

FORT SAN FRANCISCO DE PUPO

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Did you know that we have a Spanish era fort in our county? Or, at least the remains of one.....

We do and it's located on the banks of the St Johns River, south of the Shands Bridge, and is on private property. Fort San Francisco de Pupo is referred to as the sister fort of Fort Picolata which is directly across the St. Johns River on the east bank. Fort Picolata protected the Mission San Diego de Salamototo. In 1675, Pupo was initially a ferry crossing. The Spanish friars traveled from St. Augustine to Picolata, then crossed the river to land on our side, the west bank. This was the starting point of the Spanish Mission trail that went west across Florida.

The mission trail was the result of efforts to Christianize the Native Americans. This had begun shortly after Pedro Menendez's victory over the French. Spanish colonists needed to build profitable Catholic settlements. Not all Spaniards had the same agendas in Florida. Some wished to use the Native Americans as laborers and military allies for the new colony. Others were there for the sincere religious conversion of the native people.

Since the local Timucua were semi-nomadic, in order to convert them, missionaries needed to gather the Native Americans into permanent settlements. Thus began the mission system and the subsequent Camino Real (King's Road). This road later became known as the Bellamy Road (first federal highway) and it cut southwest across Clay County from the Bayard Conservation area south to around modern-day Melrose.

Captain Juan Fernandez de Florencia wrote in 1675, "*the river at Salamototo is very large and about a leagues breadth....there is a place with great labor ferry and transport of the people which come and go from the provinces.*" The captain was describing Salamototo and Pupo. Later, Fort Pupo is first named in 1716. Then it began appearing on maps.

The British colonies to our north were not on good terms with the Spanish. Both sides regularly raided each other's territory. Thus, in the early 1700's, when James Moore the English governor of colonial Carolina carried out attacks in 1704 and 1706, he succeeded in wiping out most of the Spanish missions in Florida. This caused the Spanish to begin building more forts and attacking the British. It is thought that this is when Pupo may first have been built.

Fort Pupo's first incarnation was a simple wooden sentry post. It barely held eight men and their guns. It was 8 feet in diameter. It was quite small. Picolata was similar. By 1714 an uneasy peace accord was reached. In 1737, the Spanish Royal Engineer Arredondo took notice of the two small forts and found them falling down and crumbling. He recommended an immediate rebuilding and reinforcement.

The peace did not last long. In 1740, along with the beginning of the War of Jenkins Ear, General Oglethorpe, the British general from the colony of Georgia chose this as an opportunity to invade St Augustine. He began with raids on Pupo and Picolata. He landed his troops, with a full contingent of native scouts, about 4 miles up from the fort. In a classic pincher movement he trapped the fort

between the river and his troops. A day-long artillery barrage ensued and the Spanish surrendered. Oglethorpe took out Picolata and went on the raid of St. Augustine.

This was the end of Pupo as a fort. Oglethorpe invaded again in 1743 and it was observed then that the fort had not been rebuilt. During the British period that followed the fort was noted on maps and it is possible it was used off and on. It is believed to have been destroyed completely in 1813.

In 1818, George Clarke received a 1,000 acre Spanish land grant which included the fort area. Later known as Bayard, it was part of Clark's Grant of sixteen thousand acres. His heirs later sold off the land. Later, Sherriff John P. Hall owned part of the property. Then the Bayard Conservation area was created. The fort area is a sensitive and archeologically significant site.

1950-1952 Dr John Goggin, a well-respected archeologist, conducted a study of the fort. When he dug his trenches he discovered Native American pottery dating to the "Orange Series". Orange series pottery dates to 1000 BC. This means that the site at Pupo was used by early native people long before it ever became a Spanish fort.

As Goggin dug his trenches he deduced that after the original use during the Orange period, the site lay untouched for about 2,000 years. Then the Spanish began their use of the area in about 1650. Goggin surmised this by looking a pottery and the artifacts retrieved and creating a timeline of the use of the site. He found a total of 1,532 pot shards and 210 artifacts in all. Some were wonderful objects like locks, a gun barrel, pipes and beads. Others were ordinary refuse like charred corn cobs and even a bison bone. That's right; we used to have bison in Florida.

Pupo is one of Clay County's most important historical sites. Today, it is eroding into the river and will eventually be lost to time and the elements.



Crumbling remains of the fort

Pot shards found at the site



Hinges, gun barrel, spikes, hoe, and axes found at fort



Map of the government of East Florida by John Gibson, circa 1763 showing Picolata and Pupo. The English spelled it Pupa or Pupao.



James Oglethorpe, a founder of the British colony of Georgia