

Celebrate Clay County History: Making a Dollar in the 14th Colony, British East Florida

By Vishi Garig, Clay County Archives Supervisor, a Service of Clerk of Court and Comptroller Tara S. Green

The British colonization of Florida was in full swing. The ink on the 1763 Treaty of Paris wasn't even dry when "The Crown" made it clear that this new territory was going to be a moneymaker for the king's purse.

In 1766, the British hired John and William Bartram, two of their loyal Philadelphia colonists, to carry out a field expedition to the St. Johns River and surrounds. The mission was to discover and describe Florida's flora, fauna, climate, geology and hydrology. Was Florida going to be a good place to grow crops? Yes, yes it was. *Very good, actually.*

Large land grants were made in what is now Clay County. The land on both sides of Black Creek and up and down the St. Johns River was granted to English citizens, and Doctor's Lake was surrounded by huge indigo plantations as well. Some of these new owners were part of the British peerage, i.e., those holding a hereditary or honorary title. Others were "ordinary" folks. The size of the land grant tracts ranged from a few hundred acres up to 20,000 acres. These plantations did not run themselves, and some of these owners preferred to remain in Britain and reap the rewards from across the pond. Most of the other plantations were quite small and were made up of local land grants, which seldom exceeded one thousand acres and were usually much smaller.

Enter Alexander Gray. Gray was a professional plantation manager who was very good at his job. He was not an overseer; he stood in place of the absentee owners as their agent. Operating out of St. Augustine, he managed several of the more successful plantations in Northeast Florida, including numerous ones in Clay County. He acclimated himself well to Florida, and he had a son with Ysabel Saunders, a mixed-race woman from Charleston, South Carolina. The sons' name was Juan Gris (John Gray).

Alexander Gray also personally owned a few land grants. He purchased a 3,000-acre tract on May 22, 1770, from Captain Henry Skynner, one of the earliest British settlers. The Skynner grant bordered west on Swimming Pen Creek and north on the southern shore of Doctor's Lake. Another grant owned by James Crisp, called Upper Crisp, adjoined to the east. It appears that this estate was developed first by Skynner and expanded by Gray. He also owned Spring Garden and Tobacco Bluff, two plantations on the shores of Doctor's Lake. He later divested himself of the land.

In 1766, Baron Hawke hired Gray to manage his estate. Hawke's estate ran along Black Creek. Gray bought slaves, constructed buildings, planted crops, and made the land productive.

In 1767, Sir Richard Russell and Lord Buckworth, were granted 10,000 acres along the St. Johns River and along Black Creek. Governor James Grant personally selected the site for Lord Buckworth, an absentee planter in East Florida who never saw his property. Sir Russell hired Alexander Gray to run his plantation. There were 70 slaves working the property. Corn, indigo, and other provisions were raised in the one square mile of fenced fields.

In a January 1, 1787, letter to the East Florida Claims Commission, Governor Tonyn said that he was invited to make a settlement in 1763, but he was unable to proceed until 1767, when he sent an agent

to locate his tract and initiate a settlement. That agent was Alexander Gray, who also acted in the same capacity for Tonyn's son-in-law, Francis Levett. Tonyn's grant was on Black Creek, the St. Johns River, and Governor's Creek.

E. A. Ferguson was a hands-on grant holder. He called his plantation Harmony Hall. The flood of Loyalists entering the province after 1780 prompted Governor Tonyn to detach at least 500 acres from Upper Crisp and grant it to Henry Ferguson, who resided in Georgia and South Carolina before the Revolutionary War. He remained loyal to The Crown and was forced to escape to East Florida.

In his memorandum to the East Florida Claims Commission, Ferguson said, "By his industry and assistance of a few slaves...he acquired a comfortable living." Fifty acres were cleared, fenced, and planted by twenty slaves, who also constructed a new dwelling house and detached kitchen, slave housing, corn crib, and other buildings that overlooked the St. Johns River. Ferguson said his property was brought "to a flourishing condition" and was situated on a "navigable river 160 miles into the heart of the country, convenient for rafting naval stores and country produce, to the most commodious best in the province."

Ferguson cleared £100 sterling a year from the sale of his produce at the time the province was ceded to Spain. During the evacuation, he lost several valuable slaves to bandits, including a carpenter, a cooper, two male field hands, and "a young wench, an excellent cook, washer and dryer of linen; likewise a good weaver." The bandits also took two workhorses and two saddle horses. After the British ceded Florida back to Spain, Ferguson's grant was converted into a Spanish land grant. Later, his heirs successfully defended their title to the land once Florida became a territory.

Wide varieties of crops were raised, but the most important was indigo. Three crops a year were harvested, and it was Clay County's first cash crop. Timber and naval stores were harvested, and Sea Island cotton, citrus, sugar cane, rice and tobacco were grown. Rum and sugar were also exported.

Of course, none of this great wealth could be achieved without slavery. The Spanish had not been interested in slavery, as they were more occupied with converting indigenous peoples to Catholicism. The British knew that these large-scale agricultural endeavors would never work without slavery, so thousands of enslaved persons were brought to Florida. During the British period (1763 to 1783), African slaves constituted the majority population in British-controlled Florida, numbering about 11,200 of a total population of 17,300, or nearly 65 percent. That is indeed a very disturbing statistic.

Alexander Gray was good at making money for other people. For himself, not so much. He later lost his fortune and found himself locked up in debtor's prison at the Castillo de San Marco. Chief Justice of British East Florida William Drayton noted: "*One Alexander Gray, who was under arrest on another charge, and was in a weak state of mind from excessive drinking, the result of an unhappy marriage, was persuaded by Tonyn to execute a bond and "confess a judgment thereupon" for 2,000 to him, and was then kept in prison on mesne process, although he declared he had never owed Tonyn a shilling. "Mesne process involved profits derived from land while in wrongful possession. Gray subsequently cut his own throat in jail. By 1783, Florida was again in the hands of the Spanish. The losses claimed by the planters was in the tens of thousands of pounds.*



A block of indigo dye



Sugar cane



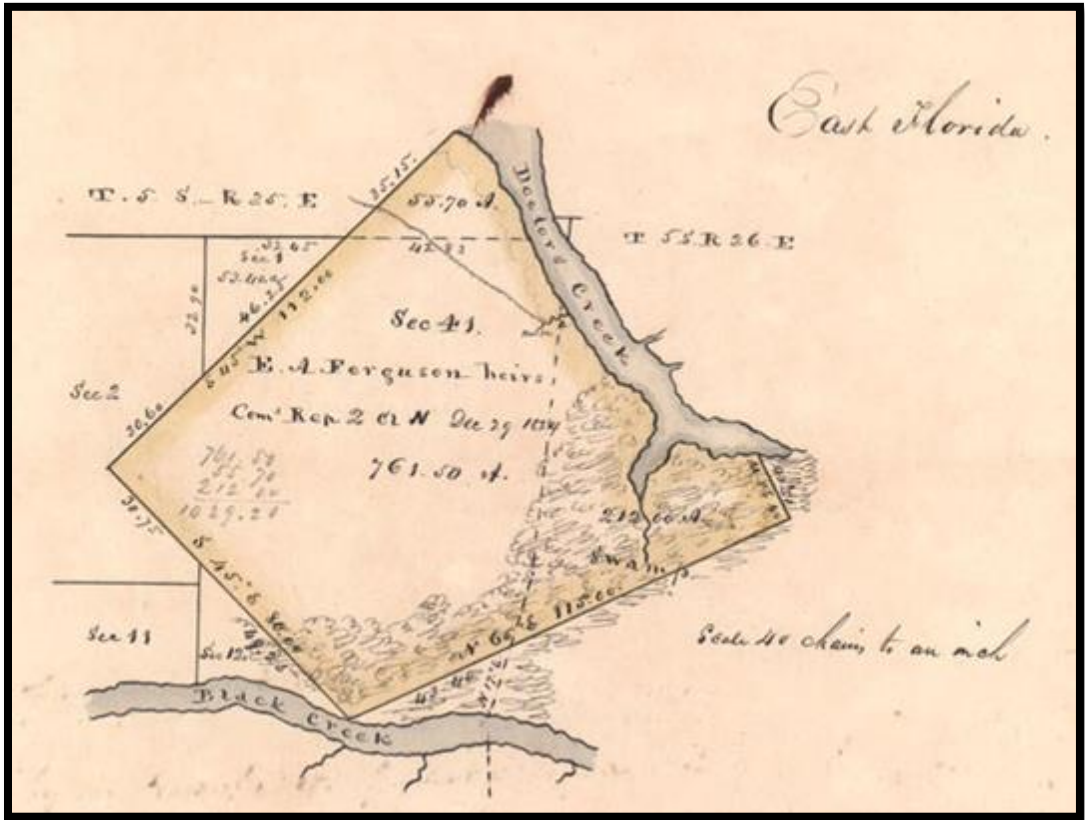
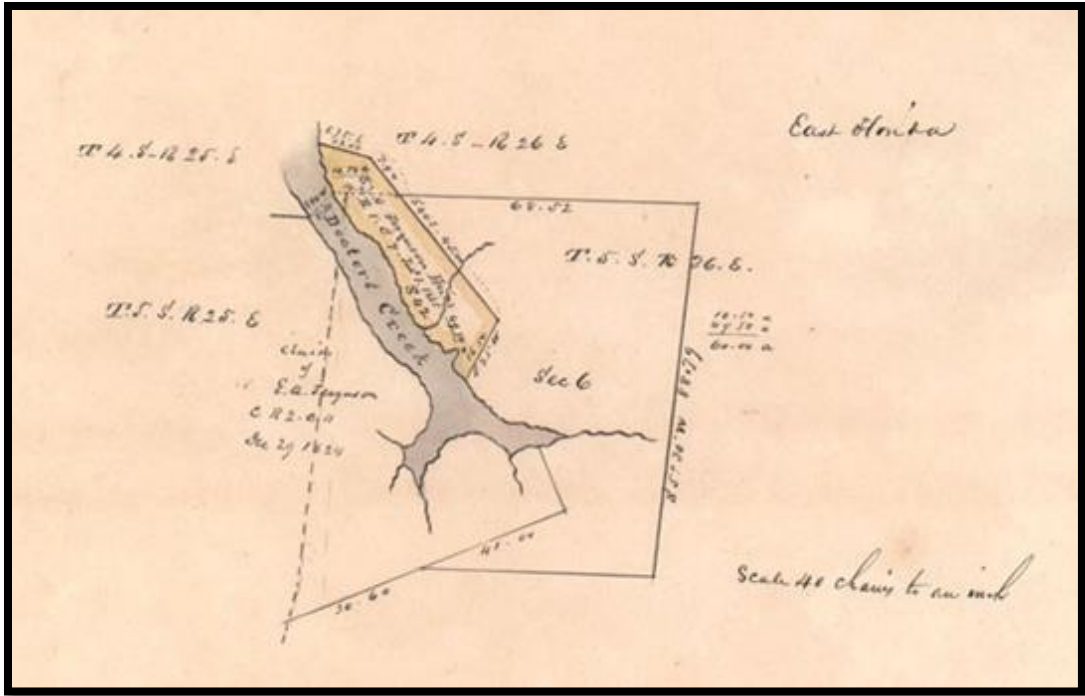
tobacco



Bitter orange



Sea Island cotton



E. A. Ferguson's grant. Notice that Swimming Pen Creek is called Doctor's Creek. Harmony Hall Road is named after Ferguson's plantation.