

# The Original Peachtree Road and Why It was Built.

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The course of the original Peachtree road began at Fort Daniel and ran southwesterly to Fort Peachtree at Standing Peach Tree. The story of Peachtree Road, built as a military road by the US Army Quartermaster Corps in early 1814, begins with General John Floyd's return to Fort Mitchell, on the Alabama/Georgia border, following the Georgia Militia Army's victory over the Creek Red Sticks at Autosse in November of 1813. Although the army had won the battle, Floyd had been seriously wounded and, more to the point, supply of the troops from the capital at Milledgeville had become a serious logistical problem.

Supplies would be gathered at Milledgeville and/or Fort Hawkins, and then wagoned some 100 miles through Creek territory to the Chattahoochee River. From a point about 9 miles below present day Columbus, they were rafted across the river, then wagoned several more miles to Fort Mitchell near what is now Phoenix, AL. Fort Mitchell had been built by Floyd as the main depot to receive the army's supplies, from which they would be distributed to other forts built along the Federal Road in what would become, Alabama.

Until recently, the best-known source for the story of Peachtree Road has been James C. Flanigan. According to Flanigan, "The war-like attitude of the Indians required... that the frontier be so strongly garrisoned that there would be little, if any, danger the Indians' invading the white settlements. A fort at Hog Mountain, subsequently known as Fort Daniel, was constructed or re-built in final months of 1813. Accordingly, George R. Gilmer, a young Lieutenant of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, and who was later Governor, was ordered to advance into the territory west of Hog Mountain and erect another fort."<sup>1</sup>

It was Flanigan's surmise that Lt. Gilmer's recruits were probably men stationed at Fort Daniel. They "marched thirty miles into the Indian territory and erected a fort at Standing Peachtree." Flanigan continues, "This necessitated the opening of a road from Fort Daniel ...to Gilmer's new fort..." The officer in charge of having the road built, he surmised, "was probably Captain Nehemiah Garrison, who was in charge of the detachment of soldiers when Fort Daniel was erected; and the next officer in rank was Lieutenant George R. Gilmer."<sup>2</sup> The remainder of Flanigan's account was taken from a Richard D. Winn account, and told how Fort Daniel's commandant,

...procured the services of Robert Young, Isham Williams and William Nesbit, who were stock raisers and well acquainted with the country, to mark out the route. These three men, accompanied by Lieutenant Gilmer and a detachment from the fort, proceeded to the task by following the trail leading from the white settlement to Suwannee Old Town or to the settlement of John Roberts, near the mouth of Suwannee Creek.<sup>3</sup>

"After this road was marked out and surveyed," Winn continued, "it was important that it be constructed or opened up. Isham Williams, William Nesbit and Bob Young were employed to grade or construct the road, each one agreeing to furnish some hands, and William Nesbit was to superintend the work."<sup>4</sup>

In light of primary sources found at the National Archives in 2006, a somewhat corrected version and context for the building of Fort Daniel, Fort Peachtree and Peachtree Road is now possible. US Army Major General Pinckney, Commander of the Southern Army, is believed to have devised a plan to avoid or supplement the difficult overland route by floating supplies down the Chattahoochee from settlements further upstream by means of keel-boats.

Supply of Floyd's Georgia Militia Army and Andrew Jackson's US Army (though also made up largely of western militia) fighting the Creek *via* a Chattahoochee river project, was the responsibility of the US Army Quartermaster Corp, which fell under the command of Major General Pinckney. The officer in charge was Major Thomas Bourke, who had been appointed Military Agent at Savannah in 1809, and was appointed Deputy Quarter Master US Army by Secretary of War Dearborn on or about December 6 of 1813 to oversee this road and waterway transportation project.

In a letter dated 2 January 1814, Bourke reported to General Pinckney, who was at Fort Hawkins, from "Major Gibson's house" in Jackson County<sup>5</sup> that, "to my surprise found not the least progress had been made in erecting the boat which Lt. Morris had made arrangements for," alluding to the fact that the plan had been in the works for some time, probably since December 6. He went on to say that, he has "made the necessary arrangements for Lumber, Nails, Tar, Cotton, and tomorrow proceed down to the Hog Mountain Fort to Commence the Road."<sup>6</sup>

Bourke stated that, "the boat will be built at Van's Ferry." He chose that site due to its proximity to skilled labor and building materials near Jefferson, and the fact that the Standing Peachtree location would not be ready for some time. In addition, it is clear that the construction boat yard at Standing Peachtree was contingent on the success of the boat experiment.

From this first of many letter-reports to Pinckney we get the dimensions of that first boat:

"She will be Fifty feet Long fifteen [or thirteen] wide & three High with a floor & roof and a [unclear] cabin in the Stern. I have ordered a Skiff to be built and engaged an Intelligent man to proceed with two others in her, supplied with Paper [and] Ink to take a description of the River, the falls, Distances and such information as may be of use in navigating the boat."

Bourke also commented that "if I had a Corporals Guard sent to the Hog Mountain fort and a Commissioned Officer, I would find them of great importance." That "Corporals Guard" – a military expression simply meaning, "small detachment" – would be Lt. George Gilmer and his 22 Regulars from Washington Barracks (old Fort Washington) on the

Broad River, near where Gilmer lived. This letter suggests that Gilmer's march to Fort Daniel and Standing Peachtree may have been based on this request from Bourke.

On 11 January 1814 Bourke again wrote to Pinckney from the Gibson Plantation informing the General that he has just returned from an expedition on the Chattahoochee.

I have blazed out a road which will cross the South fork of Big Creek, which empties into the River at the Standing Peach tree Village. The Landing will be about a half mile below the Creek on a good bluff with a large body of first Quality land well timbered with a hill nob Commanded by Rifle shot and Commanding the River. I could have got a Spot well adapted to the purpose at the Right hand of where the Creek forms a junction with the River but was Prevented by a Shoal of Rocks on which on getting in a canoe with and Indian acquainted with the River allowed but Eleven Inches of Water a depth not sufficient for a loaded boat.<sup>7</sup>

In this letter Bourke reports that also he explored the river upstream for about three miles and found it "unfit for navigation," but that exploration of the river for five miles below the landing showed it fit for navigation and that the opinion of the Indians was that the river was navigable from "Floydsville"<sup>8</sup> to the falls above Coweta.

On 22 January, Bourke informed Pinckney:

I do myself the honor to inform your Excellency that the boat will be launched tomorrow at Vans ferry and will proceed down, light, to the standing Peachtree where there is a wagon road finished from the Hog Mountain ... She will be loaded and proceed about Thursday the 27th. I have purchased part of her load in flour to be delivered at the Peachtree at the Augusta prices and calculate to send her load altogether in flour, it best being subject to damage as any other cargo.

As reported in the 23 February 1814 issue of the Georgia Journal<sup>9</sup>, the boat left on 2 February and reached shoals above the falls on 11 February, the trip counted a success by Bourke.

As for the road, in his 11 January letter Bourke wrote that it was "not Short of Fifty miles, Eighteen of which I found had been made use of by Waggons already<sup>10</sup> the balance of the Road I have Contracted for and it will be done in sufficient time for the boat." The contract probably refers to Robert Young, Isham Williams and William Nesbit's work on the road as Winn had recounted, but it was Bourke, not they, who had blazed it, and he, not Garrison, who had contracted with them for the work.

James Montgomery, a Jackson resident and US Army Wagonmaster was instrumental in building Fort Peachtree. A letter from Montgomery to Bourke and Col Francis Huger,

dated 10 February, is about his preparations to proceed down to Standing Peachtree to begin building the fort and several flatboats:

I have organized a corps of artificers, one of the best boat rights, and a corps of healthy athletic fellows indeed, but as late as Sunday I learned no tools had arrived at the hog mountain fort, in consequence of which I have had to go far and wide in pursuit of tools to work with (viz.) whipsaws, axes, broad axes,.. but have collected three good whipsaws, and I have a cross cut of my own which I shall take with me and such other tools as I have got that can be spared out of my farm.”<sup>11</sup>

About Gilmer, Montgomery says: “I am just about to start for Floydsville. Lieut. Gilmore (Gilmer), a valuable sober young officer with the detachment ordered, is on the march also...”<sup>12</sup> It is also from James Montgomery that we get the most information about the construction and location of the fort:

In two months built two large hew’d logg block houses, six dwelling houses, one framed store house... and five boats. ...[we] choose a place for the Fort and a place for a boat yard... [and] pitched on a spot about a quarter and half quarter<sup>13</sup> from where Majr Burk pitched on, on a commanding eminence below the mouth of a large creek... and right opposite a bend on the river from where, from the Gate of the fort [a] view of the river can be had both up and down... the boat yard... can be commanded by the Fort. [We also built] one bridge half a mile from the fort...<sup>14</sup>

Gilmer gives us a good hint of the fort’s layout and position. One night, before the Palisade was completed, Gilmer thought they were being attacked. “As soon as possible I had a barricade constructed in front of the ditch which had been dug for the palisades of the fort. In this ditch, and between the cabins and the barricade, I stationed myself and the soldiers.”<sup>15</sup> Thus the buildings were located within the fort’s Palisade walls and, based on Montgomery’s mention of two blockhouses, its footprint was likely the same as Fort Daniel’s, and Forts Hawkins, Lawrence, and Mitchell.

The mistaken notion that the fort was located “on a high hill or promontory just north of the mouth of Peachtree Creek” may have originated with Eugene M. Mitchell.<sup>16</sup> This was noted by Franklin Garrett<sup>17</sup> and has thereafter been repeated in several places, including archaeology reports.<sup>18</sup> Now, with the corroboration of Bourke’s description of the site, especially of the crossing of Peachtree Road over the creek, and with Montgomery’s description of the site, especially of the construction of the bridge over the creek one half mile from the location of the fort site and, notwithstanding some difficulties with his respective phrasing and punctuation, it is possible to look at the 1820 District 17

survey for Henry County for this area and pretty-well determine where the fort was likely located!<sup>19</sup> ■JJD

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> James C. Flanigan, *The History of Gwinnett County Georgia 1818-1968 Vol.1*, Facsimile Reprint, Annie Francis Flanigan, 1995. P 15.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,17.

<sup>5</sup> Gibson's plantation was apparently near Jefferson, the Jackson County Seat, on or near the Athens Road (Georgia Road) and not far from Vann's Ferry.

<sup>6</sup> Major Thomas Bourke to Major General Thomas Pinckney, 2 January 1814, NARA M566.

<sup>7</sup> Bourke to Pinckney, 11 January 1814, NARA M566.

<sup>8</sup> "Floydsville" was the military name for the site and Peachtree road was considered a military road.

<sup>9</sup> "Inland Navigation" *Georgia Journal*, Wednesday 23 February 1814, page 3.

<sup>10</sup> Closer to 40 miles according original land surveys for Henry and Gwinnett Counties.

<sup>11</sup> J.M.C. Montgomery to Bourke and Huber, 10 February 1814. NARA M566.

<sup>12</sup> This is the military name for the Standing Peachtree site, ascribed to James Montgomery.

<sup>13</sup> .38 mile or 1950 feet?

<sup>14</sup> James McC. Montgomery to General Jackson, 24 July 1814. Quoted in E. Katherine Anderson, "James McC. Montgomery of Standing Peachtree," *The Atlanta Historical Bulletin*, Published by the Atlanta Historical Society, December 1937. Pages 22-23.

<sup>15</sup> George R. Gilmer, *Sketches of Some of the First Settlers of Upper Georgia, of the Cherokees, and the Author*, New York: D. Appleton and company, 1855, page 197.

<sup>16</sup> Eugene Mitchell, "The Story of 'the Standing Peachtree'" *The Atlanta Historical Bulletin*, January 1928, page 14.

<sup>17</sup> Franklin Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*, Volume 1 1820's-1870's, University of Georgia Press 1969, pages14.

<sup>18</sup> Wilbur G. Kurtz. "Standing Peachtree," *Early Georgia*, Summer 1950, page 35.

<sup>19</sup> See also Howard L. Preston, "The cultural landscape at Standing Peachtree, an historical geographic study," (unpublished 1977), James G. Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, page 50.

## Sources

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New Georgia Encyclopedia, The. "Federal Road" by John Hayes, University of Georgia, 02/10/2003. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/federal-road>.

Preston, Howard L. "The cultural landscape at Standing Peachtree, an historical geographic study," (unpublished 1977), James G. Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center

Other important secondary works would include Flanigan's primary source, the 1873 *Weekly Gwinnet Herald* series by Judge R.D. Winn, Eugene Mitchell's 1928, "The Story of The Standing Peachtree," William Cooper's 1934, "Official History of Fulton County," and Franklin Garrett's 1954, "Atlanta and Its Environs." Among the best primary sources, one would have to include, "Bartram's Travels," a well-known 1814 Georgia Journal account of the experimental supply boat trip made down the Chattahoochee between Standing Peachtree and Fort Mitchell, Governor George R. Gilmer's 1855 memoir, "Sketches," various letters of James M. C. Montgomery, and Wash Collier's recollections about Standing Peachtree published in 1897 in "The Atlanta Constitution".