

## 'On the Road Again' .... With John Bellamy

By Donald Caton

In 1823 the United States Congress allocated twenty- three thousand dollars to build a road connecting Pensacola and Saint Augustine. The grant stipulated that the road was to be twenty- five feet wide, a width adequate to permit wagons to pass one another, and with enough grass in the right of way for oxen to forage. Tree stumps were to be low enough to allow wagons to pass over them. Just east of the Saint Johns River the road was to connect with the Kings Highway, a major north south route built by the British in 1767. Responsibility for overseeing construction fell to a young army officer named Daniel Burch, a veteran of Andrew Jackson's army which had fought in the Battle of New Orleans (January 8, 1815) and then against the Seminole Indians in North Florida.

The Congressional Act read: *"Be it enacted that the President of the United States is hereby authorized to cause to be opened, in the Territory of Florida, a public road from Pensacola to St. Augustine, commencing at Deer Point, on the Bay of Pensacola, and pursuing the old Indian Trail to the Cow Ford on the Choctawatchy River; thence direct to the Natural Bridge on the Econfinan River; thence to the Ochese Bluff on the Apalachicola River; thence in the most direct practicable to the site of Fort St. Louis; thence as nearly as practicable, on the old Spanish road to St. Augustine crossing the St. Johns River at Picolata; which road shall be plainly and distinctly marked and shall be the width of twenty-five feet."*

To build the eastern section of the road, a stretch that extended from Picolata, on the St. Johns River, to the Ochlockonee River, Burch hired John Bellamy, a Florida plantation owner. Originally from St. George Parish in South Carolina, Bellamy and his wife Margaret immigrated first to 'Cowford' in East Florida, so named for the shallows where cows could ford the Saint Johns River. Cowford later became Jacksonville, named for Burch's former commanding officer, the first provisional governor of recently acquired Florida Territory. Bellamy (sometimes spelled 'Bellame') later relocated to an 18,000 acre plantation near present day Tallahassee. To build the road he used enslaved African-Americans from his plantation along with Native Americans and settlers hired from local populations. A couple of years later Bellamy's second daughter, Sarah, would marry Daniel Burch.

On the surface the rationale for building the road was simple. During Spain's second occupation of *La Florida*, an era that extended from 1783 (the Treaty of Paris) to 1819 (the Treaty of Ghent), the territory had two capitals, Pensacola and Saint Augustine. Travel between required fifteen days by horseback or even more by sail. Good governance, Congress decreed, required better communication between the two administrative centers.

Security was another issue. By 1824 General Jackson had subdued one Seminole insurrection and displaced, by force, several Spanish military and civilian centers. Threats of insurrection remained, however: The Army needed better roads for the deployment of troops and supplies. Accordingly, it was ordered to build the 'western section' of the highway thereby extending Bellamy's Road to Pensacola.

Equally important, Congress wanted roads to stimulate economic growth. During its last occupation of Florida (1783-1819), as its power and influence waned, Spain encouraged migration of settlers into North Florida to counter growing political, economic and military influence of Britain. Unfortunately for Spain, most of those who relocated were Anglo-Americans from Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Thus, by 1819, when the United States took control of "Spanish Florida," it already had a loyal resident population ready to exploit the agricultural resources of the new territory.

For new residents of 'East Florida', however, transportation of agricultural goods overland to larger markets was slow and expensive. In contrast, 'West Florida' had a substantial network of navigable rivers: For some time, the Apalachicola River rivaled the Mississippi for its volume of commercial traffic. At that time transportation by water was preferable. Costs over water were a fraction of those by land. To move a ton of goods overland in 1815 cost nine dollars, a sum that that would move the same goods 3,000 miles by sea. Further north, work had already begun on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, a project envisioned by George Washington. Similarly, New York State, when it failed to get Congressional support for building the Erie Canal, began work on its own under the leadership of Governor DeWitt Clinton, a project that had a tremendous impact on the economic development of that state. East Florida residents would have

preferred a canal. The cost, however, made such a project unreasonable. They got a road instead.

Curiously enough, 'Internal Improvements' of roads, canals, and harbors, became a recurring and contentious political issue in the early years of our country. From George Washington on, federal political leaders believed that the economic success and political security of the young country depended on expansion of the country south and west. This philosophy underlay the 1803 purchase of Louisiana by Thomas Jefferson and, later, the annexation of Texas (1845), New Mexico and California from Spain (Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo 1848) and the acquisition of Oregon from Great Britain (1846). Associated with this physical expansion of the country, large numbers of Anglo-Americans moved south and west, a phenomenon which some scholars have called one of the most important migrations in history. Many early Americans believed that God ordained that they fill and dominate the continent, a sentiment later associated with the term 'Manifest Destiny.'

As part of its 'expansionist' philosophy, Congress passed the 'General Surveys Act' in 1824. It authorized President Monroe to identify routes suitable for roads and canals *"of national importance, in a commercial or military point of view, or necessary for the transportation of public mail."* Monroe assigned responsibility for this work to the Army, one of the first projects of the Army Corp of Engineers. Bellamy's Road, however, was just one of several early federal highway projects. Others included a road connecting Cumberland, Maryland, to Wheeling, West Virginia, (eventually extending to Vandalia, Illinois) and a road connecting Detroit to Fort Dearborn, on Michigan Avenue in present day Chicago. The impact of these policies on Florida showed in its census figures. The 1825 count, estimated a population of 5,780 living west of the Apalachicola and only 317 in South Florida. Five years later West Florida had 9,474; Middle, 15,779; East 8,956; South 517.

The physical expansion of the United States, including improvements in its transportation system, raised significant political issues. Politicians who favored a strong federal government, most of them 'Whigs' from northern states, argued for a nationally coordinated transportation system. Their adversaries, most of them 'Democrats' from the South, feared that federally sponsored road projects would undermine state sovereignty. For just this reason David Levy Yulee, a part-time resident of Alachua County

who later was instrumental in building the Fernandina – Cedar Key railroad, argued against the Federal Internal Improvements Program. Controversy regarding federal versus state sovereignty surfaced again when Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin proposed formation of a ‘National Bank.’ Slavery was another aspect of the issue. Underlying the debate were implications of the shift of political power away from the north as the population of the young country migrated south and west. ‘States’ Rights’ and slavery, already festering issues at the signing of Constitution in 1786, would culminate in the Civil War decades later.

Bellamy’s original road crossed Alachua County along the route of the *Old Mission Trail*, a trail widely used by Indians and Franciscan missionaries, running from near Santa Fe Lake through a swampy, forested hammock between present-day O’Leno State Park and River Rise Preserve State Park where the Santa Fe River disappeared underground, traveling three miles before re-appearing above ground. Places on its route included the town of Traxler, the Santa Fe Taloca Spanish Mission, the settlement that would become Newnansville, Fairbanks, and Melrose. In subsequent years sections of the road were rerouted to better serve local needs. Remnants of the old sand road are used today and part of the Bellamy Road forms the county line between the northwest part of Putnam County and the southwest part of Clay County. Similarly, parts of State Road 25, near Melrose, are remnants of Bellamy’s original road.

When John Bellamy completed his section of the road in 1826, he already had concerns about its permanence. The warm humid climate of Florida, he warned, would cause rapid deterioration of the felled tree trunks used to pave sections of the road that ran through swampy areas. Ironically, an even greater threat to the road was the advent of rail travel. The beginning of this transportation revolution was underway even before Bellamy finished his project. In north east England, George Stephenson completed the world’s first public steam railway in 1825. That same year, in Hoboken, New Jersey, John Stevens built a test track and ran a locomotive around it. Two years later investors incorporated the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. In southeastern United States the miles of track increased from ten to eight thousand between 1830 and 1860. Soon after it was completed, John Bellamy’s road was consigned to handle only local traffic. John Bellamy died in 1845. His wife, Margaret, died two years later.

1. **History of the Second Seminole War: J.K. Mahon, U FL Press, 1967**
2. **Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821 RV Remini Harper and Row, 1977**
3. **Florida; A Short History: Michael Gannon U Fl. Press 1993**
4. **A History of Florida: CW Tebeau, U of Miami Press, 1971**
5. **The Bellamys of Territorial Florida: Eleanor Hortense Grenelle, Master's Thesis, U of Fl 1953**
6. **Letter WS Eubanks Jr. to B. V. Desha: 10/10/81**
7. **The First American Road in Florida; Papers Relating to the Survey and Construction of the Pensacola St. Augustine Highway Part II: Mark F. Boyd. The Florida Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Jan., 1936), pp. 139-192**
8. **What Hath God Wrought; The Transformation of America, 1815 to 1848: D. W. Howe. Oxford U Press, 2007**
9. **The Year of Decision, 1846: B. A. DeVoto, St. Martin's Press, 2000**

## **Description of Various Routes of The Bellamy Road In Alachua County**

“In your part of the country there were at least three Bellamy roads. All three went through Melrose, but the first, the Original Bellamy Road, went north of Orange Heights across the neck of the Saluda Swamp (there is still an old timber road in use there yet, it crosses 301 about one and a quarter miles north of Orange Heights... and crosses the railroad exactly where the railroad crosses the east-west line between Township 8 South and Township 9 South-Range 21 East. It loops north around a wetland, turns west and crosses Alachua road 7 just below the middle Section 34, then proceeds westwardly and a little north around the middle of Section 34, then proceeds westwardly and a little north across the Austin Cary Forrest, across SR #24, continues across the pine flats to cross the Montechoa Road just north of the drag race strip. Then from there it goes on to intersect SR 121 above the forks and continue to Newnansville. This road was completed in 1826.

In 1829 they all but quit using the stretch from Newnansville to the St. Johns Ferry, preferring instead to go by way of Micanopy to the Micanopy-Palatka road (The first American Road in Florida completed in 1822) which ran across the east side of Paynes Prairie, bent around Lake Lockloosa to where Hawthorn is now and then on, to Palatka. The railroad is built on top of this road from Hawthorn to Palatka.

In 1835, however, the people of Newnansville (and Micanopy) when they found out about the new Steamboat Landing at the Picolata insisted that the Bellamy Road be improved and restored to use as the primary road from the Alachua area to the St. Johns. The Federal government agreed and the Bellamy road was rebuilt and improved from the St. Johns into Alachua County in 1835-36 under the supervision of Lt. L'Engle. The road was straightened in a number of places this time passing west of the Saluda Swamp and crossing US 301 at a point just above the Orange Heights Cemetery, crossing Hatchet Creek, east branch, at a point about where a timber road crosses it now in Special Section 2.... When this second road crossed the area, now occupied by the Gator Nationals Drag Tracks, it was still south of the original road. Later, when a railroad was built from Lake Sampson to the new community of Gainesville, it had a crossing just east of the present day Montechoa road where this road was located called the 'Bellamy Crossing.'”

After the end of the Second Seminole, in the late 1840's, this road was re-routed a third time in Alachua County, this time bending south still further to pass through what is now Orange Heights. ... This latter road is the very old and used to be called the Alachua Trail and before that the St. Mary's Trail providing passage for those from Georgia across the St. Mary's at Trader's Hill, down Trail Ridge to the west side of Kingsley Pond where it met the Black Creek trail and proceeded south. ... When they made relocation (sometime during the boom days of the 1880's) it became the Melrose Road. And later, still, further south, it was called SR #26.”

**Letter from W.S. Eubanks Jr. to B. V. Desha: 10/10/81**