



By Richard Procyk

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The Letter

It is rare, indeed, that some questions raised about a historic event are answered decades later with a letter out of the past. Such may be the case with General Jesup's encounter with the Tennessee Volunteers and their refusal to follow him to the Loxahatchee River.

The pieces of information and details that are missing in the historic reports makes for speculation as to what would prompt the General to challenge the volunteer soldiers rather than their commanding officer. Surgeon Jacob Motte describes General Jesup as being "enraged" when he charged to the river "alone", and was then shot under the left eye. The question remains, what was the motivation for the General's behavior?

In Chapter 8, on page 82 (Guns across the Loxahatchee - Third Edition by Richard Procyk) of our narrative, we note ---"It is a puzzlement why Major William Lauderdale or his officers were not mentioned at this point in the battle". This omission is made by almost all the historic reports. While Motte also omits this important point in his journal, Jesup wrote that " some confusion occurred among the Tennessee Volunteers", but does not explain why he chose to lead the volunteers into combat personally, rather than ordering the volunteer commanding officers to do so.

As in the case of the Missouri Volunteers in the Battle of Okeechobee, just a few weeks earlier, the Tennessee Volunteers (citizen soldiers,) were somehow maneuvered into epicenter of the battle while the Dragoons (regulars) were placed far to the south with less participation and no fatalities.

Although the missing pieces in this historic event are self-evident, it appeared these questions would never be resolved. Recently however, I received a note from Joe Rubinfine who deals in historic autographs, letters, etc., and publishes "Florida-A Historic Catalog". Among the many letters listed in the catalog is number 40, Seminole War—an account of the Battle of the Loxahatchee; an autographed letter signed by Capt. J.A. DeLagnell, 3 papers, 4 to, Ordinance Depot, Black Creek, February 7th, 1838. To J.M. Chandler, Augusta, Georgia.

The letter as described in Mr. Rubin fine's catalog may not be an eye witness account, but the information that can be verified is accurate. The battle as described in the catalog is as follows:

"On the 24th January. The Main Column of the Army overtook the Enemy on the banks of the



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Taloosahatchee or Turtle Creek and gave them battle. The action commenced about 11 o'clock A.M. and lasted nearly 2 hours. The enemy had 2 killed left on the field: our loss was 10 killed & 30 wounded. The regulars, as usual, behaved with the greatest bravery but the rascally Tennesseans broke & ran. During the action it was reported to Gen. Jesup that they held back, and had actually bawled out 'retreat'. He rode up and did all he could to bring up but find his efforts useless, drew his pistols and pointing one to the head of the Officer in Command ordered him to 'bring yr. men immediately into action, or I will blow out your brains'. The Genl. recd. A wound under the left eye – the ball striking and glancing on his spectacle. Colonels Gates & Harney behaved with the greatest bravery and coolness. The prospects of peace are more remote than at any former period".

The letter abruptly drops the confrontation between the general and the officer in command of the Tennessee Volunteers and goes directly to Jesup's battlefield wound without any explanation. The letter, however, does give us a missing link to Jesup's actions, mainly that he was so frustrated and angered with the Tennessee Commander's insubordination and refusal to move his men into action that he threatened the Commander's life and in a fit of rage ordered the volunteers to the river, himself leading the way.

Of course the officer in command of the Tennesseans could have been Major William Lauderdale—his name being omitted in the letter. Lauderdale, however, had veteran Tennessee officers to lead the troops; commanding companies A through E of mounted riflemen, each comprising a 100 men. These were Sanders Ferris, Richard Waterhouse, Benjamin Cherry, John Elliott, and William Deering. One of these companies could have been pinned down just west of the river and commanded by one of the above officers.

The officer in command is unknown, however, if it was Lauderdale the politics involved would have to be considered. Lauderdale had a long personal relationship with President Andrew Jackson which started when they were neighbors in Tennessee. Lauderdale was Andrew Jackson's "warrior", who served and fought with him in the Creek Wars, the Battle of New Orleans, and fought "for him" in the disastrous 1836 campaign in Florida.

Lauderdale was still ill from that campaign when President Jackson summoned his old friend to his home at the Heritage in Tennessee and asked him to take his Tennessee Volunteers back to Florida for one last campaign (1838). Lauderdale was in his fifties and in very poor health when he reluctantly accepted this last call to arms.

The regular army had a reputation for dismissing the value of the militia and volunteer forces. Col. Zackary Taylor, like other officers of the regular army, often held the volunteers in contempt



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and was mainly responsible for placing the Missouri Volunteers on the front line and ordered to lead the assault over the objections of Col. Richard Gentry of the Missouri Volunteers. Col. Gentry was killed in the first moment of battle as he led the attack up the middle rather than a flanking motion that he had suggested.

Maj. Lauderdale must have realized he was in a similar position as his troops began to fall as they reached the open river. As he was sworn to protect the lives of his troops whenever possible, it is reasonable to assume he would try to prevent a rerun of the calamitous event that occurred at the Battle of Okeechobee.

Even if the commander of one of the Tennessee companies was responsible for the disobedient volunteers, the shadow of Andrew Jackson fell over them in a cloak of protection. Shortly before the battle, Andrew Jackson, in a letter to Secretary of War, Joel R. Poinsett, prophesied a speedy end to the war in Florida because of the arrival of his "indomitable and beloved Tennesseans". "They are experienced and brave", he went on "and will do their duty. Lauderdale's Battalion can and will beat the whole combined Indian force in Florida. They are pledged to me to do their duty and sustain the character of Tennessee and put a speedy end to this war".

The failure of the volunteers to follow Jesup into a line of fire may be answered by Jackson's statement that ---- "the volunteers would not serve under officers they did not know or could not look to for advice and care when exposed to the dangers of a southern sun".

On March 2nd, 1838, General Jesup ordered Major Lauderdale and his volunteers to cut a trail from Jupiter to New River (63 miles in 4 days) and establish a fort there. The trail became known as Military Trail and the fort was named Fort Lauderdale in order to honor Maj. William Lauderdale who was now terminally ill and died in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on May 11th, 1838, four weeks after the Battle of the Loxahatchee on his way home to Tennessee.