

THE PRIME MERIDIAN MARKER
ITS MEANING AND PLACE IN HISTORY

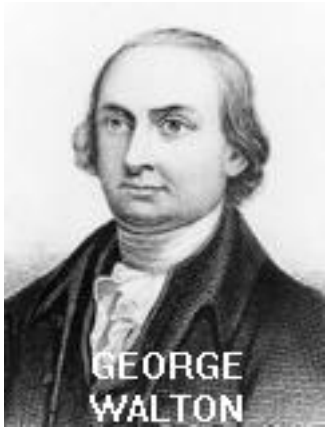
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DECEMBER 19, 1995

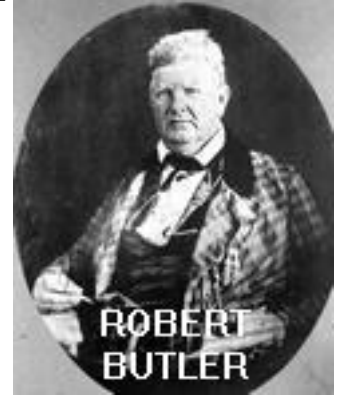
Few of the early settlers of Tallahassee realized the importance of the beginning of public land surveys as readily as the new officialdom of the Territory. Governor William Pope Duval and Territorial Secretary, George Walton, recognized that the land titles of all settlers had to be clear and firm before anyone would wish to risk life and limb on the frontier of Florida. When the orders for the institution of the surveys began, the Surveyor General of Florida, Robert Butler, had only been recently appointed and his staff and surveyors were not yet in place. Because Governor Duval was in St. Marks on an important mission to negotiate with the Indians, therefore, it was left to George Walton assumed the duties of placing the beginning point for the official land surveys.



There is the old legend, unsupported by any official documents, that tells of the stone



being hauled on a wagon to the point designated by the Secretary and falling off of it about 200 yards short of the point. However, whether this may or may not have been the case, it is immaterial to the actual location of the point of origin. Once the point was set and the surveys begun, the exact point hypothetically put down by Walton is of no value.



The first contract to survey for the prime meridian went to Benjamin Clements of Tennessee, a surveyor of vast experience, on the 16th of November 1824. The contract directions read:

Commencing on the South East corner of the Quarter Section selected for the seat of the Territorial Government of Florida and extending the Meridian North to the Georgia Line & South to the Gulf of Mexico, thence to Section Township 1 Range 1 South & East on the completion of which, from the beginning corner aforesaid, extend the Basis Parallel West to the Perdido.

(The contract for extending the Basis Parallel to the East went to another experienced surveyor, C. C. Stone.) Clements took his crew, which included his son Hosea, and began running the Prime Meridian. The job performed by Clements was the beginning line of all property lines in the State of Florida. It is at this very point of origin that all individual's property descriptions in this State begin, hence the very importance of this marker and park, which we are rededicating today. Clements did his work well and accurately.

Clements experienced little difficulty in running this first line and suffered no ill effects from it. However, this was not to be the case of all who followed in his footsteps. Many surveyors suffered greatly doing their jobs in the field. Some, like

Henry Wells and William S. Moseley, suffered snake bites that incapacitated them for days. Others, like A. H. Jones, Clements, James Exum and Michael Garrison were delayed and almost lost lives because of the high waters frequently experienced by the surveyors unfamiliar, at that time, with the rainy season of Florida. The fear of the Indian, as on every frontier in North America, also delayed, postponed or canceled surveys, although not one Florida Deputy Surveyor lost his life to an Indian attack. And, of course, the yellow fever and malaria took their toll among the surveyors and their crews. In the infamous outbreak of 1831, while on the Escambia River survey, Hosea Clements, who had assisted his father on the Basis Parallel and Prime Meridian succumbed to the dreaded disease. The dangers faced and sacrifices made by the surveyors of Florida give added meaning to the importance of this place.

Additionally, these brave men who tackled every difficulty imaginable in the field, often sacrificed their financial well being because of their work. The Territory did not have an adequate banking system nor did it have ready cash with which to pay the men for their work. Often, the surveyors had to go deeply into debt to pay their crews and the merchants who had loaned them supplies for the field. This led to frequent court cases, legal fees, lost credit and total exasperation. Some of the men went bankrupt, including the great Henry Washington, who, living here in Tallahassee, declared bankruptcy twice because of the failure of the Government to supply the money for his work in a timely fashion. Washington, like other Floridians, also invested his time and money in the Union Bank and when that institution failed, he, like many others, failed with it. This marker, therefore, symbolizes not only the beginning of surveys, but represents all of the early surveyors and their efforts to bring order to the property of all Floridians on the Florida frontier.

The city of Tallahassee, the site of an early native American village, also begins with this marker. Not until the marker was laid down and the surveys begun could Benjamin Tennile lay out the pattern that became the central core of the Capitol City. The Capitol Square, part of the original quarter-section allotted to the town, was the center point of Tennile's plan. The town was surrounded by a 200 foot strip of land, cleared for the open fire upon any approaching enemy, especially the followers of Neamathela, upon whose land the capitol was raised. Indeed, some of Robert Butler's first dispatches were carried north by Indian courier. The major remnant of that 200 foot cleared strip is today's Park Street.

The new capitol building, at first made of logs, was to be paid for by the selling of lots within the city, as surveyed by Tennile. This became known as the "Tallahassee Fund", which experienced a varied and colorful history of its own. When the capitol building of 1845 was completed, with the assistance of skilled slave labor, its construction was to be paid for by the funds generated by the sale of 8 sections of land, located, oddly enough, near the natural bridge of the Santa Fe River. The object in this, was to offer for sale land most likely to be purchased, thereby alleviating the fund of a long existence. Unfortunately, this did not happen and the fund's life dragged on for many years thereafter. Again, it is the setting of this marker, on these grounds, that begins the whole process that became the Territorial and State Capitol and the City of Tallahassee.

So much of the history of this State is tied to the prime meridian marker. All property designations begin here, all surveys begin here, the Capitol City begins here, and the famous Lafayette Land Grant also begins here. It is from this point that this famed grant gets its start. To honor and financially repair the fortunes of the Marquis de Lafayette, the Government gave him one of the first townships created, 1 North and 1 East, the

corner of which begins right here! As one of three large land grants given by the Federal government to the Marquis, it represents part of the Revolutionary heritage of our country and ties this site to something sacred to all Americans.

As a symbol of the rights of all Americans, the right to enjoy private property for personal benefit, this park and marker have a great importance. They are not simply the visual symbol, but a physical representation of all that we hold dear and what our forefathers fought and died for. It symbolizes suffering, dedication to duty, citizenship, and the basis of much of our present society. It represents freedom and the pursuit of the happiness that can result from the ownership of private property by all, a right held sacred by the framers of the Constitution. Therefore, they are more than just a stone and a field, they are a monument to what we stand for as a nation. Small as they are; hidden from the main flow of traffic as they are; they are, together, one of the most important landmarks in our State. It is only fitting that this park be rededicated at this time, when so much of our heritage is being lost or overlooked. they are precious symbols of our past and, hopefully, the joyful symbols for our future.