



Fairchild Oak on Site of the Ormond Damietta Plantation

first a reference to his Seminole War role, then “Florida Frontiersman, Merchant on the St. Marks River, Antebellum European Traveler, Master Story Teller.”

I was a little concerned about that last item. Older storytellers often exaggerate their youthful adventures. But local historians assure me that most of what Ormond said actually happened. The stories may seem overly dramatic because the times themselves were dramatic – the Seminole Wars, yes, but later the Civil War, his duty as adjutant at Andersonville Prison, and so on.

Most relevant for my purposes is the account of his childhood at Damietta. He traveled from Scotland via Charleston when he was nine, a voyage he remembers vividly because it was the first time he saw “. . . a clear, bright, cloudless sky . . .” and Black slaves, and tasted strange new foods: “. . . Indian corn, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, goober peas, ‘cabbage trees’.”

At Damietta he was struck by the absence of hills and mountains, a place with “. . . no grass . . . soil but sand.” Though he found the landscape strange, I can imagine the boy in him learning to make palmetto spears and to climb the live oak trees. One of those trees, still standing after some 400 years,* is the great Fairchild Oak. I mention this because the tree marks Damietta’s location in what is now Bulow Creek State Park,

some hundred yards north of James Ormond Park off Old Dixie Highway.

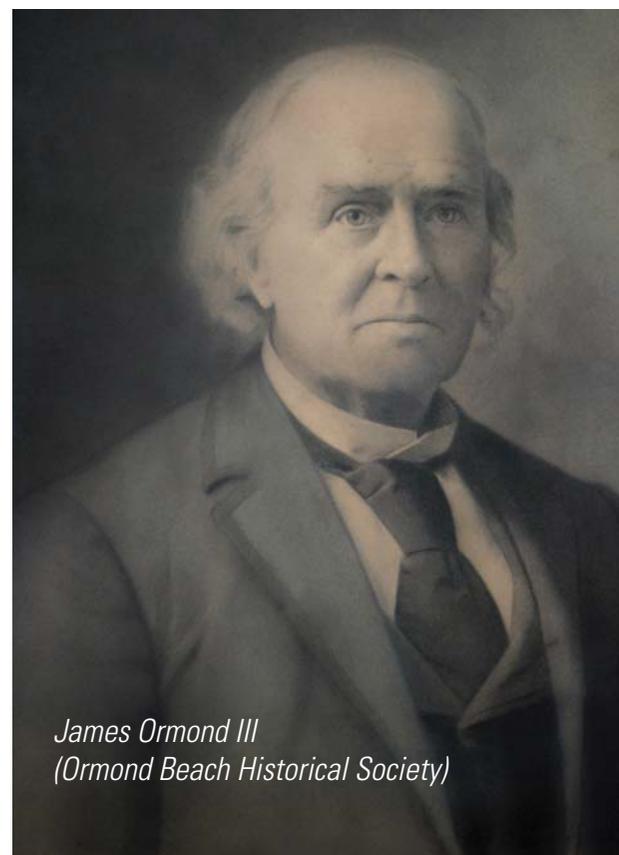
Although the Fairchild Oak was preserved, Ormond remembers “. . . some men from New England cutting timber for the U.S. Navy . . .” and afterward his father wanting him to return with the tree-cutters to Boston to become an apprentice shipbuilder. At the last minute his uncle persuaded his father not to make him go. When the Civil War broke out and iron ships were invented, the live oak business slowed and was eventually discontinued.

He writes also of “neighbors” in what was called the Tomoka Settlement: the Dummett plantation with its steam-operated rum mill, the Bulow estate with over 300 slaves, the Anderson place on Tomoka River. The principal crops for most of these settlers (hard for us to believe today) were cotton, sugar cane, and indigo. Ormond also describes his days, and his fights, at a school in St. Augustine – which was also the location of the nearest church and doctor (he almost died of cholera) – and later his brief stint “. . . I made one crop . . .” running Damietta after his father’s death. After that, all the “negroes” were sold and the place abandoned, as were all the other plantations after the Seminole attacks.

Ormond went on to do all those things he listed about himself in *Reminiscences*. He was in his seventies before he returned to the New Britain settlement to find what was left of Damietta. He enlisted the help of John Anderson, who would become his close friend. After camping a night at the Dummett property, they worked their way north on Old King’s Road where they came upon James II’s grave in the woods, then found the remains of the slave quarters, a chimney, and a food cellar dug in the ground. The cellar is all that remains today.

Ormond was impressed with the New Britain community, proud that it would bear his family’s name. He was also interested in the town’s future, advising John Anderson to move ahead with several local projects and describing his own hopes that one day would appear “. . . a Coast railroad all along the top of these saw palmetto ridges . . . with the beautiful Halifax on one side.”

He lived to see much of this vision come true. In 1886 the St. Johns and Halifax Railroad connected Rawlston, in Putnam County, to the Ormond mainland. A year



*James Ormond III
(Ormond Beach Historical Society)*