

# The Foundations Are Laid

**I**t began, as did so much of America, with that experience we have come to call the *melting pot*. They came from many lands, sharing a common faith; and they came to a New World seeking new beginnings.

First to come were the Spaniards, founders of Florida and christeners of St. Augustine. With them came the SOLANOS, America's oldest documented family. The LOPEZ and SANCHEZ families came also. The ASHTONS came from Ireland during the period of English occupation (1763-1783).

Then in 1777 a mass migration came on foot from the failing colony Of New Smyrna. They arrived in St. Augustine, led by FATHER PEDRO CAMPS. These Minorcans, as they were called, were actually a conglomerate of Greeks, Italians and native Minorcans. They had come to this new land as indentured servants to work the land for DR. ANDREW TURNBULL. He was colonizing a land grant given by the English government.

Among those who shared the ordeals of the ill-fated effort to recreate a little of Italy, Spain, Minorca and Greece in the Florida sands, were such names as FERREIRA, MASTERS, PACETTI, PAPPY, PELLICER, ORTAGUS, ROGERO and TRIAY. These are names that ring familiar to the present day. Though all first settled within or near the comparative security of walled St. Augustine, it can be discerned that by 1800, a tentative reaching out into the surrounding country side had begun in search of land to settle and farm.

In 1804, the Spanish government granted to one, ANDRES PACETTI, II, a section of land, 640 acres in all. It was situated on the road that now bears his name in the Bakersville area. On it he built a two story frame house to accommodate his wife and himself and his family, which ultimately numbered five. A typical dwelling of the time included a living room, dining room, kitchen and bedroom downstairs, with additional bedrooms upstairs. The women cooked out of doors, except when bad weather necessitated the use of the indoor fireplace.

Meanwhile in 1810, a young man settled some land in another corner of the county. His name was BARTOLO SOLANO and the place was MOCCASIN BRANCH. Over the years he too improved the property by erecting a

home and other buildings for use as a farm. In 1825 he petitioned the government for 640 acres and records show that it was granted to him in 1830.

On part of the property now known as SOLANOS OLD FIELD, was built an adobe barn. This barn was to serve as the first *chapel* for Mass at Moccasin Branch when Bartolo's son EMMANUEL SOLANO became owner of the property. The present parish property is adjacent to this *Solano Grant*.

The same year that Bartolo petitioned for his land, a twenty-year-old Frenchman settled at Picolata. He was born a Huguenot in 1805 and forced to leave France to escape religious persecution. The young GEORGE COLEE married TRYPHENA RIZ IN 1828 She and her parents had accompanied him from France. In 1833 some visiting priests conducted a mission in St. Augustine. The young couple attended the mission and, upon its conclusion, became Catholic. Their home in Picolata subsequently became the location for occasional Masses in that area. His oldest son, LOUIS ALBERT COLEE, established a livery business in St. Augustine. Today the *St. Augustine Transfer Company* remains a highly visible aspect of the contemporary scene, providing horse drawn carriages that reveal to tourists the city's splendors.

Thus, through such gradual homesteading, the land west and south of St. Augustine had begun to be populated, but not without incident. One of the occupational hazards of being a pioneer was the every present fear of being attacked by Indians. Among those early settlers were PAUL WEIDMAN and his wife ANTONIA JOSEFA ROGERO. They had a farm near Tocoli. Their son, BARTOLO WEIDMAN, was born February 13, 1856. In later years he recalled that during this parent's childhood, Indian attacks were not infrequent. Often, when returning from St. Augustine they would find the chickens beheaded and the house ransacked. The mattresses would be ripped open and their contents scattered about. Once, during a sugar cane grinding, eighteen Indians attacked the workers near what is now the TRIAY place. They scalped one man and sought to do likewise to another, PHILIP MANUCY. Fortunately, however, the pursuing Indian tripped over a dog and Manucy had a chance to run for it. He hid under some bonnet leaves in an empty alligator hole in Brushy Branch. For several hours he barely managed to keep his nose above water, all the while suffering the nibbling of catfish

and minnows on his feet. Eventually the Indians decided he must have drowned and gave up the search. Upon seeing the Indians leave, Manucy promptly made his escape through the woods to Picolata. Even though Bartolo did not say so, it may well be that the man scalped that day was his own grandfather, PHILIP. Records show that he was killed by Indians in the year 1836.



Antonia Josefa Rogero Weidman – born 1828, mother of Bartolo Weidman

MARY JANE PACETTI, the wife of ANDRES PACETTI, II, had her own solution to the Indian problem. She befriended some of the Indian women, who then informed her when their great chief OSCEOLA was planning to go on the warpath. This enabled the Pacetti family to retire to the safety of the Castillo San Marco, where they could ride out the ensuing storm. Ironically, the capturer of Osceola, BRIG. GEN. JOSEPH HERNANDEZ was related by subsequent marriage to the Pacetti family. His granddaughter, ANTONIA HERNANDEZ, married DOMINGO PACETTI, son of Mary Jane and Andres II.

In addition to the inevitable hardships of *country living* encountered during this period, the tragic Civil War had come to Florida and thus to St. Johns County. Union troops had occupied St. Augustine. Some of the citizens of St. Augustine had fled to the countryside rather than stay in town under the yoke of the enemy occupation.

Many of the young men of the future ST. AMBROSE PARISH volunteered their services in the Army of the Confederacy, and served with CAPTAIN DICKINSON in the Second Florida Cavalry. Most of the volunteers were used in the capacity of scouting enemy movements because they had first hand knowledge of the country side and excellent equestrian ability. Two of those Army scouts were ALBERT CRESPIAN ROGERO and JOHN CLAUDE ROGERO.

With their men folk gone from home for long periods of time, the ladies were left to deal with the problems of keeping the home fires burning in more primitive and precarious circumstances than their city sisters could imagine. All the work formerly done by their men now fell to the ladies. So, each homestead became its own small fort to guard against the elements as well as enemy troops.

One Confederate Army volunteer was DOMINGO PACETTI who had obtained a few days leave to check on his family. While there, he and his wife, ANTONIA HERNANDEZ PACETTI, heard the sound of rapidly advancing horsemen. In a moment the house was surrounded by Union troops, who had received information of Domingo's possible whereabouts. Necessity became the mother of invention, and Antonia bundled her rather substantial husband into the baby's crib, covering him with freshly laundered clothes.

The soldiers, seeing his horse in the barn, proceeded to thoroughly search the house. At one point a soldier opened a door close by the crib and in the process almost overturned Domingo's precariously balanced hiding place. Afraid that their slave would inform on his master, Antonia took the chance that the Union soldiers would not understand Spanish. In her native language she told the boy not to reveal Domingo's whereabouts. In spite of all, the secret was kept. The soldiers, frustration at not finding their prey, finally left. Through this and other narrow escapes Domingo remained uncaptured, a fate his less fortunate brother PETER was not able to achieve.

The Civil War also produced a local Paul Revere. Only this time the alarm-raising rider was a lady, MARY DOLORES (LOLA) SANCHEZ, daughter of MAURITIO SANCHEZ, who had settled on the St. Johns River across from Palatka. With her father incarcerated in the Castillo San Marco as a potential spy, and her brother in the Confederate forces, Lola, her mother and two sisters found themselves defenseless and under the watchful eye of the Union troops. They hoped to catch the women attempting to

communicate with the Confederate troops dug in on the west bank of the St. Johns.

The Sanchez girls decided it was good policy to be nice to the Union officers, both from their own protection and also in the hope that they might get some information from them that could benefit the Confederates. One warm summer night, three Yankee officers were invited for supper. The girls left their guests alone and went to prepare the meal. The men injudiciously began to chat about some impending operational plans. Lola Sanchez, with her ear to the wall, managed to overhear them and learned that on the next Sunday, gunboats would start down river to surprise the Confederate forces. The Union forces also planned to send out a foraging party to liberate supplies from the surrounding homes in the countryside.

Lola, realizing that this information was vital to the confederates, decided upon a daring plan. She told her two sisters to delay the preparation of supper as long as possible, and stole out of the house in the dusk. She quickly saddled a fast horse and rode to the ferry a mile away. The ferryman agreed to mind the horse for her and loaned her a boat in which she rowed herself across the river. Once across, she encountered a rebel sentinel and persuaded him to lend her his horse. Mounted once more, she galloped to the Confederate Camp, some 1½ miles away. There she told her news to the Captain. With her mission accomplished, she hurried home the way she had come. She was, of course, too clever to come thundering up to the Sanchez house on a lathered horse, but instead turned the animal loose a safe distance away, and strolled in just in time to join the supper party.

On Sunday, the Confederated soldiers crossed the river and ambushed the foragers, appropriating all their wagons and supplies, and captured a number of prisoners. The army in Palatka was waiting for the gunboats, and fought them off, crippling one ship and sinking a transport. It all came about because of Lola Sanchez' wild night ride through the pine forests. She later married EMMANUEL LOPEZ and now lies buried in the parish cemetery.

Yet another association with the Civil War comes in the person of the man who named Elkton, BARTOLO GENOVAR. When only a scant fifteen years of age, young Genovar enlisted with the Third Florida Regiment. After 15 months of service, his true age was discovered, and Bartolo was discharged. He returned to Florida only to be captured, and spent six months as a prisoner of war. May years later he bought a sizable tract of land in this part of the country. Since he was a member of the Elks Lodge, he gave the name Elkton to his new development. He was the first to engage in potato farming in the vicinity of Elkton.

At long last the Civil War came to its inevitable conclusion. This tragic chapter in American history had ended. In its place a new chapter was beginning. The nation was once more united and faced the task of rebuilding the devastated Southland and healing the scars of a nation that had been torn apart. The men of St. Augustine and the surrounding area returned to their homes and families. They met the challenges found in evolving a more peaceful and productive lifestyle in this area with courage, tenacity and humor.



The Albert Rogero house, built in the 1830's and used in the latter part of the century to house the Sister's. It was still standing in 1975 when this sketch was made and was one of the oldest houses in the parish in Moccasin Branch.