

THE STORY OF STARKE

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Who was the first white man to settle in Starke? No one living today can truthfully say.

Very little is known of those years prior to 1857 and an account of Starke before that date would be based on speculation rather than fact. There are no written records — at least none that are known to exist — and those who could shed some light on the embryonic years have long since passed away.

There is reason to believe, however, that prior to 1857 this community was very sparsely settled — a log cabin here and a log cabin there, perhaps, but in the main just a dense forest of virgin pine.

Old maps indicate, however, that the vicinity of Starke was a crossroads point, even at that early date—if the crude, sandy trails used for travel in those days could be dignified with the name “roads.” Over these trails came an occasional settler, mainly from Georgia and South Carolina, who would stake out a homestead and laboriously clear a small plot for planting cotton. Others were attracted here because of the fine pine forests, valued for their lumber and naval stores products.

And so, while there were scattered settlers here prior to 1857, there was no real impetus for growth until the proposed route of the famed Fernandina to Cedar Key railroad (connecting the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico by rail for the first time) was announced. When it was learned that this important line would cut through this vicinity, business began to pick up.

The earliest known date in relation to Starke is a land grant recorded in 1854, giving Drury (or Drew) Reddish, a young farmer from Wayne County, Georgia, title to 40 acres in what is now South Starke. Mr. Reddish was the grandfather of the present Drew Reddish of Heilbronn Springs, and the great grandfather of incumbent Bradford County Sheriff P. D. Reddish.

In November of 1857 Starke was “officially born,” as it were, when the first post office was established here with George W. Cole as postmaster. Very little is known of Mr. Cole although his name appears frequently in local legal documents due to the fact that in 1859 he obtained title from the government to the 40 acres described as “Original Town of Starke,” and comprising the heart of the town’s business section—from about the courthouse on the west to the municipal power plant on the east. It cost him a grand total of \$100.

Mr. Cole at one time lived in Fernandina and was later connected with the land office at St. Augustine. It is believed that he was attracted to this area by the prospect of a new railroad and acquired his 40 acres of land, which he soon disposed of, as an investment. Apparently he remained in Starke for only a short while since his name is not carried in the 1860 census of the town, and there is no mention of him in



Capt. and Mrs. John Charles Richard

early copies of *The Telegraph*. According to old court house records, he died “somewhere in Alachua County,” which then included the area of Bradford.

Although there may have been a “trading post” in this vicinity before that time, it was not until 1859 that the first general store of any importance was established here by Capt. John Charles Richard, who had as a partner, George E. Pace. Known as Richard & Pace, the store did a thriving business here for years.

Capt. Richard was born in Georgia on January 29, 1827. After his marriage on January 30, 1855 to Mary Olmstead Morgan of Middleburg, he and his bride moved to Jacksonville where he was engaged in the mercantile business in partnership with George E. Pace.

In 1859 Mr. Richard came to Starke, just after the new railroad had been completed to this point, and opened the first mercantile establishment of any importance. Mr. Pace soon followed, and the two continued in partnership for some thirty years.

How did Starke get its name? Here again, there is nothing on record to prove beyond a doubt any one of several theories. Until recently, it had been generally accepted that the town was given the name of Starke in honor of Madison Starke Perry, Governor of Florida from 1857 to 1861. Governor Perry was born in South Carolina in 1814 and his mother was a member of the prominent Starke family of that state.

However, an old copy of *The Telegraph*, recently unearthed, throws new light on the subject and gives the origin of the town's name a romantic rather than a historic significance.

Back in the 80's there was a concerted effort on the part of some of its citizens to change Starke's name to Central City. It was believed that the latter would be more euphonious and would lend itself to advertising purposes better than the shorter, one-syllable name. During the controversy that raged for weeks, one writer, in a letter to *The Telegraph*, said that back in the days when Cole, Richard, and Pace were the three main property owners here, they got together and agreed to let Cole have the privilege of naming the new community. According to this writer, he gave it the name of his sweetheart, although it was not said whether this was her given name or her family name. It is possible, of course, that she was related to the same prominent South Carolina family as was Governor Perry.

The origin of the name for Call Street, present main business thoroughfare and at one time the one and only street in the town, has never been disputed. It was named in honor of Governor Richard Keith Call who was the third and fifth territorial Governor of Florida (1835-40; 1841-44). It is interesting to note that Governor Call was the great grandfather of Florida's present "First Lady," Mrs. LeRoy Collins, wife of the incumbent Governor.

In 1858 the railroad had reached Starke—midway point on its course from the Atlantic to the Gulf—and this community was the terminus for about a year before it continued its push to Cedar Key. A stage line was established connecting Starke with Waldo, Gainesville, Ocala, and other points south, so that passengers could leave the rail line here and continue their travels southward.

What was Starke like when the railroad reached here in 1858? An unknown writer in the May 7, 1887 issue of *The Telegraph* describes it thus:

“ . . . at that time this was a wilderness, a vast and unbroken pine forest, where the deer, bear, wildcat, and the stealthy panther roamed at their own free will. There was not a single house worthy of the name in what is now the corporate limits, only a few little shanties occupied by railroad hands.”

The arrival of the railroad started the town to growing. The importance of the line to the young community is shown in the fact that streets and avenues in the old “original town” were laid off in relation to the railroad rather than in conformance with section lines or other geographical considerations. They were platted to run parallel and at right angles with the tracks.

According to the 1887 writer, the first structure erected in the town of Starke was a large “double-log” house built by Wm. Edwards Sr. in cooperation with John Brown. It was erected on property at the northwest corner of Thompson and Madison Streets, now the home site of Mrs. A. A. Durden.

Soon thereafter, according to this writer, Richard & Pace began construction of the first business house, next to the railroad on the south side of Call Street. The third building was erected by John Brown and was a dwelling located on Call Street about where Roberts Jewelry Store is today.

“Wm. Edwards Sr. boarded the men employed in the erection of the first hotel, which was a very large double-log, occupying the spot now covered by the Commercial Hotel,” says the 1887 writer.

But if the railroad brought new growth and prosperity to Starke, the young town’s “boom” was to be short-lived. In 1861 the country was torn asunder by the bloody War Between the States and Starke suffered like all the rest of the South. Many of the young men left to fight for a cause they considered just, and Capt. Richard organized a militia (Co. A, 10th Florida Infantry) that fought with distinction during the four years of civil strife.

Starke was visited by at least one Union “raiding party” during the war, and several freight cars, containing Confederate

supplies, were burned at the depot here, but by and large the town escaped serious loss or damage during the war.

Though many of the early families left during this period of war unrest and the trying Reconstruction days that followed, the struggling young town survived this serious blow and by 1875 had grown to a population of 400. The earliest census in which Starke is recorded by name—that of 1860—had shown a population of 138.

While some old timers had left, an influx of new citizens came after the war, including such well known names as N. J. Jones, Dr. J. L. Gaskins, Thomas Hemingway, J.J. Sparkman, Joseph Alvarez, S. S. Weeks, and W. F. Bowen.

The time had obviously arrived for the thriving young village to take on the dignity of an incorporated town. Accordingly, on May 29, 1876 an election was held to decide whether or not to incorporate and to elect the first slate of city officials. Forty-two persons voted in that historic election and the vote was unanimous in favor of incorporating. Dr. J. L. Gaskins was elected as the first mayor.

A year before its incorporation Starke had received another boost when an election was held and the people of Bradford County, by a narrow margin of 46 votes, decided to move the court house from its original site at Lake Butler to Starke. The county records were moved that year to Starke and set up in temporary “court house” headquarters in the old Tom Hemingway building on the northeast corner of Call and Walnut Streets (present location of Canova Pharmacy). This was the beginning of a 45-year feud between the two towns over which should be the county seat, and during which time the court house was moved back and forth three times. The dispute was not finally resolved until 1921 when the Florida Legislature created Union County from all that portion of Bradford lying west of New River and making Lake Butler the county seat.

In 1879 there was another indication that Starke had reached the status of a full-blown town. Col. Wm. W. Moore, a man of some culture and influence, who had been engaged in the newspaper profession in Tallahassee, Jacksonville, Cedar Key, and



Dr. J. L. Gaskins, Starke's first mayor

other localities, came to Starke to look around. He liked what he saw and judged the town ripe for a newspaper of its own.

Accordingly, with very modest means and equipment, Col. Moore and his son, Sterling, started *The Florida Weekly Telegraph* in July of 1879, and the paper has been published continuously since that date, making it the oldest weekly newspaper in Florida published continuously under the same masthead. The name was later changed to *The Starke Telegraph*, and finally to *The Bradford County Telegraph*, which it remains today.

With a newspaper at its service, the town was ready to advertise itself to the world and to take up any and all fights for the betterment of Starke, such as the numerous courthouse elections when the editors of Starke and Lake Butler battled it out in their editorial columns, each advancing the cause of his home town as a prospective county seat.

In the 1880's Starke's growth was again stimulated by an influx of newcomers. Whereas the first settlers had come largely

from the nearby states of Georgia and South Carolina, these latest arrivals were mainly well-to-do families from Pennsylvania. Several of them were families who had made money in oil and were lured to Florida by the prospect of investing a part of their fortunes in orange groves.

The new arrivals from Pennsylvania included three families who were to figure prominently in the social and business life of Starke in this period. They were the S. J. Sternburgs, the J. M. Trubys, and the E. Strongs. All three built fine homes on North Cherry Street (then called Pennsylvania Avenue). These houses are still standing today, and are easily recognized by their architecture which followed the “high off the ground” style of that period.

The old firm of Richard & Pace was sold to three of the newcomers and became Truby, Sternburg & Co. Mr. Strong, a reputed millionaire and the wealthiest of the three, was the “Company” — the silent partner.

By 1884 the population of Starke had grown to six or seven hundred and some hundred or so houses dotted the landscape. A “bird’s eye view,” drawn by an unknown artist that year, shows 15 or 20 store buildings clustered around the railroad, two or three hotels, two churches (Baptist and Methodist), two schools (the Starke Institute and the Orange College), a railroad station where the rear half of the Coca-Cola plant now stands, a couple of saw mills, and a cotton gin or two. The scene was set off prettily by evenly spaced orange groves that occupied many of the vacant lots, and even entire blocks within the corporate limits. Truly Starke had arrived as a town.

But disaster, in another form, was ready to strike again, and in the winter of 1894-95 Starke suffered its second severe setback — counting the Civil War and Reconstruction days as the first.

The winter of 1894-95 brought the famous “Big Freeze” to this section. By mid-February practically every orange tree in the area had been killed to the ground. Gone were the dreams of the early settlers and the later arrivals from Pennsylvania and other northern states who had hoped to make their fortunes in citrus.

A few determined growers replanted, but only four years elapsed until another disastrous freeze came in February of 1899. This finished the job and convinced growers that the orange industry was better off farther South. Farms and homes were advertised for sale, and many of the growers who had come here so hopefully a few years before, returned to their former homes in the North, or pushed on farther into Central Florida.

It was a severe economic blow to the little town, but one which was quickly overcome. For several years a few adventurous growers at Starke and Lawtey had been experimenting with a new cash crop, the luscious winter strawberry, and it was found to be well adapted to the climate and soil of Bradford County. Needing something to take up the slack left by the loss of orange groves, more and more farmers turned to this promising new money crop. The old standby, Sea Island cotton, still ruled as king of the money producers, of course.

In spite of these temporary setbacks the town continued to grow. By 1900 the population was 972, and in 1905 it reached the imposing figure of 1,102. Growing pains were being experienced and in the period from 1900 to 1915 the first bond issues were floated for such civic improvements as lights and water, sewer lines, and schools.

Then once more the economy of the town and county suffered reversal and change. A new pestilence, the dreaded boll weevil, made its appearance in Florida and did to the cotton industry what the Big Freeze had done to the orange groves. World War I also brought another period of uncertainty and unrest and the population of Starke declined from 1,233 in 1915 to 1,023 in 1920.

But you can't keep a good town down, and Starke moved on to experience, as did all of Florida, the fabulous land boom of the late 1920's. Population had barely held its own until 1925, but in the five years from then until 1930 it increased from 1,071 to 1,339.

It was during this period of expansion that the first hard surfaced highway, connecting Starke and Bradford County with the outside world, was constructed. Due largely to the efforts of Eugene S. Matthews, publisher of *The Telegraph* for many

years, the famous Jacksonville to Tampa “short route” (then called State Road 13) was designated through Starke and Bradford County. This highway was an instantaneous boom to the area and now, carrying the double designation of State Highway 200 and U.S. 301, it is the veritable “life line” of traffic through this county and has resulted in a multi-million dollar motel industry in Starke.

It was in these years also that State Road 28 (now State 100) was designated through Starke, providing a short cut for traffic from the west, through Lake City, to the East Coast. Starke is now a strategic hub of highways and is also destined to be an interchange point on the new Florida turnpike which will likely be built within the next two years.

Then, in the early 1930's, came the fourth disaster to strike the town—one that was not confined to Starke, but which broke the spirit of the entire Nation: the great depression of the early 1930's. Starke had its WPA projects, its sewing rooms, its Red Cross flour, and its CCC camps, just like the rest of the country. It was tough going, and the population trend was again reversed, the census of 1935 showing a decline to 1,317.

Thanks to emergency measures started by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Starke and the rest of the Nation slowly emerged from the slough of depression, and by 1940 the population here had increased slightly to 1,480.

Then came World War II and the hectic days of construction and occupation of Camp Blanding on the east shore of Kingsley Lake, just seven miles from Starke. Totally unprepared for the tremendous economic changes resulting from the establishment of a huge military post on its door step, Starke was literally bursting at its seams. With Federal aid, utilities were hastily expanded to take care of the overflow of population, and every vacant room, garage, and attic was pressed into service to accommodate the families of Blanding personnel.

The population doubled and trebled, but much of it was transient. It was freely predicted that Starke would become a ghost town when Camp Blanding was deactivated at the close of the war. But once again Starke and its leaders proved that they could meet and surmount a crisis, just as their forefathers

had overcome emergencies brought on by the Civil War, the Big Freeze, the boll weevil plague, and the great depression.

With the close of the war and the deactivation of Blanding, local leaders made a determined effort to attract new industry to take up the slack. A corporation was formed to construct a factory building for lease to a North Carolina manufacturer of work and play clothes. Small plastics plants and a furniture factory took hold and huge ilmenite mining operations were established east of Starke and northeast of Lawtey. The Hercules Powder Company began a woods operation in this area, utilizing old stumps from the original stand of pine trees. Forest products, always a major factor in Starke's economy, took on new importance with the establishment of paper mills in Florida, requiring millions of cords of pulpwood annually. All of these things tended to balance Starke's new economy which, until the 1940's had been almost totally dependent on agriculture.

The 1950 Federal census credited Starke with a population of 3,000, but since that time much more area has been added by an extension of the corporate limits, and it is estimated that the present population is between 4,500 and 5,000.

Far from becoming a ghost town, Starke has actually enjoyed its greatest period of growth and expansion since the close of Camp Blanding. Two housing developments, providing modern homes for more than 100 new families, have recently been completed. The city has expanded its utilities plant to take care of the needs of a growing population for years to come. The school system recently completed a half million dollar building program, and a \$350,000 hospital was opened to the public last year. The growth of traffic on U. S. Highway 301 has brought a brand new industry to our town, for Starke is now famed as an overnight stop for tourists, offering them a choice of more than a score of modern motor courts and a fine selection of restaurants.

Starke today is a long way from that original wilderness of "unbroken pine forests" that greeted settlers in 1857. The "blood, and sweat, and tears" of those early arrivals welded a firm foundation upon which those who came afterward could build the city as we know it today. Although there may be other

Big Freezes, and plagues, and depressions in the future, there is no reason to doubt that Starke and its leaders will take them in their stride, just as those in the past have done, arising from whatever disaster fate may bring, a stronger, more determined, more progressive town than ever before.



THE EVENT

PETRIFIED LIGHTNING FROM CENTRAL FLORIDA

A PROJECT BY ALLAN MCCOLLUM

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