

## THE FORT PIERCE AMERICAN GOLD FIND

by CARL J. CLAUSEN

THE PROBABILITY is that the treasure will never be re-covered," states the *Charleston Daily Courier*, reporting in 1857 the accidental loss of a sizeable United States army payroll in a Florida east coast inlet.<sup>1</sup> The Third Seminole War, which officially started with the not entirely unprovoked attack by the Indians on a government survey party near Fort Myers in late December 1855, was in its seventeenth month when Major Jeremiah Yellot Dashiell of the army paymaster corps arrived off the Indian River Inlet on the east coast of Florida on May 1, 1857.<sup>2</sup> Entrusted to Dashiell was a leather pouch containing \$23,000 in gold which had been withdrawn a few days earlier from the sub-treasury in Charleston, South Carolina. The money was intended for disbursement to federal troops in the major's pay district which encompassed the Indian River area.<sup>3</sup>

Located opposite the mouth of the inlet on the west bank of the Indian River lay Fort Capron, a post established in March 1850 following the Indian attack on the local settlement the previous summer.<sup>4</sup> By the spring of 1857, this fort had achieved a certain degree of strategic importance, for it both anchored the eastern end of the chain of military posts and roads which reached across southern Florida north of Lake Okeechobee, and it commanded the inlet through which logistical support from the ports of Charleston and Jacksonville could flow.<sup>5</sup>

1. *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 25, 1857.
2. James W. Covington, "An Episode in the Third Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLV (July 1966), 45-59; Kenneth W. Porter, "Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco) in the Seminole Wars (Part 1)," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLV (January 1967), 236-39.
3. J. Y. Dashiell to Paymaster General Benjamin F. Larned, April 19, 1858, "Letters Received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1822-60," Roll 577, C116-D 1858, National Archives, Washington. Microfilm copy, Florida Board of Archives and History, Tallahassee, Florida.
4. Charles H. Coe, *Red Patriots: The Story of the Seminoles* (Cincinnati, 1898), 165; H. J. Chaffer, "Military Posts of Florida Fortified Prior to 1860," typed copy in P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville; James W. Covington, "The Indian Scare of 1849," *Taquesta*, XXI (1961), 53-63.
5. *Charleston Mercury*, May 16, June 22, 1857.

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In April and May 1857 four companies of regular army troops—H of the First Artillery; D, E, and G of the Fourth Artillery; and two companies of Florida Mounted Volunteers—were operating out of Fort Capron.<sup>6</sup> These units were actively engaged in scouting the country lying west of the present cities of Stuart, Fort Pierce, Vero Beach, and Sebastian.<sup>7</sup> Their purpose was to locate and if possible capture any hostiles in that area. The payment of the federal troops stationed at Fort Capron was Major Dashiell's immediate objective. Captain Cannon, master of the *William and Mary*, the schooner on which Dashiell had arrived, elected to anchor outside the inlet, which was noted during this period for its narrow channel and shifting bars.<sup>8</sup> It was thus necessary for the major and his young son who had accompanied him from Charleston to board a small boat with four others for the trip through the inlet to the fort. According to a Captain Nye who witnessed the accident from his schooner *Pongasset* which lay at anchor within the bar of the inlet, Major Dashiell's "boat was struck by a sea" when near the outer breakers and upset.<sup>9</sup> Captain Nye manned his boat and managed to rescue all six persons, but the payroll was lost. A search was made for the money but with no success for the bottom of the "river" was described as a quicksand. Major Dashiell applied to Congress for relief from responsibility in the loss which apparently he received early in 1858.<sup>10</sup>

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In the spring of 1963, 106 years later, Albert Ashley and James Gordy discovered the lost payroll. These two young men had been skin diving for crawfish in the Atlantic a few hundred yards off the beach in the area where the Indian River Inlet had been located.<sup>11</sup> The coins they found lay scattered over the top of one of the "reefs" of Anastasia Formation limestone which parallel

6. *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, April 11, May 9, 1857.

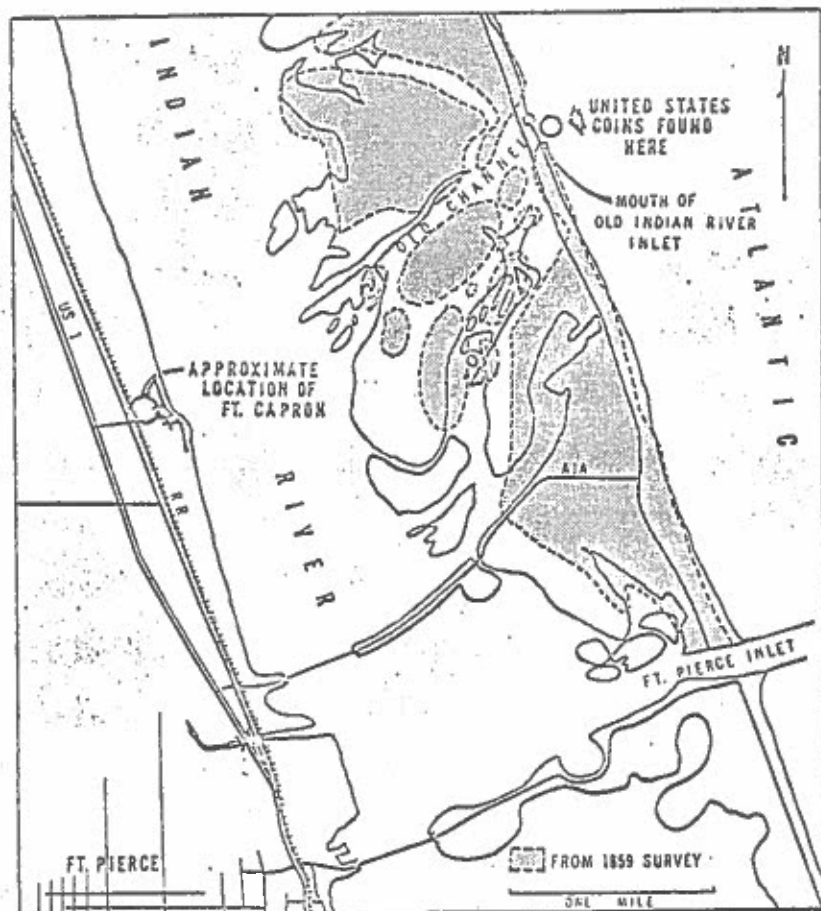
7. *Jacksonville Florida News*, May 2, 1857; *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, May 23, 1857.

8. Joseph D. Cushman, Jr., "The Indian River Settlement: 1842-1849," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLIII (July 1964), 30-32.

9. *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 25, 1857.

10. Dashiell to Larned, April 19, 1858.

11. The old Indian River Inlet sanded up and finally closed, disappearing entirely, after the new government-constructed Fort Pierce Inlet, almost three miles to the south, was opened in the 1920s.



Map of the Fort Pierce area of the lower Florida East Coast locating the site of the recovery of the lost army payroll. Shaded overlay delineates the Barrier Island and Old Indian River Inlet as it appears in an 1859 government survey. Site of Fort Capron, destination for the payroll, is at left center on the mainland.

the shore in this area. James Gordy's father, a Fort Pierce citrus grower, contacted the trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund, the state agency then having jurisdiction over the recovery of lost or abandoned valuables from submerged public lands, and obtained a lease on July 2, 1964, to salvage the remaining coins.<sup>12</sup>

During July, August, and early September of 1964, the men worked the area from a small boat to recover more coins. The author, then archeologist for the Internal Improvement Fund, visited the site and dived with the salvagers on a number of occasions during this period.

The coins recovered in 1964 were found in an area measuring roughly fifty by eighty feet. The majority were concentrated in small depressions in the surface of the reef where the divers could simply "fan" away the light covering of sand or marine growth with gentle waves of the hand to expose the coins. A few lay in deeper pockets in the limestone and were uncovered with a small injection dredge which gently "vacuumed" away the sand and loose shell. In this manner 477 additional one, two and a half, five, ten, and twenty dollar gold pieces and several hundred half dollars, quarters, and half dimes were recovered. The gold coins, which had been minted in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Dahlonega (Georgia), San Francisco, and Charlotte, showed almost no effect from their long immersion in sea water. The distribution by date of the gold coins in all five denominations strongly reflected the yearly mintage figures indicating that the coins comprising the payroll had been drawn from general circulation. This fact would probably account for the absence in the sample of any three dollar gold pieces, a denomination minted from 1854 through 1857, the year of Major Dashiell's loss, but in relatively small quantities.<sup>13</sup>

The payroll's silver coins were in general badly corroded with many examples reduced to thin wafers on which the original de-

12. Trustees of the Florida Internal Improvement Fund to Albert N. Ashley, James Robert Gordy, and Ken F. Gordy, Lease No. 2025, July 2, 1964. Copies of documents and pertinent correspondence in Internal Improvement Fund Office, Tallahassee. Copies of contracts and pertinent correspondence in office of Florida Board of Archives and History, Tallahassee. All are filed under lease and contract number. Control over the salvage of "artifacts and treasure" was passed from the Internal Improvement Fund to the State Board of Antiquities in 1965, and in 1967, to the Florida Board of Archives and History.
13. R. S. Yeoman, *Handbook of United States Coins* (Racine, 1967), 87-88.

DENOMINATION	NUMBER	PER CENT	RANGE	MINTS
20 DOLLAR	113	19.4	1850-56	P.O. & S.
10 "	48	8.2	1840-52	P.O.
6 "	125	21.6	1834-56	P.O., C & D
2½ "	137	23.5	1834-56	P.O. & D
1 "	159	27.3	1849-56	P.O.
TOTALS	582	99.0	1834-56	P.O., D, C & S

Data on gold coins recovered from the 1857 army payroll. Based on information contained in an inventory prepared by the state in 1964.

tails of seated figures and eagles were only faintly discernible. The arrangement of the coins in several of the consolidated clumps suggested that at least a portion of the silver might have been carried in rolls. There were no silver dollars represented in the sample, probably for the same reason given above for the absence of three dollar gold pieces, i.e., low mintage. On this same basis, dimes, silver three cent pieces, and large cents should have been present but were unrepresented.

DENOMINATION	NUMBER	PER CENT
HALF DOLLAR	38	18.9
QUARTER	139	61.8
HALF DIME	48	21.3
TOTALS	225	100.0

Silver coins recovered from the payroll. Based on information contained in an inventory prepared by the state in 1964.

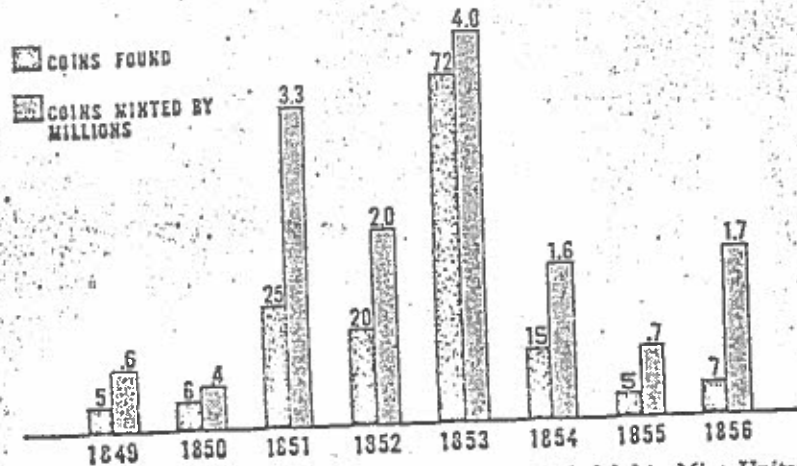
Under the terms of the lease issued by the trustees of the Internal Improvement Fund in 1964, the public was to retain twenty-five per cent of all items recovered from state land and the salvagers were to receive title to the remaining seventy-five per cent. Meetings were held on September 10 and 22, 1964, to divide the 477 gold coins, the silver coins recovered in 1964, and 105 gold coins which the salvagers had turned over to the State of Florida on July 13, 1964, as the total number of coins salvaged from the site prior to the issuance of the lease. Unfortunately at the time it was not known that the salvagers were misrepresenting their recovery by failing to report more than 2,600 additional gold coins which they had brought up in 1963.<sup>14</sup> Ac-

14. The salvagers never officially admitted the full extent of the recovery they had made in 1963. That a total of more than 2,700 gold coins had been salvaged from the site in that year was not revealed

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cordingly, at the division, representatives of the state selected 147 gold coins and twenty-five per cent of the silver which it was felt constituted a representative sample of the find.<sup>15</sup>

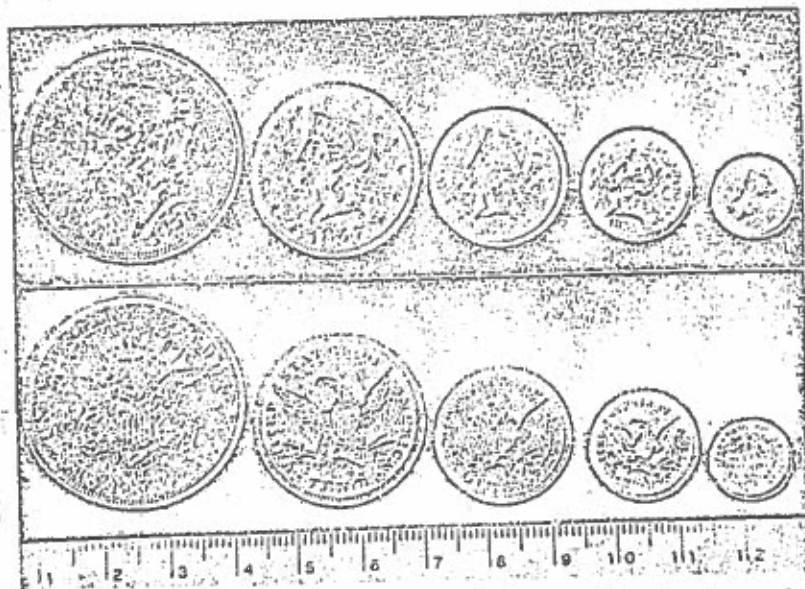


Comparison of the distribution by date of 155 Philadelphia Mint United States gold dollars from 1857 payroll recovered in 1963-1964 with the total yearly output of gold dollars by that mint for the same period.

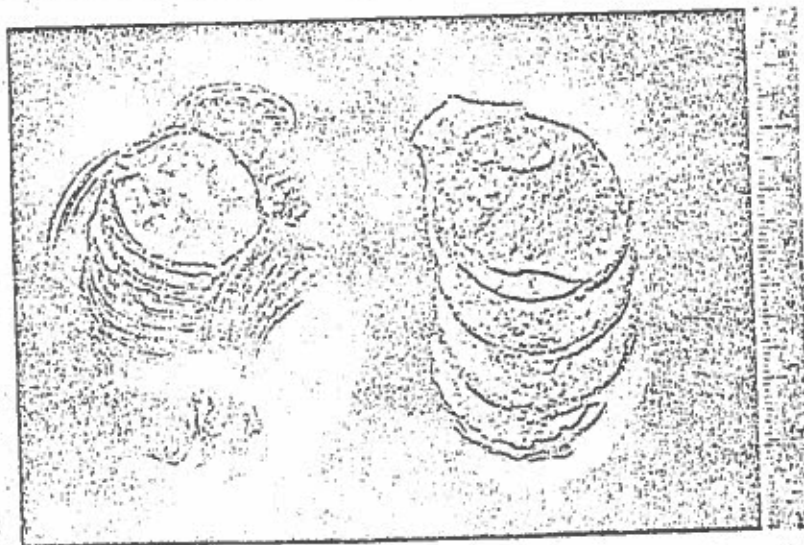
In retrospect it is evident that Major Dashiell and his party were near tragic victims of the cycloidal waves which often break

until early in 1968 when answers to interrogatories were filed in a civil action between the salvagers. The salvagers then claimed that they had recovered the following 3,264 gold coins from the site (including those found in 1964): 550 twenties (17.1 per cent); 490 tens (fifteen per cent); 929 fives (28.4 per cent); 787 two and a half dollar pieces (twenty-four per cent); and 508 one dollar pieces (15.5 per cent). The total face value of these coins is \$23,025.50, approximately the amount of the payroll lost by Dashiell in 1857. (See *Ashley v Gordy et al*, Circuit Court, St. Lucie County, Florida, Case No. 67-300.) On April 18, 1968, the State of Florida filed suit to recover the coins which had been illegally salvaged. (See Florida Board of Archives and History *et al v. Gordy et al*, Circuit Court, St. Lucie County, Florida, Case No. 68-250.)

15. Inventory-Florida's share of U.S. gold coins recovered under Lease "No. 2025 (Ashley, Gordy and Gordy) as divided on September 10, 1964, and September 22, 1964." (The numismatist who appraised the public share classified three per cent of the coins as *uncirculated*, fourteen per cent *almost or about uncirculated*, thirty-nine per cent *extremely fine*, forty-one per cent *very fine*, and three per cent *fine*.)



Obverse and reverse of a set of United States gold coins from the army payroll. Left to right: twenty, ten, five, two and a half, and one dollar gold pieces. (Note the fine condition of these coins after more than 110 years in the ocean.)



1857 quarters (left) and half dollars (right) in clumps from the payroll.

over the outer bars of inlets along exposed coasts.<sup>16</sup> These waves which may break even during periods of relative calm represent a real hazard to small craft attempting to negotiate an inlet such as the one at Indian River. Accidents similar to that which befell Major Dashiell in 1857 still occur with regularity even in the "improved" inlets along the Florida east coast.<sup>17</sup>

What became of the major after the loss? Unfortunately his ill luck continued. Returning to Florida a few weeks later from Charleston where he had withdrawn an additional \$28,000 in gold to replace the funds lost in the inlet, the major and his escort, a Private Rowles from Fort Moultrie, stayed overnight at a hotel in Palatka. The following morning, before they were to board a small steamboat for the trip south along the St. Johns River to Enterprise, the major left the payroll unattended in his room for a few moments while he went in search of his escort. During his absence, a Negro named Washington, a slave of the proprietor of the hotel, entered the room and probably removed a total of \$13,000 from the major's traveling bag. The theft escaped detection until the major and his escort arrived in Enterprise where a delay, to wait for a mail wagon before traveling on to New Smyrna, gave Dashiell the opportunity to count the money. Dumbfounded by the shortage, the major did not at first recognize that a theft had been committed. He even questioned Private Rowles about the possibility of their having inadvertently left some of the bags of coin behind at the subtreasury office in Charleston. Finding no immediate explanation for the loss, Dashiell proceeded on to New Smyrna and then south to the posts in his district along the Indian River where he made up the shortage by borrowing from sutlers and others to pay the troops.

Returning to Charleston by the same route, the major made judicious inquiries at Palatka and other points where the money might have been taken, but to no avail. It was not until Septem-

16. Charles F. Chapman, *Piloting, Seamanship, and Small Boat Handling* (New York, 1961-1962), 439 a-n. Seven soldiers, all of Company E, 3rd Artillery, drowned at the Indian River Bar on October 26, 1841, during the Second Seminole War, perhaps as a result of an accident similar to Dashiell's catastrophe. John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848), 532-33. Also see facsimile edition with an introduction by John K. Mahon (Gainesville, 1964).
17. Fort Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel*, November 28, 1962, March 27, November 2, 1964, October 31, 1967; Fort Pierce *News Tribune*, January 23, 1968.

ber 1857, while at home in San Antonio, Texas, to see his family and ostensibly to raise money to make up the deficit by selling his own property that Dashiell received letters from friends in Palatka informing him that the town marshall there had seized a large amount of gold that was believed to belong to him. Dashiell quickly returned to Florida, but he was disappointed to learn on his arrival in Palatka that the amount of money recovered totaled only a little over \$3,000. However, questioning of the Negro slaves, from whom the gold had been seized, implicated Washington who readily confessed to the robbery but admitted taking only \$4,500. Others, local merchants and traders, besides the slaves, were also apparently implicated in one way or another; but the testimony gathered was contradictory and in some cases inconsistent, and the authorities did not appear anxious to pursue the matter. Dashiell retained a Palatka attorney to represent him in the matter and returned to duty in Charleston where he remained until the spring of 1858 when he took leave to plead his case in Washington.<sup>18</sup>

Although there was abundant evidence that a robbery had occurred, the full explanation for the missing \$13,000 still rested solely on Dashiell's testimony. This, coupled with the fact that the government had repeatedly ordered the major to pay over the balance of public funds in his possession without success, at last caused Secretary of War John B. Floyd to lose patience. On July 7, 1858, he referred the case to President Buchanan, recommending Dashiell's dismissal from the service.<sup>19</sup> The President's response was swift, and Dashiell was relieved by executive order dated July 10, 1858.<sup>20</sup> His twelve years of service in the United States Army, begun during the War with Mexico, had ended, but Dashiell's military career was not finished.

He served as an assistant adjutant-general and inspector-general during the Civil War for the State of Texas holding the rank of colonel.<sup>21</sup> After the war he settled in San Antonio,

18. Dashiell to Larned, April 19, 1858.

19. John B. Floyd to James Buchanan, July 7, 1858, "Letters received by the Office of the Adjutant General (Main Series) 1822-60."

20. War Department, General Orders No. 9, July 10, 1858, National Archives, Washington.

21. Compiled Service Records of Confederate General and Staff Officers and Non Regimental Enlisted Men (Micro copy No. 253 Roll 71) National Archives, Washington; Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington, 1903), I, 354.

Texas, and for a time edited the *Herald*, the local paper. A little more than a year before his death on March 14, 1888, Dashiell applied to Washington for a pension on the basis of his Mexican War service, but his claim was denied because of the circumstances of his dismissal from the army.<sup>22</sup>

22. Walter Prescott Webb, ed., *The Handbook of Texas* (Austin, 1952), I, 465-66; assistant adjutant general to the commissioner of pensions regarding application 7994 Mexican War, June 28, 1887, National Archives, Washington.