



Fitzgerald, Georgia: The Soldier's Colony of Unity

by Gloria Swift, BGES Historian – October 15, 2019

When people retire or are looking for new jobs, especially those in colder climates, they often think of moving South so that they might enjoy warmer temperatures during the winter months. Today we view this as a modern phenomenon, given that people are much more mobile now than in years past.

One town in Georgia, however, provided that opportunity in 1895 through an idea of Philander H. Fitzgerald of Indianapolis, Indiana. Fitzgerald was a pension attorney after the war for Union veterans and also owned and ran a newspaper called *The American Tribune*, formerly the *Veteran's Review*, with a circulation of 25,000 copies per week.

The 1890s in the Midwest were not good ones. Widespread depression and severe, long-term drought ruined many farms. Worried for his veterans, Fitzgerald came up with the idea of purchasing land for a planned community where veterans and their families could live out their days in a milder climate. A hundred thousand acres in Georgia were bought for the creation of a soldiers "colony." Fitzgerald used his paper to sell the idea. He sold fifty-thousand shares of stock in The American Tribune Soldiers Colony Company for ten dollars per share. Shares were to be converted into lots in town or farmettes of twenty to forty acres. Money quickly poured in from veterans seeking relief. Surveyors and work teams were sent to lay out the town that became "Fitzgerald."



The last vets

Fitzgerald was not a town reserved only for Union veterans. Southern veterans were invited to live there too, and many moved into the community. As they began to name the streets of Fitzgerald, an equal number were named for Southern generals as Northern. Other streets were named for Georgia rivers and trees. A sense of humor appeared to be had when the fire department was built on Sherman Street! Eventually, a railroad connected Fitzgerald with the outside world bringing in supplies. So, too, came tourists, because of advertisements and regular excursion trains scheduled to "look at the Yankees!"

Fitzgerald grew quickly and prospered. Despite the widespread depression, the town did not suffer because of the influx of cash into the economy from the pensions of the veterans. Combined, the pensions added to more than fifty thousand dollars per month. With prosperity, the town continued to grow. A hotel named the Lee Grant was built to accommodate visitors, and an event hall called the Corn and Cotton Palace was built.

In 1896, the citizens of Fitzgerald wanted to celebrate their good fortune. Invitations were sent for an exposition to be held at the Corn and Cotton Palace and to watch a grand parade of veterans as part of the event. The parade was planned so that the Southern veterans would go first. After a short break, the Union veterans would start. When the doors of the Palace opened, all of the bands stepped out, and all of them were playing the National Anthem. Behind them were the soldiers, some in blue, some in gray, all following as one behind the Stars and Stripes. The veterans were giving the signal that this was once again the United States of America. The parade became known as the Parade of Unity. The soldiers who marched formed Battalion One of the Blue and Gray. You can visit Fitzgerald, Georgia, today and learn more about this amazing town.



Downtown



Corn and Cotton Palace

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