

# **The Seminole Wars 1817-1858**

**Bruce Dahlquist, January 2025**

Every day, whether we remember it or not, we live in an historic area. The entire state of Florida was the stage for the Seminole Wars which, ultimately, had a significant impact upon the future of Florida. As you read through this description of the Seminole Wars, you will recognize many of the names of people and places that we encounter every day.

Having recently read Florida's Seminole Wars 1817-1858 by Joe Knetsch, the history surrounding the Seminole Wars began to unveil itself. The book describes, in detail, the events of the 3 Seminole Wars; as well as the backstory which contributed to each of them.

The information from this book was supplemented by The Great Florida Seminole Trail, by Doug Alderson. This book tracks the historic sites of the Seminole Wars from Pre-First Seminole War through today.

## **Pre-First Seminole War**

Between 1656 and 1704 there was a mass migration of Creek Indians from the north, eventually becoming the Seminoles. Before they arrived, the Apalachee Indians lived in north Florida with the Spanish missionaries. The Apalachee's grew large amounts of corn to help feed the Spanish in St. Augustine.

When the English with a force of 50 and their 1,000 thousand Creek allies invaded in 1704, most of the Apalachee's were killed or moved south. They destroyed all fourteen of the mission villages and Spanish ranches. The inhabitants were burned, enslaved or sent into exile. The Creeks then moved into the Alachua savannah by the current Payne's Prairie, along with the upper Florida east coast and the Suwanee River. These Creeks were the Oconee, led by Cowkeeper. Cowkeeper waged war against the Spanish and any of their allies.

In 1763, Spain ceded St. Augustine to the British. Simultaneously, the Oconee wanted to be recognized as different than the other Creeks, so by 1765 they were known as Seminoles.

In 1783, the British returned control of Florida to the Spanish, after losing the Revolutionary War. When Cowkeeper died, his son, Payne took over and moved their village near Micanopy. Here, they formed an alliance with the Black slaves, who were escaping from the north. This resulted in the construction of Fort Mose, near St. Augustine.

The United States was fighting the British in the War of 1812.

On September 24, 1812 Payne and his warriors were on their way to St. Augustine when they were ambushed by 117 militia. As a result, Payne died from his wounds; and his son

Bowlegs became the hereditary chief of the Alchua Seminoles, taking over and moving the village. They were attacked again, with 60 killed and 386 dwellings destroyed.

In 1813, during the Creek War, 700 Creek Indians (Redsticks) attacked the settlement of Samuel Mimms in Baldwin County, Alabama. There were 265 militia killed or captured, with 252 civilians killed or captured. This became known as the Fort Mimms Massacre. Fort Mimms consisted of a blockhouse, stockade, and Mimm's outbuildings.

In 1814 Bowleg joined the British at the Battle of New Orleans, when the British were fighting the United States. As a result, he became an enemy of Andrew Jackson.

In 1835, Osceola and 81 warriors ambushed a baggage train, along with the Battle of Black Point, where the Seminoles killed 6 and wounded 8.

At the same time, the Spanish government could not support its Florida colonies (East and West Florida) because it was fighting with Napoleon; and was afraid of a potential revolution in Spain. Also, Florida became a burden to Spain because it could not afford to send settlers or staff garrisons. It was difficult for them to govern their territory. As a result, at the request of the Spanish governor in Florida, the British occupied Pensacola. They used Pensacola as a base for their southern campaign during the War.

The British had the support of many Native American Creeks in Alabama, known as "Redsticks." They were also arming the Seminoles, Miccosukees and runaway slaves. The British encouraged and bribed the Native Americans to make war against the United States. In doing so, the United States saw them as a threat.

On March 27, 1814, Andrew Jackson with a force of 3,300 men, attacked and defeated 1,000 Redsticks at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in central Alabama. This resulted in the Treaty of Fort Jackson. Among other things, the terms of the Treaty included:

- The Creeks had to cede 23 million acres of land in central Alabama and southern Georgia to the United States.

- They had to stop all communication with the British or Spanish.

- The United States was allowed to establish military posts in areas that were guaranteed to the Creek nation.

- All instigators of the War were to be turned over.

The United States Congress thought that this was unfair and refused to confirm it. The international community also censured this move by the United States.

Many of the Creeks found the terms of the Treaty of Fort Jackson untenable. They moved south into northern Spanish Florida. Along with the Creeks, runaway slaves from southern plantations were escaping into Florida as well. Villages were set up including both the Blacks and the Seminoles

However, ending this conflict allowed Jackson to move on to Louisiana, where he defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans. It also led to the opening up of the Mississippi Territory for pioneer settlement.

In 1814, during the War of 1812, the British built a fort at Prospect Bluff along the Apalachicola River to support a British attack of the United States. It was abandoned after the War and was turned over to a large group of free Blacks, escaped slaves and a few Indians. It became known as Negro Fort.

In 1815, when the British withdrew, the Negro Fort was intended to be used by the Native Americans. However, it was occupied by 30 Seminoles and Choctaws, along with 300 free Blacks. This was seen as a threat to slave-holding interests in newly opened lands in Alabama and Georgia. Approximately 800 Black slaves came south to settle in the area. As a result, slave hunters were continuously chasing down Blacks and Seminoles.

In 1816, the United States force led by Colonel Clinch, along with 500 Creek allies, blew up the Negro Fort. Over 270 men, women and children were killed. Those that survived were either forced back into slavery or fled south to join the Seminoles and Miccosukees.

Also in 1816, the Miccosukees, led by Neamathla, set up the town of "Fowltown" along the Apalachicola River in southwest Georgia. The southern slave-holding states saw Fowltown as another threat for the escaping of slaves. Despite this, they continued to push their expansion into Native American territory for cattle grazing and growing crops.

Part of the pressure leading to the First Seminole War was the search for escaped slaves.

### **First Seminole War 1817-1818**

A formal Declaration of War did not start the First Seminole War.

The Miccosukee warned the United States that they were trespassing on Miccosukee land when they came across the border to cut timber. Large oak trees were used to build ships, and cedar was used for building furniture.

In 1817, the United States built Fort Scott, across the Apalachicola River from Fowltown, to defend against Native American raids. General Gaines and his force of 250 men initially attacked Fowltown but the Miccosukee fired on the troops turning them back. A couple of days later they returned with a larger group and took Fowltown by force. Some historians say that this started the First Seminole War.

The Georgia Militia continued raiding areas around Alachua (today's Gainesville).

On November 30, 1817, a supply convoy sailing up the Apalachicola River, led by Lieutenant Scott, was ambushed by the Seminoles. Most of those on board were killed. Known as the Scott Massacre, this also contributed to the start of the First Seminole War.

The U.S. continued to make excursions into Spanish Florida. Some forces, however, were called back to deal with the pirates in Fernandina as well as Gregor McGregor and pirate Luis Aury seizing Amelia Island, near St. Augustine. This weakened the U.S. forces.

Secretary of War, John Calhoun, gave Andrew Jackson the permission to pursue the Native Americans into Florida, but not to take over Spanish possessions. In 1818, Jackson still proceeded to take over two Spanish towns and pushed the Seminoles farther south. He took over St. Marks and Pensacola. The Spanish governor threatened Spanish retaliation if the U.S. did not leave the Spanish territory. However, Spain did not have the military force to enforce it.

In 1819, Spain signed a treaty with the United States ceding Florida to the United States (The Transcontinental Treaty). Then in 1821, Spain purchased Florida from Spain.

While this may have ended the First Seminole War, fighting with the Seminoles continued. White Georgians continued to cross the borders into the Native American lands. They stole cattle, burned villages, and searched for runaway slaves. Landowners remained concerned about escaped slaves among the Seminoles and Miccosukees.

### **First Interlude Between Wars**

Jackson wanted to put the Native Americans on two reservations – one on the upper Apalachicola River and the other in southern Florida. However, those Native Americans in the north did not want to move to a reservation in the south, because the land was poor and could not support their people.

In 1823, the Moultrie Creek Treaty was enacted after the United States acquired Florida from Spain. The United States wanted the Seminole land for plantation slavery. However, only part of the Native American tribes signed a treaty with the U.S. It called for Native Americans in East Florida to move to a Seminole reservation bounded by the Charlotte River on the south and the Big Swamp on the north. The tribes were to get \$5,000 per year for 20 years. It also said that the United States was to provide tools, farming implements, a school, blacksmith shop, gunsmith shop and an annuity. The Seminoles were to apprehend runaway slaves. The treaty did not last long. They received numerous beatings, theft of property, White encroachment on land, and were deprived of money owed through fraud and false claims. Also, the Native Americans claimed that the land was not fit for farming or hunting.

By 1825, the Native Americans began crossing the Suwannee River and raided White farms for cattle and foodstuffs.

In 1830, The Indian Removal Act was signed by then President Andrew Jackson to negotiate with the Native American tribes to exchange their land for land designated as “Indian Territory” west of the Mississippi. This forced tribes out of their ancestral homelands, becoming a part of the Trail of Tears debacle. The incentive was that they

would receive financial and material assistance to travel to their new locations and be protected by the United States government forever.

Next came the Treaty of Payne's Landing in 1832, where the U.S. met with Seminole representatives who allegedly agreed to the terms. The Seminoles were to leave Florida within 3 years of the Treaty's ratification, receive a shirt and blanket upon moving to the West as well as receive \$80,000 in compensation. Part of the deal was that seven representatives would go to the area to find suitable land for settlement.

The Seminoles and their allies believed that this was non-binding since it would not be approved until the Tribal Council convened and approved it. The Seminoles and allies were not united in the idea of emigration. The Blacks living with the Seminoles were not in favor of this either. Did the Blacks have any votes in the Tribal Council? Also, the United States was not living up to the treaty obligations from 1823 Moultrie Creek Treaty.

Why should they think the obligations would be met this time? The Seminoles refused to recognize these treaties as binding.

Their hostilities continued having been pushed out of Florida into unfamiliar western lands, and their Black allies being forced back into slavery.

In 1835, General Wiley Thompson, the Indian Agent, requested a council at Silver Springs with the Seminoles. Jumper and his allies were in favor of emigrating, but Osceola was not. Jumper restated the fact that this was non-binding until the Tribal Council approved it. Jumper then changed his position. Seminoles could not live under the direction of the Creeks in this new land.

Thompson threatened the tribes by ordering them to move to points of embarkation, sell their cattle to the United States and be ready to board ships. If they did not comply, they would be removed by force. Osceola was put in irons and thrown into the guardhouse. The U.S. was pushing the Seminoles into a "submit or fight" alternative. Raids continued and crops were stolen. War was imminent.

### **Second Seminole War 1835-1842**

The many skirmishes in 1835 led to the Second Seminole War.

On December 28, 1835, Major Dade was attacked near Bushnell by the 180 Seminoles and Black allies, led by Jumper, Micanopy, Alligator and Osceola. Of the command of 180, only 3 survived. Osceola returned with 60 warriors, when he killed and scalped Thompson in retaliation for Thompson capturing his wife and sending her into slavery. Other raids continued. This became known as the Dade Massacre.

Many Whites moved southward into the Keys.

In 1835, after Dade was defeated, many of the Seminoles retreated to the Wahoo Swamp in central Florida. Colonel Clinch and his men chased them but were killed by Osceola and the Seminoles.

About the same time, the Seminoles were in the process of burning 16 plantations between St. Augustine and New Smyrna, including the Dunlawton Plantation. At the time, these were the most valuable plantations in North America.

In 1836, Major Putnam and his company of poorly trained militia, as well as the Mosquito Roarers, a company from the Mosquito Inlet, were defeated at the Battle of Dunlawton when three hundred eighty five Black plantation slaves and their Indian allies led by King Phillip and Wildcat and destroyed the sugar mill. This was seen as another liberation of the enslaved workers, part of a large-scale slave rebellion facilitated by the Seminoles.

The military was not getting the arms they needed but began a concerted effort to re-arm themselves. Volunteers were coming down from the southern states, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia to help. In 1836, General Winfield Scott, a hero in the War of 1812, came down to lead the military. He was well-versed in European strategy and studied the strategies of the Napoleonic War. However, the Seminoles used hit and run guerilla tactics. They knew the terrain had a good source of local supplies and had a firm belief in their cause. They would be hard to defeat.

General Jesup came after leading victories against the Creeks in Alabama and Georgia. Jesup felt that the Seminole War was really the Negro War. He set up supply depots in Ft. LaHarve (Ft. Lauderdale) Ft. Denaud (near LaBelle) as well as posts around Lake "O" and Big Cypress.

The war moved south, led by Micanopy, Jumper, Alligator, Osceola, and Sam Jones.

On Christmas Day 1837, Zachary Taylor led the U.S. forces against the Seminoles including Micanopy, Coacooche, Alligator and Sam Jones at Lake "O". The Seminoles did not give up but retreated. Even though the U.S had significant casualties, Taylor called it a victory.

In 1837, King Phillip, and his band of Seminoles were captured near the Dunlawton Plantation in Port Orange, Florida. He was persuaded to have his son Wildcat, Blue Snake, Coacooche, as well as Gopher John (leader of the Black Seminoles) come in under a white flag to negotiate. Jesup ignored the custom of recognizing the white flag and took them into custody. King Phillip was then used as a pawn to lure in Osceola. Osceola also came in under a white flag, but he too was taken prisoner. Osceola was taken to St. Augustine and imprisoned at the Castillo San Marco. Some Seminole captives escaped, but Osceola was tired and gravely ill, so he stayed behind. He was transferred to Fort Moultrie in South Carolina where he died on January 31, 1838. The Seminole War went on for 6 years after his death. King Phillip died in 1839, as he was forced west to the Indian Territory along the Trail of Tears.

Zachery Taylor sent a force under the command of Colonel Harney to build a fort along the Caloosahatchee River. His command was attacked by the Seminoles. There were only 14 survivors, losing most of their rifles and supplies as well. Harney held parleys with Sam Jones, but soon afterward 2 soldiers were killed. Taylor then imported bloodhounds from Cuba to track down the Seminoles and their allies. This was condemned by Congress. Congress began to feel that the war was too expensive, was draining resources and caused too many deaths.

In 1838, the Armed Occupation Act was passed. It allowed Whites who were willing to chance living in the frontier the ability to get free land if they would pledge to defend themselves and other frontier settlements.

In 1839, Jacob Housman, who salvaged shipwrecks in the Keys, had set up a trading post with the Seminoles. During the Second Seminole War, though, he asked the government if they would pay him \$200 per head for killing or capturing Indians in south Florida. The government did not take him seriously, but the Seminoles did.

In 1840, a band of 17 canoe loads of Seminoles (locally called "Spanish Indians") attacked Indian Key, killing Henry Perrine and salvaging goods and arms. Of the 70 occupants on the island, 57 escaped. Soon after, the Seminole leader of the attack was killed by Colonel Harney when he was found in his Everglades hammock.

In 1841, Colonel Worth fought the Seminoles in the swamps and hammock strongholds of the Seminoles during a summer campaign where he was able to deprive them of their summer plantings and stockpiles of goods.

By the end of 1841 and into 1842, a significant number of Seminoles began coming out of the swamps and began to discuss terms of emigration. This, along with the growing settlement of Florida, led to the end of the Second Seminole War.

Under The Armed Occupation Act of 1842, people were offered land if they would inhabit the land for five continuous years, build a habitation to live in, improve one acre per year, be head of the family and be capable of bearing arms.

The last of the Seminoles to surrender did so in early 1843. They joined the emigration of the Seminoles, Miccosukees, Creeks and Blacks to the West. They sailed to New Orleans, up the Mississippi River to the Red River into the Indian Territory in Arkansas and Oklahoma. However, there continued to be trouble with the few remaining Seminoles and Miccosukees.

The Second Seminole War lasted 7 years, claimed thousands of lives, cost thirty million dollars, and pushed nearly all of the Seminoles into exile in Oklahoma. With peace, Florida was open to White settlement.

### **Second Interlude Between Wars**

During this era of “peace,” the Whites were focused on preparing for statehood. Florida achieved statehood in 1845, entering as a slaveholding state. By 1850, Florida’s population was 87,445, of which there were 39,000 African American slaves and 1,000 free Blacks.

Colonel Worth made a temporary agreement with the remaining tribes in Florida allowing them time to get ready for emigration. They could stay on the previous reservation established by the Macomb Arrangement of 1839, bounded by Charlotte Harbor, up the Peace River, over to the Kissimmee River, down to the eastern shore of Lake “O” and end up near the head of the Shark River. Any contact with the Whites outside of the reservation was prohibited.

There continued to be incursions. The Whites continued to push their way into the land reserved for the Seminoles and the Miccosukees. The Seminoles were also hunting outside of their reservation line.

It was said that the Seminoles wanted peace, but the Whites wanted their territory. Billy Bowlegs let the Army know that they wanted peace. However, the army continued scouting in the reserved lands in the Big Cypress and along the coast. The state legislature passed a resolution for the immediate removal of the Seminoles. The Whites were either going to force the Seminoles to emigrate or have them commit the first act of aggression. This led to the Third Seminole War.

### **Third Seminole War 1855-1858**

The constant patrolling of the Indian lands by the Florida militia led to an attack by the Seminoles, which likely led to the Third Seminole War. There were a large number of temporary posts constructed to control the Seminoles, with no major battles; however, there were only a few skirmishes. Almost the entire war was fought in the Everglades and the Big Cypress Swamp. Rewards were offered for the capture of Seminoles but were not particularly effective. The bands of Billy Bowlegs, Assinwah and Sam Jones were the major groups left, but were never brought to the brink of battle. It was said that there were more casualties from disease than from fighting.

It was the unrelenting pressure that forced Billy Bowlegs to emigrate. In January 1858, negotiations led to emigration along with guaranteed monetary inducements. Billy Bowlegs left Tampa Bay, along with 41 prisoners. By May 8<sup>th</sup>, the war was declared officially over. About 100 Seminoles and Miccosukees remained in Florida, along with Sam Jones, who was never found. It is from these tribes that those today have descended.

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This is just a synopsis of the Seminole Wars. Much more can be learned by visiting the historic sites described, or through further reading. Also, for an excellent insight into the life of the Seminoles, consider visiting Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum in Clewiston.