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12/3/2012



More About the Seminole Wars

Safe guarding slavery was one of the key factors motivating the US government's action. Demands from southern plantation owners prompted the government to attempt to block the escape route of fugitive slaves into Florida; in doing so US troops overran Chief Nemathla's territory just north of the border. During this assault they exacerbated the situation by burning Fowltown and forcing Nemathla and his people to abandon it and retreat into Florida. As incidents and threats continued Major General Andrew Jackson, who had won fame as an Indian fighter and later as the victor of the Battle of New Orleans, was placed in command of the American forces in the Southeast, by the Monroe administration on December 26, 1817.

Early the following year Andrew Jackson crossed the border into Spanish Florida with a force of 3500 men – including 1000 volunteers, mostly from Tennessee. They attacked the Spanish fort at St. Marks, and then marched east, raiding and burning Indian villages all the way to the Suwannee River. There they attacked the village of Chief Billy Bowlegs (Boleck); where a black slave named Abraham made his first stand against the American army and later became one of the most famous personalities during the Second Seminole



War. Forcing and routing the Indians and their black allies into the swamps, Jackson's troops marched west and captured the Spanish fort at Pensacola, ending the First Seminole War.

Before the American army withdrew, however, several other forts and Spanish settlements were attacked. Two British citizens, Alexander Arbuthnot and Robert Ambrister, known to be Indian sympathizers, were arrested and quickly executed on April 29, 1818. This action produced much indignation in Britain, along with diplomatic protests from Spain, whose territory had been violated. The latter was too weak militarily to do more than complain, however, and when the US government later offered to buy Florida for \$5 million, Spain accepted. The treaty of cession was signed in 1819, but it was not until two years later, February 22, 1821, that it was ratified. Acquisition of Florida by the United States made the Seminole problem more acute, as the slavery problem intensified.

When the white planter came into Florida with their slaves, the nearness of the Indian owned slaves with their mild form of servitude and relaxed lifestyle increased the temptation of the plantation blacks to escape to the Seminole tribes. When the opportunity presented itself many slaves fled across the line, and

soon friction between the reds and the whites arose. After detailed negotiations, the Seminoles accepted an agreement with the US government intended to reduce these tensions. This was the Treaty of Moultrie Creek in 1823, the first in a series of disastrous agreements for the Seminoles. When Andrew Jackson became president in 1829, he quickly endorsed the "Indian Removal Act" which became law on May 28, 1830. By 1832, under Jackson's direction, the Treaty of Payne's Landing was forced upon them even though only half the life of the Treaty of Moultrie Creek had expired.

Jackson had little tolerance for the Florida Indians, who stood in the way of white settlements and gave black runaways refuge. He was determined to remove the Seminoles from their Florida homeland westward to what was then called Arkansas Territory and is now part of Oklahoma. One more insult, the Treaty of Fort Gibson – this stipulated that the Seminoles be sent to Arkansas and be part of the Creek nation (1833). The Creek and Seminoles were long standing enemies. Jackson never forgot that during the Revolution the Seminoles had cast their lot with the British and during the War of 1812 were again informally allied with them. This heritage of hostility did not endear them to Jackson and remained part of his mindset all through his presidency. Approximately one year after the Treaty of Fort Gibson Osceola, a new leader for the Seminoles, made his presence known. Like a shooting star he lit up the sky for Indian resistance, and led the way in opposing all government effort to move the Seminoles from Florida. Although he was not a hereditary chief, Osceola soon became a ruling martial spirit shaped by the stormy times he lived in and by the powerful ideas of his kinsman and mentor, the "prophet," Peter McQueen.



The forces at work around Osceola forged this fervent leader into the rebellious firebrand of the Second Seminole War, which was soon to come. Osceola was born in Alabama around 1804, and although he denied having white blood, his mother Polly was married to an Englishman named William Powell. There is no evidence that Osceola was Powell's son; however, his mother's grand father James McQueen, was a Scotsman. McQueen married a Tallahassee woman, and their daughter Nancy married a man named Copinger, who also may have been English or part English. Their daughter Polly took young Billy with her when she

joined a Red Stick band after the Battle of Horseshoe Bend and headed for Florida with her kinsman, the Indian "prophet" Peter McQueen. Peter McQueen was an important Indian leader during the Creek Wars and was involved in a movement among the southeastern Indians that rejected the growing impact of the expanding white culture on Native Americans. During his march and destruction of Red Stick towns, General Jackson searched for the Red Stick leaders, but Peter

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McQueen, Josiah Francis and others had fled south into Florida to seek sanctuary with the Spanish and to continue the war against the Americans. Obviously the Peter McQueen movement and the ideas of Indian independence and "rights" must have made a deep impression on young Billy, who in later years would continue the struggle against President Jackson and his generals.

By 1834, Osceola began to demonstrate his ability as a natural leader and impressed the Seminoles with his eloquence, physical prowess, reasoning, and determination, in opposing Indian removal to land west of the Mississippi. He witnessed the increasing antagonism between the Seminoles and whites and began to form his own strong views as to the polarizing issue of emigration versus anti emigration. Several incidents fanned the sparks that ignited Osceola's rage and helped precipitate the violent actions leading up to the Second Seminole War. The first of these incidents occurred when Osceola took his wife Chechoter (Morning Dew) and his daughter to the Fort King trading post. Chechoter was of Afro-Indian descent, and while Osceola was busy trading, slave hunters seized her and carried her off. Osceola regarded this act as grave affront to his people as well as to himself. Osceola's rage was focused on General Wiley Thompson, the Indian agent in charge of the trading post, for not preventing slave catchers from operating there. Angry outbursts against Thompson resulted in Osceola being arrested and put into irons.

Thompson's action would prove to be a fatal mistake, for to chain and humiliate an Indian was to invite deadly retaliation. Osceola's revenge was not long in coming. Meanwhile, the Seminoles had been waiting until the time was right to strike the first blow. Osceola, Micanopy, (Chief of the Seminoles) Alligator, Jumper and Abraham had been planning for almost a year..."In council it was determined to strike a decided blow." On December 28, 1835, the Second Seminole War began on two fronts: As planned the Seminoles attacked two companies of U.S. troops in what would be called later the "Dade Massacre." Of the 108 soldiers that left Fort Brook (Tampa) on a march to Fort King (Ocala) through Indian country, only two survived.

While Maj. Francis L. Dade and his men were cut down at close range in the morning; it was only a few hours later that Osceola with eighty Mikasuki warriors attacked at Fort King killing General Wiley Thompson and his companion, Lt. Constantine Smith. General Thompson was riddled with fourteen balls and scalped.

The Second Seminole War, known also as the Florida War, the War of Indian Removal, and the Seven-Year War, was the most protracted armed conflict engaged in by United States until Vietnam. Like Vietnam this war was undeclared, unpopular with the American people, and came to an inglorious conclusion. It was the bloodiest Indian War, and for every two Seminole Indians removed from Florida, an American soldier died. Starting with the first confrontation in 1817 to the end of the Third Seminole War in 1858, we have more than forty years of hostility, bloodshed, suffering, and finally the anguish and "tears" of forced emigration.

