



By History Web Committee



Seminole Indian War

The first Indians in Florida were not the Seminoles. In fact the early tribes, that would later be known as the Seminoles, came to Florida two hundred years after the Spaniards and their black slaves. When Juan Ponce De Leon came to Florida in 1513, he met the descendants of the “ancient ones” who were the Calusa, Tequesta, Tocobago, Jobe/Jaegas, Ayes, Timucan, and the Apalachee. Almost 350,000 of these early people lived in Florida before the Spaniards arrived.

The wars were fought over the land in Florida. In the beginning, Florida belonged to Spain, however; after Major General Andrew Jackson (U.S.) invaded North Florida during the First Seminole War in 1818, Spain sold Florida to the United States for \$5 million dollars. The American government wished to recover some of the money paid out for Florida’s purchase, through the sale of the land. To do so, however, the Seminoles had to be removed to make room for white settlers and frontiersmen. Removal of the Indians to the lands west of the Mississippi River started the Second Seminole War. (1835-1842)



When the U.S. Army began to enforce Indian removal

to the west, a new leader arose. His name was Osceola. He became a powerful resistance leader that opposed all government efforts to remove the Seminoles from Florida. After winning several battles against the U.S. Army his fame rose like a “shooting star” all over Florida and the U.S. Army was soon determined to capture him. Major General Thomas S. Jesep, commander of all army forces in Florida, was ordered to bring in Osceola by any means. On October 27, 1837, Osceola sent word to General Jesup that he was willing to come in and parley. Before the meeting, Osceola sent a messenger with a beaded peace pipe and a white plume—the Indian sign of a flag of truce.



At the meeting Osceola and Coa Hadjo stood under a large white flag and was prepared for a meeting, not a surrender. Even though the white flag stood for a flag of truce, General Jesup ordered the capture and arrest of Osceola and his party. The Indians were then marched between a double file of soldiers to Fort Marion in St. Augustine. The Indians called this act “Treachery Under the White Flag” and the war intensified. Another hero of the Seminole Wars was the son of Mikasuki chief, King Philip—his name was



Coacoochee, the white soldiers called him "Wildcat." He also was taken under a white flag of truce and was sent to join other prisoners in the dungeon of Old Fort Marion, considered escape proof with its five foot thick walls and old Spanish moat—the formidable old Castillo de San Marcos.

Wildcat with other prisoners in his cell, tied together, rope fashion, the burlap forage bags (feed bags) on which they slept. With knives they had hidden in their clothes, they cut the bags and chipped the stone walls to make handholds for climbing. At night they watched the moon's phases to be sure the escape was on a dark night. Wildcat ate little food to be sure that he could squeeze through a small window fifteen feet overhead.

Wildcat climbed onto a friend's shoulder, grabbed the ledge, and pulled himself up. One of the two iron bars in the window had rusted with age and with some effort was finally pulled loose. Wildcat went first. Later he recalled, "With much difficulty I succeeded in getting my head through; for the sharp stones took the skin off my breast and back." Their bodies bloodied and cut, one by one the other prisoners with Wildcat descended the rope, the last before daybreak. This amazing breakout encouraged the Indians to continue the war. Wildcat now became the new leader for the Seminoles, for Osceola, also a prisoner at Fort Marion, was too sick with malarial fever to attempt such an escape.

Wildcat and his people marched south and on Christmas day, 1837, led the Seminoles against Zachary Taylor and his troops at the Battle of Okeechobee. Wildcat would lead his people for the next twenty years and finally to freedom in Mexico. On January 15, 1838, a few weeks after the Battle of Okeechobee, another battle would rage on the banks of the Loxahatchee River, in what is now the Town of Jupiter. Taylor's battle had forced the Seminoles to retreat and move southeast into the headwaters of the Loxahatchee River. Mikasuki chief Arpeika, known as Sam Jones by the soldiers, moved his people into the villages along the banks of the river. General Jessup had sent Lt. Levin M. Powell of the U. S. Navy and his sailors into the same area using the southwest fork of the Loxahatchee River.

When Powell's sailors stumbled into the Seminole camp they were soon overwhelmed by the experienced Indian guerrilla fighters that could have ended as the "Powell Massacre." A rear guard action by army regulars with Powell prevented a complete collapse and returned the sailors to their boats. On January 24, 1838,

nine days after the Powell defeat, General Jessup, accompanied by 1500 troops, stormed the headwaters of the Loxahatchee River where he met 300 Seminoles in the last standing battle of the Second Seminole War. When Jessup's army came into Jupiter in 1838 it was the largest army assembled during the seven year war and would be known as the Battle of the Loxahatchee River. Both Powell's and Jessup's battles are in the same location and were discovered in Jupiter only 12 years ago by vocational historians/archeologists.

The Loxahatchee River Historical Society has had exhibits of this arti-factual material. See photo's of the Loxahatchee Battlefield (Riverbend Park). Contact the Loxahatchee River Museum for tours of the battlefield. (561-747-6639). The Third Seminole War or Billy Bowlegs War (1855-1858) began when soldiers entered Billy Bowlegs' town near the west coast of Florida. While in the village soldiers cut bunches of prized banana from plants found near the chickees and destroyed other crops (beans, corn, pumpkins) belonging to Chief Bowlegs. This disrespect angered Chief Bowlegs, who later surrounded the soldiers camp under the cover of darkness. The Seminoles wearing black and white egret plumes in their hair and war paint on their faces, and with much whooping and yelling, began firing into the camp. Several soldiers were either wounded or killed, which began the last Indian War in Florida – The Third Seminole War.

The Jupiter Inlet Lighthouse was built during the Third Seminole War. (1855-1859). At that time Billy Bowlegs and his warriors crossed the state and attacked the Lighthouse construction crews slowing down the work on the Lighthouse. In fact the constant Seminole threat and outbreaks of Jupiter fever (malaria or yellow fever) often disrupted the construction which can be seen in the different bands of brick shade. These different shades (colors) of brick indicate where work was interrupted and later continued in a series of stops and starts until the end of the war. Early photos taken before the lighthouse was painted its present red in 1910 indicate the work interruptions by the frequent color changed.