

The Florida Seminoles in 1847

Edited by JAMES W. COVINGTON

By 1847 the Seminole Indians had recovered to some extent from the effects of the long and bloody Second Seminole War (1835-1842). During the course of this conflict, nearly three thousand Indians had been taken from the lowlands and forests of Florida and carried to the Ozark foothills of distant Indian Territory. When officials of the United States Government discovered that it was virtually impossible to remove all of the Indians from the peninsula, President John Tyler declared the war at an end on May 10, 1842, and the Seminoles were assigned to what might be called a temporary reservation.

Most of the Indians were within the bounds of the reserve when the fighting ceased but some others travelled as much as two hundred miles southward to the two and one half million acre reserve situated west and south of Lake Istokpoga, and west of a line running from the mouth of the Kissimmee River through the Everglades to the Shark River and thence along the Gulf Coast to the Peace River. In order to prevent contacts between the Cuban fishermen and the Indians, the numerous coastal islands were not included as part of the reserve.

In theory, a long and unbroken period of peace should have come to Florida but there were several factors which made such a possibility most difficult to attain: first, the Pact of 1842 was recognized by the national and territorial governments as being temporary in nature; second, the land hungry frontier residents regarded the Seminoles as endangering their chances of gaining prosperity and third, the Indians, having been hoodwinked so many times in the past, would not consent to any serious negotiations regarding removal or other matters.

Several administrators hoped to establish a friendly relationship with certain Indian leaders which might develop and lead to the removal of the tribe but, the Seminoles regarded any overtures as attempts to "entrap them without their consent" and ship them to the West. Communication between the races became entirely difficult and, try as they would, the Whites could not penetrate the protective shell of distrust maintained by the Red people. Despite such deep seated tensions, various units of the United States Army were transferred to other parts of the country where they could be of better

use and, by 1846, only Fort Brooke (Tampa) and Fort Marion (St. Augustine) were occupied.

In order to preserve the temporary reserve from encroachment by settlers, President James Polk on May 19, 1845, set aside a strip of land twenty miles wide situated above the Indian tract which would be closed to settlement. Nevertheless, part of this land near Charlotte Harbor was surveyed by John Jackson and John Irvin and some forty families moved within its limits. Although the Commissioner-General of the Land Office declared that such occupation of land was illegal and that his former employee in charge of the Florida Land Office was incompetent, the United States Marshal was not requested to remove the trespassers.

By 1847, Captain John T. Sprague United States Army was serving as the Federal Officer in charge of Indian Affairs in Florida. He was a capable person who understood the Indian character perhaps as well as any of the military men who had seen duty along the frontier. Sprague's duties at this time were concerned with the luring of the Seminoles from Florida and arranging transport for them to Indian Territory. Captain Sprague served in Florida during the Second Seminole War and, as a result of his experiences, published in 1848, *The Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*: a volume which is regarded as the best account of the conflict.

On January 8, 1847, Captain Sprague conferred with several Seminole leaders at Charlotte Harbor regarding a possible Indian raid upon a farm and his account concerning the Indians and their way of life at that time is an interesting document. In this dispatch which was sent to the military authorities at Washington and the Florida governor the good captain tells about the caution and suspicion of the Indians, population, leadership and habits. Other interesting facts including a tale of possible intrigue with the Seminoles by the English are found in the narrative. In all, it is a worthwhile account of Seminole life.

Kennedy's Trading House¹
Charlotte Harbour (sic), Indian Nation
Head of Pine Key, Main land, Fla.
January 11, 1847

I have the honor to report that I met the Indians as anticipated at this place on the 8th instant. The chiefs Holatter Micco (Billy Bowlegs) and

Assinwar,² Echo-emathlar-Chopco,³ Chitto Hadjo,⁴ Nub-cup-Hadjo, Subchiefs together with thirty four young warriors, well armed without women and children were present. I was disappointed in not meeting Arpeika or Sam Jones who sent a messenger stating that from age, indisposition and the extreme cold weather, he was unable to travel. My insisting upon seeing him tended to dispare the position and power of Holatter Micco who, in all respects, is qualified for supreme command which he exercises with skill and judgement.⁵ He is about thirty five years of age, speaks English fluently, active, intelligent and brave.⁶ Arpeika is ninety two years of age; without warriors, authority or influence.⁷ These chiefs and their followers express the strongest friendship and have adopted vigorous laws to punish those who violate the relation existing between the whites and red men but the young men, long accustomed to hunt the whites as they now do deer and turkeys, are ruthless, vicious and vengeful. To counteract this, I have enjoined the necessity of prompt and severe punishment and shall see that they are executed. The Indians are timid and cautious. They came into my camp prepared to receive kindness and extend it, evidently determined to avenge on the spot any manifestation of a contrary feeling. Ten days elapsed before I succeeded in obtaining an interview with the chiefs who were deterred by the young warriors who, less credulous than the older ones, induced them to procrastinate until they reconnoitred the country as well as the coast. First a boy came, then a man departed, both to hear what I had to say. I demanded the promise of all or I should at once leave the country and they must be prepared for the consequences. This had the desired effect. Their scouts were extended ten miles around to announce the approach of soldiers,

¹ Thomas Pugh Kennedy had operated a sutler's store at Fort Brooke and at the conclusion of the war, made trips to Central and South America in a schooner. It is difficult to determine when the Charlotte Harbor trading house was erected, but some time between 1842 and 1847 would be a fair estimate. The building was burned by 1848 and today the site is known as Burnt Store. In 1848 Kennedy and John Darling established a store on the banks of Payne's Creek. The site is located south of present day Bowling Green and some distance from the first site but it suffered the same fate as the other one in 1849.

² Assinwar was a father-in-law of Billy Bowlegs and a leading figure in his band.

³ Chipco was principal leader of the Tallahassee Band.

⁴ Chitto Hadjo was a nephew of Ismahtee, leader of the boat party Indians.

⁵ This statement illustrates the method by which the Whites attempted to control Indian leadership.

⁶ For an account of this leader see Carolyn T. Foreman, "Billy Bowlegs," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* XXXIII (Winter, 1955), 512-522.

⁷ In 1853, it was reported that twenty-six warriors were included within the band led by Sam Jones, *The Florida News* (Jacksonville), August 27, 1853. This newspaper article is the best account available of the male Seminole population and gives in detail family background facts concerning each male and band affiliation.

believing it to be my determination to surround them as they had been informed, vessels were on the coast for that purpose with troops.

However friendly disposed, the difficulties can at once be perceived of in enforcing upon such minds the necessity or policy of immediate emigration. To satisfy them of the integrity and sincerity of the Government in improving their condition and the necessity on their part of acting in good faith and cherishing a proper spirit towards the whites, was all important. The chiefs being treated with distinction and others with kindness and forbearance has this tendency lulling their fears when at the proper time, emigration may be effected with promptness without renewal of hostilities.

The Indians increase in number as well as improve in condition owing to partial intercourse with civilization. Their scattered condition, isolated camps and limited number, constitute their strength. One hundred and twenty men are capable of taking the field viz:

⁸ Seminoles	70
⁹ Mickasukies	30
¹⁰ Creeks	12
¹¹ Uchees	4
¹² Choctaws	4

Total 120 warriors

From observation and inquiry, I find seventy of this number grown from boyhood to manhood since December 1835, the commencement of the

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- ⁸ According to Sprague's classification, the Seminoles were the Mikasuki (Hitchiti) speaking persons found within Billy Bowlegs' band.
- ⁹ The Mickasukies were the Mikasuki (Hitchiti) speaking persons in the bands within the jurisdiction of Sam Jones.
- ¹⁰ The Creeks were members of Chipco's band and spoke Muskogee. "Of course, the Muskogee and Mikasuki dialects were related but not mutually intelligible." John M. Goggin "Source Materials for the Study of the Florida Seminole Indians," Laboratory Notes: 3. Gainesville, Florida. Since it was the practice for the married Seminole male to live at the camp of his in-laws, there was some mixture of the Mikasuki and Muskogee groups.
- ¹¹ The Yuchi had joined the Seminole at various periods during the Eighteenth and Nineteen Centuries. One town of Yuchi was situated at Spring Garden in Volusia County. John R. Swanton, *The Indian Tribes of North America* Smithsonian Institute Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 145 (Washington, 1952), 119.
- ¹² It is difficult to believe that the Choctaws were living in Southern Florida at this time but other persons had indicated that the Choctaws were in Florida. A Florida Choctaw has written an account of this tribe: Horace Ridaught, *Hell's Branch Office*, (Citra, Florida, 1957).

Florida War. The remainder excepting Sam Jones and Assinwar, the former, ninety-two and latter, sixty, are not over forty years of age. The women and children average about two to a man making two hundred and fifty, of this number, one hundred and fifty are children, thus making the total of Indians in Florida.

Men	120
Women	100
Children	140
	Total 360

The game of the country, climate and natural productions places them above sympathy or charity, every necessary want is supplied. Deer skins are the principal articles of clothing and trade for which powder and lead are obtained.¹³ Corn, pumpkins, potatoes, beans and peas are raised fresh and dried. Venison, turkeys and sea fowl, fish and oysters in abundance assure an independence the year round.

It being desirable from many cogent reasons that these remnants of tribes should join their respective bands in Arkansas. The first step to effect it is to obtain their most unqualified and unlimited confidence. This is not easily done after a sanguinary contest of six years. Success in this gives a security to citizens at the same time disowning and refuting the infamous falsehoods insidiously circulated — keeping alive a most *pernicious* and vengeful spirit of retaliation. Prudence, vigilance, a knowledge of their wants and habits, a solicitude in their welfare and *vindication* of their rights, will go far to attain this and maintain the present amicable relations. As credulous as these Indians are, these measures are easily thwarted. Under the most sacred injunctions of seentcy (sic) the chiefs will talk of emigration, some of the younger class will listen to them. Publicity would cause instant punishment in accordance with the resolve *in council* so long entertained, that those who listened to a promoted emigration should suffer death. Secret influences will find their way among the most resolute who will yield to the advice and opinion of chiefs and sub-chiefs.

Two years ago emigration could not be alluded to privately or publicly without general dissatisfaction. Now, it becomes a subject of conversation.

¹³ In 1846, the Indians made frequent trips to Tampa and were given a barracks room at Fort Brooke to serve as headquarters for their stay. George Ballentine *Autobiography of an English soldier in the United States Army* (New York, 1853) 105.

One hostile act or that which remotely has the appearance of it, destroys all confidence, peace or the hope of emigration, bidding fair to renew a Florida War more obstinate and enduring than the contest already terminated. To prevent entirely the enroads of whites on so extended a frontier by land and by water is impossible. To expel and punish intruders at the same time adopting judicious means to counteract the efforts of the profligate, the timid and alarmists, gives confidence and disarms the Indians of causes of complaint, acrimony and revenge.

The Seminoles are treacherous from instinct and habits. The fulfilment of promises and talks depends very much upon the benefits which are to result. Their cupidity is insatiable, self governs all their acts and that sentiment which redeems the savage—rationality is absorbed in avarice, individual comfort and gain. This now insures peace and rewards at the proper time will effect emigration.

I have not met so depraved, so cunning a race of Indians, so cruel, distrustful and superstitious. Human life even among themselves is disregarded and they roam through their country untamed, obeying their chiefs as instinct or intuition dictates. This must be met with firmness. A few punishments through the means of councils and chiefs will have the desired effect. The long absence of the wholesome restraint and the community of feeling arising from the influence of peace and association have caused an abandoned, wayward, and independent course of life.

Peace is the first consideration, emigration the second, to affect the latter the first must be second. This can be done by authority over the chiefs requiring them to make and execute severely all laws with justice and promptness. The borderers must at the same time be reminded by vigilance and attention that encroachments will be punished whether in crossing the boundary or in fabricating malicious and idle tales.

The Indians in future will not visit Tampa Bay but when sent for on business; this arrangement will be adhered to. The distance to Tampa, from ninety to one hundred and twenty miles, the liability to annoyance in going to and from renders the established trading house the most convenient place to sell their skins. The chiefs readily consent to visit Tampa, St. Augustine or any other appointed place on business alone and will assemble their bands at any desirable point at a favorable season of the year provided

I can come with but six soldiers and three tents. This precaution is to avoid the possibility of surprise and capture.

I have proposed to the chiefs to visit Washington City and Arkansas. The policy of this can be well understood without explanation here. They desire time to answer as the subject is submitted to a general council. When a messenger is to be sent that I may meet the chiefs in the nation they should acquiesce. I desire authority to take them to the places named and by such means practicable impress the advantages of annuities and presents distributed periodically to their various bands in Arkansas; at the same time made known the number and power of the white men. At the present moment this is questionable. Spaniards, fishing upon the coast, have informed them that our troops in Texas have been whipped and driven home by the Mexicans and Indians.¹⁴ From this I proceed to St. Augustine taking on the route the settlements. My recent interview with the Indians will have a tendency to allay an excitement and apprehension so necessary in all respects to the Government, to the citizens of the State and to the Indians. I have communicated freely and fully with Captain Winder,¹⁵ commanding Fort Brooke asking for the Indians, should any visit his Post, kindness and attention. At the same time representing the necessity of vigilance to thwart the designs of those loungers upon the border too lazy to work or steal but abandoned enough to thrive upon the honest gains of others whom they hope to defraud by *tracks*, *signs* and hostilities; thus securing to themselves the plunder and probable good luck of being mustered into service at a few dollars per month.

In continuation of this report and pertinent to the subject, I would remark briefly that at the present time I consider the peninsula of Florida of interest and importance. Its extended Coast, its numerous inlets, harbour, and Keys, its Swamps and Hammocks, its bordering slave holding states, the character of the Indians inhabiting it (few but sufficient) the sparceness of white population. Its proximity to the Colonies of a Nation with a force congenial in habits and colour to the Seminoles, renders it of vital interest. Where may [be] scattered the seeds of insurrection, which by slight cultivation will extend with renewed vigour and growth into surrounding states.

¹⁴ For an account of the Cuban fishing activities see James W. Covington, "Trade Relations between Southwestern Florida and Cuba, 1600-1840," *Florida Historical Quarterly* XXXVIII (October, 1959), 114-128.

¹⁵ During the Civil War John A. Winder served as commander of Andersonville Prison.

It is two hundred and sixty miles from Key Biscayne to Nassau, N. P. where is stationed two regiments of black troops. The harbour at this key admits of a draft of water from eight to nine feet, from thence the interior is gained with facility by land or in boats. The negroes at large in the state (common report makes the number thirty) subsist upon the spontaneous productions of the soil. The Indians are inclined to harbor and protect them.¹⁶ I have denounced this in every way and at all times, offering the Indians rewards if they would bring the vagrants to any post or town and threatened severe punishments to those who gave them subsistence or protection.

Holatter Micco (Billy Bowlegs) informs me that at Charlotte Harbor, in November last he met two white men who landed from a small boat accompanied by four sailors to row. They had in their hands paper and pencil and a compass. Their vessel, they said, was outside at sea. These men informed him that two officers of the United States Army had joined the English who were participating with the Mexicans and Indians in driving the American soldiers out of Mexico. This he told me that I might explain it as the statement was crude and unsatisfactory to him as his narration and particulars were to me. What he states, I am convinced is true, which to my mind in common with many trifling circumstances coming to my knowledge in association with fishermen, Spaniards, Indians and Americans on the coast keys, is shadowing forth of coming events.

This chief has been since the commencement of the Florida War a bold, resolute and unyielding leader. [He is] ambitious, and cunning, remarkably intelligent, speaking English with facility. His excessive vanity excites these qualities, priding himself upon his power as a chief and to maintenance (sic) of that supremacy belonging to and ascended to his ancestors. His mother was the sister of King Payne and old Bowlegs (Seminoles), who, up to the year 1815, commanded the Indians in Florida well known to all whites for intelligence and bravery.¹⁷ With these peculiar qualifications and undisputed authority exercised in Florida with an auxiliary force or alone, this Indian would be a most formidable foe. As a friend cherished by that which

¹⁶ In the editor's research concerning the Billy Bowlegs or Third Seminole War (1885-1858), he was unable to find evidence of runaway slaves among the Seminoles at that time. Perhaps one or two were seen by the soldiers but no more than that number.

¹⁷ The Seminole "royal family blood line" has been traced in Kenneth W. Porter's "The Cowkeeper Dynasty of the Seminole Nation," *Florida Historical Quarterly* XXX (April, 1952), 341-349.

would contribute to his vanity, power, and independence, he could be relied upon to expel the intruders of whatever nation and become a faithful ally to those who secure his confidence and regard. I have endeavored to obtain this so far as in my power, proper measures can cherish and perfect it and this chief who, with sufficient inducement, be an active enemy no matter from whose hands received, can be made a friend and faithful friend of the Government.

With this view of the subject matured by personal observation, enquiry and acquaintance with the remnant of Indians inhabiting the State, as well with the country and coast. I am persuaded timely measures will effect much in counteracting influences and evils calculated to result in most serious and perplexing difficulties.

The first step in my judgment is to obtain beyond the influence and friendship of Holatter Micco. He should see our numbers and the power of the country, visit Arkansas with the hope he might with his band emigrate to avoid collusions, then add to his authority and position, by making him independent in means, thus securing control over the Seminole Nation, should he emigrate; if not the subjection and organization of the number in Florida would aid very materially in the defense of the frontiers of the State by land and by water. These considerations have induced me to invite him and his sub-chiefs to visit Washington City and Arkansas, understanding that I must first obtain authority.

To Gen. Jones
Washington, D. C.

I have the honor to be very
respectfully your obt. servant
J. T. Sprague¹⁸
Capt., U. S. Army
In charge of Indian Affairs, Florida

¹⁸ Sprague to Adj.-General Jones, January 11, 1847, S26, Seminole Agency, 1846-1855, Records of Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives. In the original letter signed by Sprague, the date 1846 is given but someone in pencil has crossed through 1846 and written 1847. From evidence concerning the Mexican War given in the letter, 1847 should be the correct date when the letter was written.

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