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The First Seminole War, November 21, 1817-May 24, 1818

by JOHN K. MAHON

THE North American Southeast remained a wild borderland where Indian tribes, the United States, Spain, and Great Britain competed fiercely for supremacy. After the War of 1812 Spain kept a tenuous hold on Florida; however, Spanish authorities could not enforce peace on the border and were unable to prevent black slaves from fleeing to Florida and joining the Seminole Indians. Seen from Washington the peninsula was a natural appendage to the United States, and James Monroe's administration hankered to possess it.¹

During the War of 1812 the British built a fort on the Apalachicola River sixty miles below the American border in Spanish territory. In 1816 the fort was held by a garrison of 350 blacks, many of them runaway slaves. Slaveholders considered these people renegades and the black fort a menace to their lives and property. Andrew Jackson, commander of the southern military district, informed the Spanish officer at Pensacola that if Spain did not re-

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1. D. B. Mitchell to Senate Committee, February 23, 1819, in *American States Papers: Military Affairs*, Vol. I (Washington D.C., 1832), 748-49 (hereinafter *ASPMA*), refers to the Southeast as a violent region. The Seminoles were an amalgam of towns, tribes, and moieties. Three towns mentioned in this essay are Hitchiti, Coweta, and Miccosukee, but there were at least a dozen more, among them Tallahassee, Hilibi, Eufala, and Uchi. See James W. Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida* (Gainesville, 1993) for more information on the Seminoles.

There is no essay in print that treats the history of the First Seminole War exclusively. The fullest treatment of that war separate from the other Florida wars is Charles R. Paine, "The Seminole War of 1817-1818" (master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1938). Imbedded with other material, the war appears in the following works: Robert Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York, 1977), chapter 22; Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*; John K. Mahon, *The Second Seminole War* (Gainesville, 1967), chapter 2; Virginia B. Peters, *The Florida Wars* (Hamden, Conn., 1979); James W. Silver, *Edmund Pendleton Gaines, Frontier General* (Baton Rouge, 1949); Rembert Wallace Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform: General Duncan L. Clinch* (Gainesville, 1963). Edwin C. McReynolds, *The Seminoles* (Norman, Okla., 1957), Daniel S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Old Hickory's War: Andrew Jackson and the Quest for Empire* (Mechanicsburg, Pa., 1996), and Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville, 1996), mention the war only briefly.

move the fort, the United States, in self-defense, would have to enter Spanish territory and accomplish the task. Actually, Spain wanted to be rid of the fort but lacked the military power to eliminate it.²

In an attempt to bring some order to the Apalachicola area, the United States built Fort Scott just north of the Spanish border in 1816. The only efficient route to supply the fort was from the Gulf of Mexico up the Apalachicola River, and United States officers informed the Spanish that they intended to travel that route. The Spaniards protested but lacked the means to stop the encroachment. Accordingly, two United States gunboats moved up the Apalachicola while 270 men, half regular army and half Creek Indians, marched southward from Fort Scott. Colonel Duncan L. Clinch commanded the detachment; under him William McIntosh, son of a white father and Coweta Creek mother, led the Creeks. McIntosh's moiety of the Creeks had served with Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814 and solidly backed the United States. In contrast, another faction of the Creeks, known as the Red Sticks, had fought against the United States during the War of 1812 and had steadily opposed American encroachment onto their land. William McIntosh had suffered heavy property losses at the hands of the Red Sticks and he was vengeful. The rift in the Creek Confederation was deep and bitter.³

Clinch's detachment laid siege to the fort unsuccessfully until July 27, 1816, when a red hot cannon ball from one of the gunboats landed in the major powder magazine and blew apart the fort. The explosion killed 270 men of the black garrison. McIntosh's warriors then entered the wreckage and dispatched the remaining men. As booty they recovered 2500 muskets, 50 carbines, 400 pistols, and 500 swords. Thus the American military presence grew stronger while the Seminoles grew weaker, for the blacks in the fort had been their allies.⁴

2. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire*, 344.

3. J. Leitch Wright Jr., *Creeks and Seminoles* (Lincoln, 1990), clearly explains the rift among the Creeks and identifies McIntosh as strongly pro-American. See pp. 166, 210.

4. Patrick, *Aristocrat in Uniform*, 27-36, contains a fully documented account of the Negro Fort campaign. See also James Parton, *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. II (New York, 1861), 389-406.

In retaliation Hitchiti chief Neamathla ambushed a U.S. Army boat on November 30, killing thirty-four of forty soldiers, capturing six soldier's wives, and knocking out the brains of the four children aboard. This atrocity and the destruction of the black fort were the prologue to the First Seminole War.⁵

Neamathla's village, Fowltown, was fifteen miles from Fort Scott on the other side of the Flint River. When a detachment from the fort crossed over to gather wood, Neamathla sent word to Major General Edmund P. Gaines, commanding at Scott, not to do it again. Gaines, who viewed this as unacceptable arrogance from an Indian, demanded that the chief come to him. Receiving no response, he sent Colonel David Twiggs with 250 men to retrieve Neamathla. Twiggs got into a brief firefight on November 21, 1817, that killed five Seminoles. Neamathla escaped, whereupon the colonel burned the town. Thus began the First Seminole War.⁶

The presence of runaway slaves, Indian skirmishes, and Spanish weakness drew the attention of the Monroe administration to the Apalachicola region. On December 26, 1817, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun ordered Major General Andrew Jackson to the region. Calhoun vested Jackson "with full power to conduct the war as he may think best." Both Calhoun and Monroe knew that, given the chance, Jackson would take Florida from Spain.⁷

The general, with 500 regulars, 1000 militia, and 1800 Creek warriors led by McIntosh, marched 450 miles from Nashville to Fort Scott in 46 days, arriving on March 9, 1818. He and McIntosh struck the town of Miccosukee on April 1. Miccosukee was the largest of the Seminole towns, stretching for several miles along the shore of Lake Miccosukee. The chief there was Kinache, whose father was white and whose mother was a Miccosukee. During the attack on Miccosukee one Tennessee volunteer lost his life and

5. Hitchiti were one of the bands that had migrated from the river valleys of Georgia and Alabama and that made up the Seminole amalgam. Brigadier General Gaines to Andrew Jackson, December 2, 1817, in John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. II (Washington, D.C., 1927), 337.

6. Brigadier General Gaines to Andrew Jackson, November 21, 1817, in *Ibid.*, 333-34.

7. Secretary of War John C. Calhoun to Andrew Jackson, December 26, 1817, *ASPMA*, Vol. I, 439; Marquis James, *Andrew Jackson: The Border Captain* (Indianapolis, 1933), 309, quotes from Calhoun's letter to Governor Bibb, locating the letter in the James Monroe Papers, New York Public Library.

several were wounded. The casualties among Kinache's warriors are not known. Jackson reported that his forces had burned 300 houses and made off with ample corn and cattle. His army had destroyed the largest of all the Seminole villages.⁸ On April 6, Jackson wrote to the Spanish commander at St. Marks. The president, he said, had ordered him to enter Florida "[t]o chastise a savage foe who combined with a lawless band of Negro brigands, have for some time past been carrying on a cruel and unprovoked war against the citizens of the United States. . . ." The next day he occupied St. Marks without a fight. He did not chastise a savage foe but simply took one of the two places in West Florida that Spain had been able to settle. At St. Marks he captured two men whom he considered outlaws: Alexander Arbuthnot, an English citizen who sympathized with the Indians, and Hillis Haya, Tuskegee prophet, known to the whites as Francis. Jackson ordered Francis to be hanged at once, but he held Arbuthnot for trial.⁹

Jackson's next objective was Bowlegs Town, one hundred miles away on the Suwanee River. Chief Bowlegs, a Hitchiti, had been forced during the Patriot War of 1812-1813 to migrate from the Alachua area. Bowlegs, King Payne's brother, was a hereditary chief with as much authority over the diverse Seminole moieties as any chief.¹⁰

On the way to Bowlegs Town, McIntosh (referred to as "general" by Jackson), with his warriors and fifty Tennessee volunteers, encountered the main force of the Seminoles at the natural bridge on the Econfinia River and routed them. Jackson reported thirty-seven enemy warriors killed and six warriors and ninety-seven women and children captured. The army accelerated its pace, hoping to keep the inhabitants of Bowlegs Town from crossing the river. Later in the day, April 16, it attacked. After a brief firefight the Seminoles retreated, and Jackson ordered the town destroyed.

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8. Andrew Jackson to John C. Calhoun, Secretary of War, March 25, 1818, *ASPMA*, Vol. I, 698; Andrew Jackson to John C. Calhoun, April 9, 1818, in Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. II, 358-59, reports the attack on Kinache's town; Wright, *Creeks and Seminoles*, 126, describes Kinache's background. The Miccosukee were a moiety from the north that made up the Seminole amalgam. Kinache had been known as Tom Perryman, Kinhadjo, Kinhiji, Kinhega, and also Cappachamico and Cappichi Mico.
 9. Andrew Jackson to Maurice deZuniga, commander at St. Marks, April 6, 1818, *ASPMA*, Vol. I, 704.
 10. Rembert W. Patrick, *Florida Fiasco: Rampant Rebels on the Georgia-Florida Border, 1810-1815* (Athens, 1954), is the definitive history of the Patriot War.

His army needed supplies, but all they could gather were fifty head of cattle and only a moderate quantity of corn. The general reported nine blacks and two of the hostile Indians killed; his force suffered no casualties.¹¹

At this time Robert Ambrister was captured. Ambrister was an English citizen, considered by Jackson to be an outlaw because of his involvement with the Seminoles. After a summary trial, Jackson ordered Ambrister and Arbuthnot, also a British citizen, to be executed. Their executions raised the danger of conflict with Great Britain.¹²

The general learned that hostile Indians had gathered near Pensacola, the principal Spanish settlement in West Florida. On his own authority he marched his army 240 miles to that town. On May 24 he entered Pensacola and occupied it without resistance. Jackson was convinced that President Monroe had clandestinely given him authority to end Spanish rule in Florida. This left only one Spanish center on the peninsula, St. Augustine, 415 miles to the east. The Indian war was finished, and the general said that if he received reinforcements from the Fifth Infantry Regiment and about twenty-two gun brigs he could easily take St. Augustine. Add another regiment, he said, and a frigate, and "I will insure you Cuba in a few days."¹³

The general was not talking about any immediate action involving himself but about sometime in the future, for in the same letter he told the president that he was "[a]t present worn down with fatigue and a bad cough . . . spitting blood." He had become virtually a skeleton and returned home to regain his health. He wrote the letter from Montgomery, Alabama, already well on the way to Nashville.¹⁴ His assigned task was finished; he had broken the fighting power of the Seminoles west of the Suwanee River and had forced them to disperse; some retreated to the Alachua area,

11. Andrew Jackson to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, April 20, 1818, in Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. II, 360-63.

12. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire*, 354-59, deals with Arbuthnot and Ambrister; Bradford Perkins, *Castlereagh and Adams: England and the United States, 1812-1813* (Berkeley, 1964), 288-94, covers the threat of war with England.

13. Andrew Jackson to James Monroe, June 2, 1818, in Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, Vol. II, 376-78.

14. *Ibid.*, 378.

while others withdrew to Tampa Bay and to the lakes in north central Florida.

Capture of Spanish St. Marks and Pensacola had created international problems for the United States. The administration coveted Florida but could not risk its capture by brute force. To do so might encourage Great Britain, incensed over the execution of Arbuthnot and Ambrister, to ally with Spain in a war against the United States. Monroe's cabinet wrangled for several days over how to deal with Jackson's aggressions. At first, only Secretary of State John Quincy Adams supported Jackson, but in the end the administration endorsed what the general had done. Ultimately, over Jackson's protest, the United States returned St. Marks and Pensacola to Spain. Nevertheless, Andrew Jackson's aggressions had made him a hero among the American public. Wherever he went, crowds gathered to cheer. He had climbed a step toward becoming president.¹⁵

Jackson's success in the First Seminole War finally convinced Spain that she could not hold Florida. Florida had never been able to pay its own way from the very start. Thus on February 22, 1819, Spain ceded the peninsula to the United States, but official transfer had to wait two years. When the treaty was finally ratified in 1822, Andrew Jackson became provisional governor of the new territory. For the white population the First Seminole War opened a period, in spite of two more Seminole wars, of population growth and economic gain. For the Seminole Indians, in contrast, it was the beginning of an era of disaster.

15. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire*, 367, 376-77.