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Newcomers



In the winter of 1855, a wave of fear and panic spread throughout the thinly settled Florida frontier. This widespread anxiety was brought on by news that the Seminole Indians had once again taken to the warpath. In preparation for the anticipated hostilities, the federal government had reactivated numerous posts within the peninsula and had begun to gather the material needed for a major campaign. In Tallahassee, Governor Broome called out as large a militia force as the barren state treasury could afford. Throughout the frontier, isolated families frantically fled to the safety of the larger fortified towns. The cause of all this? Barely a hundred reclusive warriors led by a short, middle-aged chief with the somewhat laughable name of Billy Bowlegs.¹

It was no laughing matter. The people of Florida and the United States military had faced these determined warriors before, suffered bitterly at their hands, and had not forgotten the painful lessons learned nearly twenty years earlier. The entire nation recalled the day when more than 100 soldiers were killed in a matter of hours. The army remembered how their finest generals had returned from Florida in frustration, embarrassment, or dishonor. The people of Florida could not forget the smell of burnt homes or the sight of women and children cruelly slain by the tomahawk and the scalping knife. And thousands of Seminoles sadly recalled the forced migration that had led them to an unfamiliar land west of the Mississippi.

From a twenty-first-century perspective, the Seminole Wars seem improbable. How could a small group of displaced natives have hoped to stop the unrelenting tide of American expansion? It was a hopeless undertaking in which the Seminoles, to their credit, were marginally successful. What was so different about the situation in Florida that made

the Seminoles fight so much harder to remain in their homeland? Our puzzlement becomes greater when we realize that they, like those they fought against, were relatively recent immigrants to Florida. The tale of where the Seminoles came from and how their nation evolved sheds light on why they fought a series of wars that, in reality, no one would win.

The story commences long before recorded history. Twelve thousand years ago, when humans first set foot in Florida, the climate was drier and the sea level much lower. The shallow waters that now cover the continental shelf were gone, leaving a peninsula twice as wide as the one we are familiar with today. Living in Florida were creatures that have long since gone extinct, including mammoth, mastodon, sabertooth cats, and giant ground sloths.

As millennia passed, the sea level rose and the climate moistened. The population of Florida slowly increased as sustainable, seasonal foods were discovered. As the art of cultivation was learned, nomadic camps became permanent villages. Complex societies developed, along with the political and spiritual systems that supported them. Cloth weaving, cord braiding, and pottery making provided the people with valuable new tools. Tribes that flourished became powerful nations, engaging in wars with their neighbors or conducting varied forms of trade in times of peace. Florida, now much warmer and with a mixture of wetlands and woodlands, was a good place to live.

On the southwestern coast of the peninsula were the powerful Calusas. To the east, where now stands the ever-spreading metropolis of Miami–Fort Lauderdale, were the Tequestas. In northern Florida, the various tribes were linguistically related and are known today as the Timucuans. In the eastern Panhandle, the dominant people were the Apalachees. Five hundred years ago, there may have been as many as 350,000 Indians living in the land we now call Florida, a level of population that would not be reached again until the 1880s.²

Within 200 years of the Spaniards' arrival, virtually the entire population of aboriginal Floridians was gone. The first wave of death came with the arrival of the Narváez expedition in 1528, followed by the de Soto expedition in 1539. For nearly all concerned, the quest for glory proved fatal. Narváez and de Soto died, along with most of their men. Left behind were more than rotting bones and rusting weapons. Wherever the

Spaniards went, the diseases they carried infected the local population. Entire villages were wiped out or abandoned. The social structures that supported the native cultures began to crumble. They would never recover.

The conquest of Florida became a reality with the founding of St. Augustine in 1565. Chronically short of labor, Spanish authorities conscripted the natives into the harsh service of the Crown. Those who resisted were either killed or sold into slavery. Those who submitted spent the remainder of their lives toiling to feed themselves and most of the Spanish population of Florida. New shiploads of missionaries, soldiers, and colonists brought their diseases with them. One of the final blows came from the English colonists in the Carolinas, who raided northern Florida in search of Indians to enslave. By the early eighteenth century, the aboriginal population of Florida was all but extinct.

This is, of course, a tale of the Seminole Indians, yet before the eighteenth century, the Seminoles did not exist. Initially, it seems odd that the Indian group that fought hardest to remain on its land was not native to it. Yet one of the lessons American history teaches us is that “home” is often defined more by dreams than by memories. Many present-day Floridians have a “home town” in the North, but their hearts and futures are in their new southern home. Our whole national saga of migration and expansion is a testimony to the power of hope. Why should the Indians have felt any different?

One of the things that separates the Seminoles from other Indian nations is the fact that there exists historical records of the tribe’s formation. The genesis of any nation is an evolutionary process, and with the Seminoles, we are fortunate that it happened recently enough for outsiders to have observed and recorded some of those evolutionary events.

Ironically, we are forced to admit that, to a large extent, the Seminoles were a European invention. Consider the following: The decimation of the native population by the Spaniards made Florida available for new Indian settlers. Conflicts with the English caused Indian bands from other parts of the South to move into the peninsula. The need for new hunting grounds to satisfy the European deerskin trade lured bands of hunters into Florida, where, eventually, many brought their families to live. Even the term “Seminole” was European in origin, and its application was strictly for white convenience. Finally, it was war with the

United States that forged a nation from many scattered, sometimes antagonistic, tribes. As we shall see, without the Europeans and their descendants, there would be no Seminoles.

Through it all we must remember that these Indians were making their own decisions, reacting to strange, often dangerous, situations as best they could. Having no better foresight than any of us alive today, these people weighed their options and took their chances in the same manner we all do. Under extreme pressure from the much more powerful white societies surrounding them, the Indians that came to populate Florida created a new identity for themselves, embraced a name they did not create, and thrived in a portion of the world others considered uninhabitable.

As would happen throughout early Florida history, the politics of Europe determined events in this remote New World outpost. Florida was not a profitable colony for Spain. Mineral poor and generally unsuited to a plantation economy, the area was always viewed as a drain on the Spanish Royal Treasury. To reach Spain, treasure ships from the Caribbean and South America had to follow the trade winds and the gulf stream, both of which ran up the East Coast of North America. The narrow Straits of Florida, which separates the peninsula from Cuba and the Bahamas, were the favored hunting grounds of pirates and rival European warships. Places like St. Augustine were of extreme importance to the protection of Spanish shipping. Profitable or not, Spain needed Florida.

The people who would eventually make up the Seminole Nation had their origins among the tribes of what would become the Southeast United States. Decimated by European-introduced diseases and warfare, the southeastern Indian societies had been in a state of flux for much of the seventeenth century. Old groupings fell apart and new ones were formed. Faced with an array of names such as Alabamas, Apalachicolas, Chiahas, Hitchitis, Koasatis, Oconeas, Yamassees, and Yuchis, among others, we can easily understand the longing of English traders and officials to impose some order upon the chaos. The name that finally stuck was “Creeks,” derived from the fact that traders paddled up creeks to meet with the Indians. Although these different native groups saw little or no unity among themselves, it did not deter the British from imposing the term upon them.³

As much as the English may have wanted it, these Indians could not become a united nation. The most important division among the Creeks

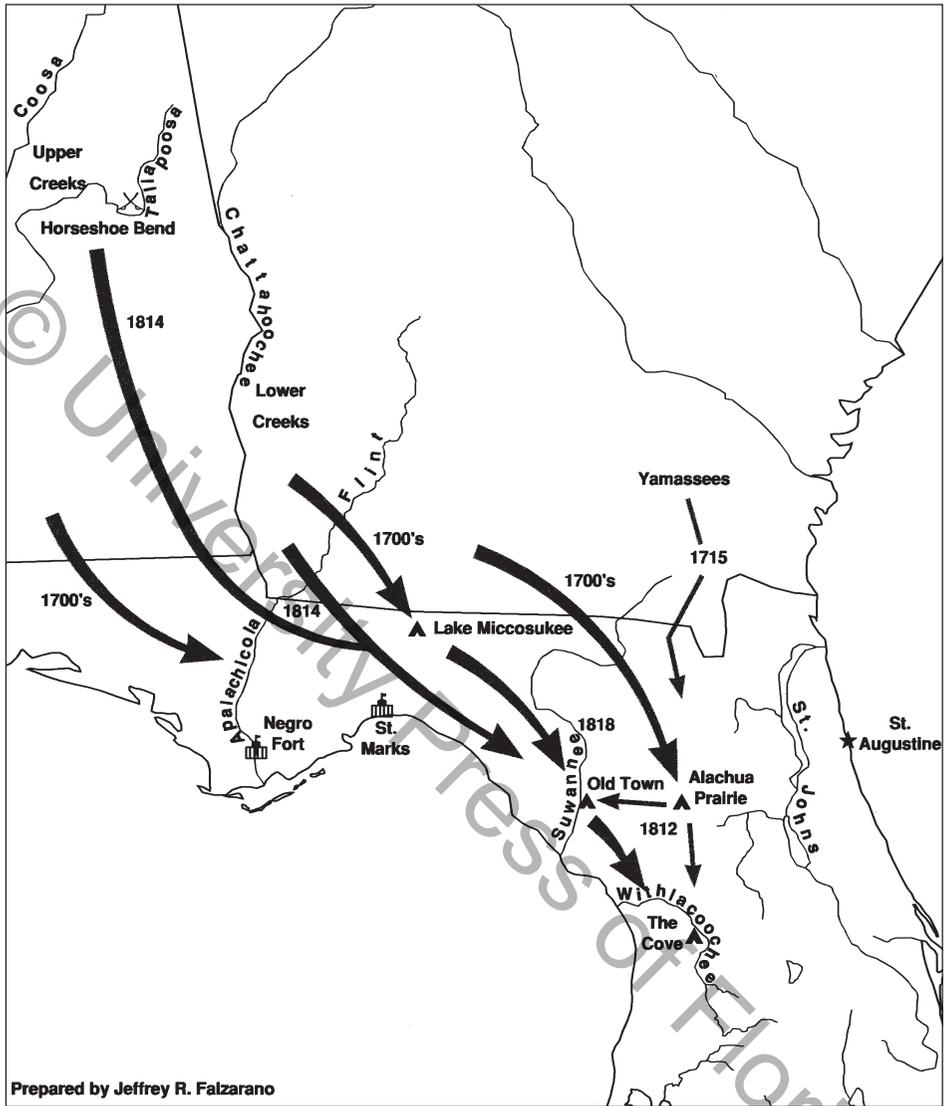
was a linguistic one. Although the vast majority spoke a language derived from the Muskogee family of languages, the differences in those languages were often great enough to make many of them unintelligible to one another. In the end, the Creeks fell into two distinct groups, labeled “Upper” and “Lower” by the whites. Although these divisions appear very neat and orderly, we must remember that they were artificial and never well defined. They are generalities that, like all generalities, should be viewed with a degree of suspicion but, in practice, cannot be abandoned.

The tribes that made up the Lower Creeks normally settled into what is now southwestern Georgia, primarily along the Flint and Chattahoochee Rivers. Their principal language was Hitchiti, though other tongues were certainly present. In contrast, the Upper Creeks lived primarily in what is now eastern Alabama, mostly along the banks of the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers. They usually spoke Muskogee, a language that was considerably different from Hitchiti. Although both groups were supposedly part of a greater Creek Confederation, the confederacy often existed only in the minds of the whites who had to deal with them. Long-standing animosities among the individual Creek tribes could not be easily erased and often led to violence and bloodshed among the different groups.

By the end of the first decade of the eighteenth century, the Spanish had more or less abandoned North Florida between Pensacola and the St. Johns River. With the exception of St. Augustine, Pensacola, and a fort at St. Marks, the land was nearly deserted. To the north, in what is now eastern Georgia, tensions were building between the British of South Carolina and the Yamassee tribe. War broke out in 1715, and the defeated Yamassees were forced to retreat into Florida, where they became allies of Spain. A steady wave of migration into northern Florida had begun.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the migration continued. Most were Lower Creeks who, for various reasons, saw the opportunity for a better life south of the border. Some were refugees who had been displaced by the whites. Others were lured south by the Spanish, who had finally begun to see some advantage in having what they considered “savage” Indian allies as opposed to docile Indian subjects. Others were more concerned with simply getting away from the whites.

Two groups, both Lower Creek and both speaking the Hitchiti dialect, stand out in particular. The first were the Mikasukis, who settled around the lake of the same name, just east of present-day Tallahassee. For them,



MAP I. Seminole migration, 1700-1820.

it had been no great migration, simply an expansion to the south. Still, as the decades passed, their community grew and the tribe became prosperous. Ties with other Creek towns lessened, and a separate identity developed. From the eighteenth century through to today, the Mikasukis have considered themselves a people apart.