

*“Tellaugue Chapcopopeau, a creek
which enters the ocean . . . at a
place called the Fishery”*

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Early Migrations

A PART FROM SMALL SETTLEMENTS east and north of the St. Johns River, the outposts of Spain's colonial empire, peninsular Florida at the dawn of the nineteenth century belonged to the Indians, most of them relative newcomers themselves. A combination of disease, war, slave raiding, and voluntary departures had eliminated almost entirely the indigenous tribes of the peninsula, and into the vacuum had come several thousand Creek Indians, great numbers of whom were becoming known as Seminoles. These early Floridians were concentrated around the Alachua Prairie or Alachua Plain in what would become Alachua County. There, under a succession of powerful rulers, the Alachua Seminoles prospered while their vast herds of cattle fattened on the surrounding prairie grasses.¹

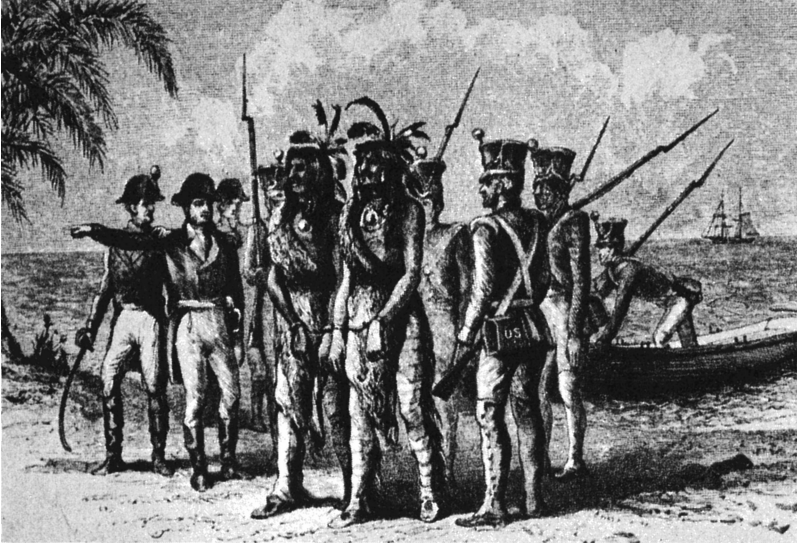
South Florida, the site of extensive earlier Indian civilizations, was virtually uninhabited in the early 1800s but for the seasonal presence of Spanish fishermen at fishing *ranchos* at Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor. The exception was a cluster of Indian settlements in or near the Big Hammock in what is today Hernando County. Known after its principal town as Chocachatti, these settlements had been founded in 1767 by Creek Indians from the town of Eufala. These immigrants were known as Upper Creek, a

collective label applied to Creeks whose homes lay along the Tallapoosa, Coosa, and Alabama rivers in the present state of Alabama. At Chocachatti and in small villages stretching southward to Tampa Bay, their numbers supplemented by later arrivals, these Upper Creeks thrived in the last three decades of the eighteenth century.²

Also in South Florida for part of each year were numerous parties of Creeks and Seminoles who, for decades and, possibly, generations prior to 1800, had journeyed to South Florida for the November to March hunting season. They followed the ancient trail from the north down to the falls of the Hillsborough River and from there to the crossing of the Alafia River south of today's Plant City, the scattering ground where hunting parties separated into smaller expeditions. Those headed for the Myakka range west of Peace River simply continued on their way. Those determined to hunt farther south, down to the Caloosahatchee River and below, turned to the east to the fords on Peace River or what they knew as the Talakchopco hatchee, the River of the Long Peas. Specifically, they forded the Peace River about fifteen miles south of the lake they believed to be at the head of the river where, by 1819, a permanent village was established. It took the name of the river, Talakchopco.³

Traditionally, the annual Creek and Seminole hunting expeditions centered around the hunt for deer, although bear, panther, and other animals figured as well. Using the game for food during the hunting season, the Indians would trade deerskins and other products of their hunt for guns, clothing, whiskey, and similar commodities. The hunts in South Florida were not always solely for deerskins, however. From as early as 1708 come reported incidents of slave raiding by Yemassee Indians of South Carolina deep into South Florida, a traffic which seems to have been continued by the Creeks well into the century.⁴

By the 1790s the Creeks in South Florida and their cousins from further north were so involved in the life and economy of the peninsula that they wanted to regularize their trading relationships with Spanish Cuba. Previously content with exchanging the rewards of their South Florida hunts through Charlotte Harbor's Cuban fishermen or St. Augustine middlemen, in 1793 the Creeks dispatched a delegation to Havana to petition for the erection of a store convenient to their hunting grounds. The request



Two Tallahassee Creek chiefs, allies of Peter McQueen, were arrested with Alexander Arbuthnot, an Englishman, at St. Marks just prior to the April 1818 battle at Bowlegs Town on the Suwannee River. In the aftermath of the battle, McQueen sought refuge at Peace River. Courtesy Florida Photographic Collection, Florida State Archives.

specified that the store should be located at Pea Creek, described as “down in the Point of Florida, where the Spaniards always fish, and where the Indians take vessels to cross over to Havana.” Although the Creek request resulted in a Spanish exploratory mission to the Tampa Bay area, no store appears to have been built there or at Charlotte Harbor. The incident, however, clearly illustrates a substantial Creek presence and interest in South Florida from the 1790s. Since the Creeks understood the location and importance of Peace River, which the Spanish explorers mistook for Tampa Bay, it also suggests a knowledge of the area on their part far greater than that held by the officials of Spain and her agents.⁵

The hunting towns at Talakchopco

A marked difference existed between Seminoles and Creeks when it came to their pursuit of game on the South Florida hunting grounds; by custom Creeks left their wives and children

at home, while Seminoles seemed to prefer having their families with them. The presence of these Seminole families on the hunt no doubt prompted the establishment of seasonal villages on high fertile land near the hunting grounds, since, for a good part of each year, much of South Florida's low, flat land was under an inch to a foot or more of water. Accordingly, when in 1799 Creek Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins noted the existence of seven "towns of the Simenolies," he noted among them "Tal-lau-gue chapco pop-cau" and "Cull-oo-saw-hat-che." These towns must have been located on the rivers which their names suggest, Talakchopco and Caloosahatchee, and most logically would have been sited near the great crossing places on each of them.⁶

The Peace River hunting towns occasionally served as refuges, as well. A letter from Hawkins, dated in mid-January 1813, mentions that the leader of the Alachua Seminoles, King Payne, recently had died, and his people were in turmoil as a result of their conflict with Georgia and North Florida frontiersmen in what has come to be known as the Patriot War [see appendix 1]. "I received from an Indian of note . . . the following information," wrote Hawkins. "Paine is dead of his wounds . . . [and] the warring Indians have quit this settlement [Alachua], and gone down to Tellaugue Chapcopopeau, a creek which enters the ocean south of Moscheto river, at a place called the Fishery. Such of their stock as they could command have been driven in that direction, and the negroes [Seminole slaves] were going the same way. The lands beyond the creek towards Florida point, were, for a considerable distance, open savannas, with ponds; and, still beyond the land, stony, to the point."⁷

Hawkins's letter preserves for us not only the name of the town or area to which the Seminoles fled in 1812 but also a description of where it lay. The Moscheto (or Mosquito) River is known to us as the Halifax, and by south of the Moscheto River Hawkins meant below or farther down the peninsula. The creek flowed into the place called the Fishery, which was Charlotte Harbor, where for at least fifty years Cuban fishing ranchos had been located. Tellaugue Chapcopopeau to the Seminoles meant "the place where long peas are eaten." It was Hawkins's spelling for Talakchopco River. The refugees had gone to Peace River and their seasonal hunting towns.⁸

Where exactly were these seasonal towns located? The great

ford of the Peace River lay at what is now Fort Meade. The banks of the river from just below the site of Fort Meade northward to the vicinity of Lake Hancock, with the banks of adjacent creeks, constituted an area of rich and high hammock land prized by the Indians for its agricultural potential and other natural resources. Behind the banks for several miles in each direction lay what was known as "2d rate pine land," land elevated above the adjacent country, healthy and high in productivity. It was in this band of country, about five or six miles in width and fifteen to twenty miles long, that the Seminoles had located their hunting towns and that other Indians and blacks before too many years passed were to attempt to establish more permanent lives.⁹

Black plantations at Sarasota Bay

The years from 1812 to 1818 were a time of almost constant turmoil for the Indians of Florida and their black slaves and allies. In East Florida the Patriot War flamed on and off from July 1812 until May 1814, sending many Seminoles in flight—with their slaves and cattle—to Peace River. During much of the same period of time war also raged within the Creek Nation in Georgia and Alabama, a conflict finding Upper Creeks, known as Red Sticks, on one side and southern frontiersmen and their "Lower Creek" Indian allies on the other. At the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, Alabama, in March 1814, Tennessee militia general Andrew Jackson, with the support of Lower Creeks and Cherokees under the command of Chief William McIntosh, crushed the Red Sticks and forced over a thousand of their number to seek refuge in Spanish Florida.¹⁰

While the Patriot and Creek wars flared, so also did the War of 1812. Anxious to find support for their cause among Florida Indians, two British agents, Col. Edward Nicolls and Capt. George Woodbine, successfully recruited 3,000 refugee Red Stick Creeks, blacks, and Seminoles. After a series of engagements, these native forces were defeated decisively at the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815, and again forced to retreat into Florida. When Nicolls withdrew his British forces from the province the following June, some of his black allies, concerned for their own safety, sailed for Tampa Bay under the leadership of Captain

Woodbine. At Sarasota Bay they established a substantial farming community where for the time being they and their families could live in peace and safety.¹¹

Why was the Tampa Bay area selected for the black plantations? Major advantages, certainly, were that the locale could be supplied easily by sea from the Bahamas and that the bay afforded ocean-going vessels a safe harbor. But perhaps most importantly, the area already enjoyed a reputation as a haven for blacks. At least as early as 1813, black refugees from the Alachua Seminole towns had sought protection in the area. There were several rich hammocks for farming near the bay, and access to trade was available through contacts with the Cuban fishermen at Charlotte Harbor and at Tampa Bay itself. In fact, by 1812 some of those fishermen were living at Sarasota Bay on the Oyster River near where Woodbine located the black settlement. Many of the black refugees, together with runaway slaves, no doubt remained in the area in 1815, and from them Woodbine could recruit laborers as well as supporters for future operations he had planned for Florida.¹²

The black plantations at Sarasota prospered for several years and in one form or another still were in operation as late as 1821. They proved a magnet for runaway blacks and the memory of their existence lingered. Pioneer Floridian John Lee Williams, confusing Captain Woodbine with two other famous Britons who became involved in the lives of Florida's Indians and blacks, wrote of the plantations as they appeared in 1833: "Oyster river at the south-east side of Tampa Bay, was explored by twenty miles. . . . A stream that enters the bay joining the entrance of Oyster River, on the S.W., was ascended about six miles. . . . The point between these two rivers is called Negro Point. The famous Arbuthnot and Ambrister had at one time a plantation here cultivated by two hundred blacks. The ruins of their cabins, and domestic utensils are still seen on the old fields."¹³

Over the years additional black settlers were drawn to the plantations at Sarasota. When, during the summer of 1816, American and Creek troops destroyed Florida's other principal settlement of runaway slaves, Negro Fort on the Apalachicola River, it was said that most of the survivors fled to the east and, by the end of the year, had located near Seminole settlements on the Suwannee and in small villages reaching southward to Tampa