

John and Mary Lou Missall

A SHORT HISTORY OF  
THE SEMINOLE WARS



SEMINOLE WARS FOUNDATION, INC.

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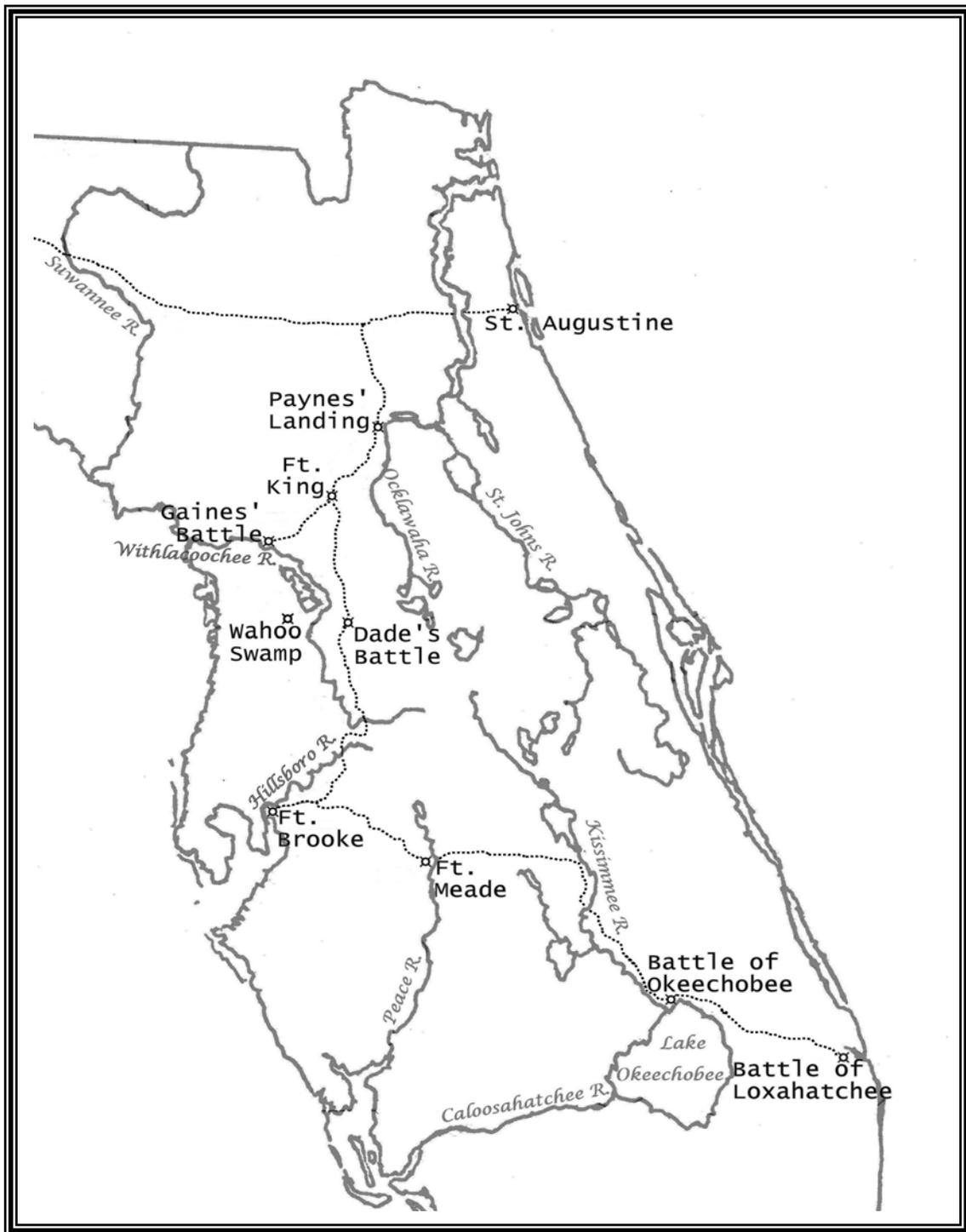
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*Florida During the Second Seminole War*

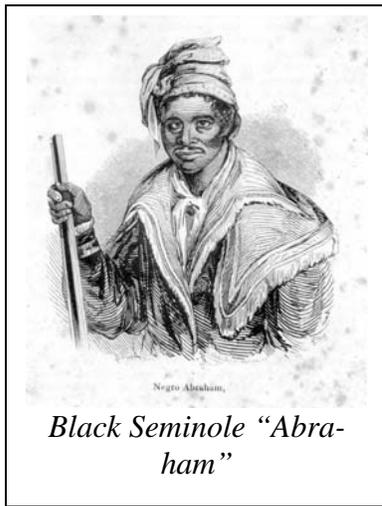
## The Seminole Wars

Florida's three Seminole Wars were important events in American history that have often been neglected by those who tell the story of our nation's past. These wars, which took place between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, were driven by many forces, ranging from the clash of global empires to the basic need to protect one's home and family. They were part of the great American economic and territorial expansion of the nineteenth century, and were greatly influenced by the national debate over the issue of slavery.

In particular, the Second Seminole War stands out as the nation's longest, costliest, and deadliest Indian war. Lasting almost seven years, the conflict cost thousands of lives and millions of dollars, yet faded from the nation's collective memory soon after the fighting ended. It is a story that should not have been forgotten, a story that can teach us lessons that are still relevant today. It is in hopes of restoring a portion of that lost memory that the Seminole Wars Foundation offers this short history of one of our nation's longest wars.

### Seminole Origins

The ancestors of the Seminole Indians were primarily Creek Indians from Georgia and Alabama who migrated to Florida during the 18th century after the decimation of the aboriginal natives under Spanish rule. Unable to understand the relationships between the many native tribes that inhabited Florida, Europeans began to identify all Native Americans in the peninsula as *Seminoles*, a term that means "runaways" or "those who live apart." The two largest bands were the *Mikasukis*, who inhabited the area around Lake Miccosukee near present-day Tallahassee, and the *Alachuas*, who lived around the fertile Alachua Prairie near what is now Gainesville. Before and during the War of 1812, as part of an American attempt to wrest Florida from Spain, United States forces invaded



*Black Seminole "Abraham"*

the Spanish colony and attacked the Seminole villages in the Alachua area, forcing many natives south, into the region north of Tampa Bay. These native Seminoles were joined by many refugee Creeks who had fled to safety in Spanish Florida after defeat in the Creek Civil War of 1814.

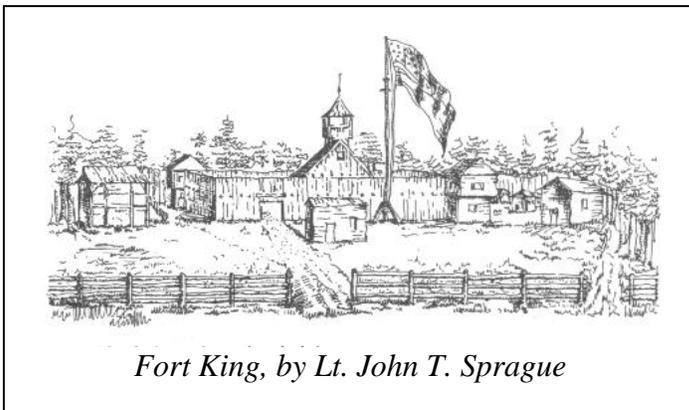
The Seminole population also included a significant number of blacks, many of whom were runaway slaves from southern plantations. Slaveholders were concerned that more of their slaves would seek refuge among the Seminoles and that these runaways would be armed by the Indians and later return to lead slave uprisings. The presence of blacks would prove one of the primary factors in causing friction between the Seminoles and white Americans.



The war against the Seminoles may have been over, but the invasion was not. Claiming that the Spaniards were offering sanctuary to the Indians and supplying them with arms, Jackson exceeded his orders by traveling over 100 miles to the west to attack and capture the Spanish capital of Pensacola. Leaving the army in possession of the city, Jackson returned to Tennessee. The general's actions caused considerable diplomatic trouble with Spain and England and led to lengthy debates in Congress concerning the power of the military and the president. In 1819 Spain agreed to cede Florida to the United States and Andrew Jackson was appointed its first governor when the territory changed hands in 1821.

### **Territorial Florida**

When the United States acquired Florida from Spain there were perhaps 30,000 residents in the Territory, nearly half of them black, either slave or free. Most of the population lived around the only towns of any notable size, St. Augustine and Pensacola, or in scattered plantations and homesteads in between. With the exception of Key West, almost no one lived in the southern half of the peninsula. The Seminole population was estimated at around 5,000 people, including several hundred blacks. Seminole villages were located throughout the northern portion of the Territory, near areas of good farmland and hunting grounds.



*Fort King, by Lt. John T. Sprague*

In September of 1823, the Seminoles relented to white pressure and signed the Treaty of Moultrie Creek. This agreement forced the Seminoles to give up claim to all territory in Florida with the exception of a 4,000,000 acre reservation in the center of the peninsula. Provisions were also included demanding that the Seminoles return all runaway slaves residing among them. The

treaty also promised annuities and other benefits that were to last for twenty years. To monitor the Indians, Fort Brooke was constructed at a location that would eventually become the city of Tampa, and an Indian Agency was established at Fort King, which would later become the city of Ocala. Reluctantly, and with little assistance from the government, the Seminoles slowly moved onto the reservation.

As the Florida Territory's population slowly increased and expanded into the wilderness, altercations between the newcomers and the natives intensified. Many Seminoles occupied land that was coveted by settlers, which brought them into conflict with squatters, while other Indians were living in marginal areas where not enough food could be grown, which forced them to either steal or beg from their white neighbors. The one item

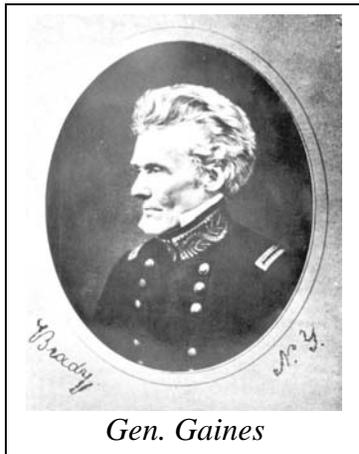
of wealth the Seminoles possessed, their cattle, also caused trouble. In a land with unfenced, open ranges, the rustling of cattle was a continual problem.

In 1830, under intense pressure from President Andrew Jackson, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. The intention of this law was to relocate all Indians living east of the Mississippi to new lands in the west. The five “civilized” tribes of the southeast (Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole) were to be placed in an official Indian Territory, in what is now the state of Oklahoma. One by one, the native nations were forced to sign treaties that obligated them to emigrate.

The Seminoles were pressured into signing the Treaty of Payne’s Landing in 1832, in which they agreed to leave Florida within three years. The agreement was contingent upon the tribal council receiving the report of a delegation of seven chiefs who would inspect the proposed western reservation. Although the members of the delegation did place their marks upon a document stating their satisfaction with the new land, upon their return to Florida they denounced the agreement as being fraudulent, claiming they had either been forced or tricked into signing, and insisting that the final determination lay not with them, but with the council.

### The Second Seminole War

For the next three years, the Seminoles quietly resisted all attempts to gather the tribe for deportation to the west. Hostile feelings turned into open warfare on December 28, 1835, when the Seminoles attacked and nearly wiped out a detachment of 108 soldiers commanded by Major Francis L. Dade. On the same day, the famed Seminole leader Osceola killed Indian Agent Wiley Thompson outside the agency at Ft. King.

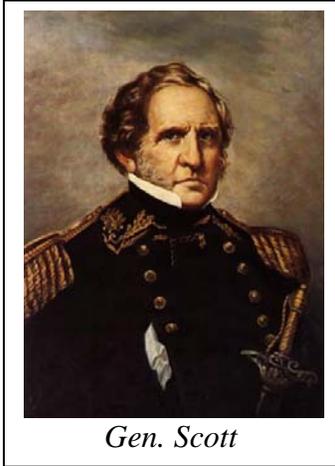


Gen. Gaines

Within weeks, the Seminoles scored other stunning victories. On December 31, they repulsed a force of 750 soldiers and volunteers at the Withlacoochee River. By the middle of January they had destroyed virtually every sugar plantation in Florida, ruining the Territory’s largest industry and freeing hundreds of slaves.

Hearing of the destruction of Dade’s command, Maj. Gen. Edmund P. Gaines, in charge of the Western Division of the army, came from New Orleans to Florida in February of 1836 with over 1,000 men. Instead of capturing the belligerent Seminoles, Gaines was confronted at the Withlacoochee River and forced to erect a defensive enclosure known as Camp Izard. The army then found itself held under siege for over a week before being rescued and forced to withdraw.

Unaware of Gaines’ presence in Florida, President Jackson placed Eastern Division commander Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott in charge of the war. Scott fielded 5,000 men in an elaborate plan to surround and capture the Seminole warriors and their families. The campaign ended in embarrassment when it failed to locate, kill, or capture any significant



*Gen. Scott*

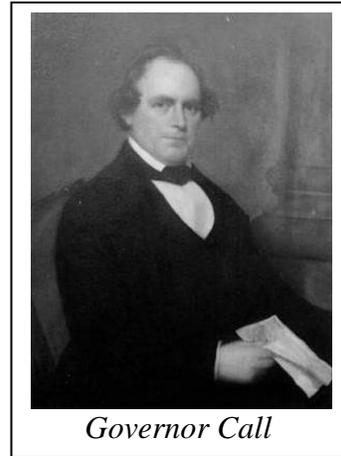
number of the Indians. The Seminoles, desperately trying to preserve their homeland and way of life, were proving a much more formidable enemy than anyone had anticipated.

Due to heavy rains and rampant disease, offensive operations were suspended for the summer months, as the army abandoned the interior and gathered at “healthy” posts along the coast. As would happen for the next five years, the relatively quiet summers allowed the Seminoles to rest, grow their crops, and prepare for the winter, when the American forces would resume their campaigns. In the meantime, scattered attacks on travelers and homesteads continued.

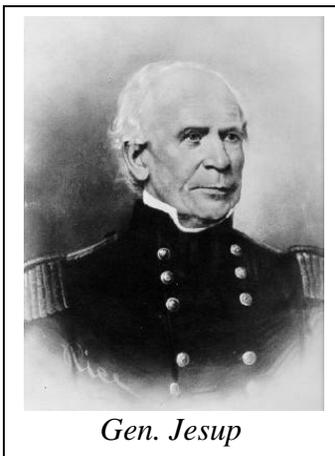
In the fall of 1836 the offensive began again under the leadership of Florida Governor Richard K. Call., a protégé of President Jackson and a veteran of previous Indian Wars.

Leading a large force of volunteers and regular soldiers, Call managed to force the Seminoles from their strongholds near the Withlacoochee River but was stalled at the Battle of Wahoo Swamp, allowing the Indians time to escape into the unmapped Florida wilderness.

The year 1837 proved to be a turning point in the war. Command of the war was given to Maj. Gen. Thomas Jesup, who began a methodical drive to force the Seminoles from Florida. Forts were established throughout the Indian occupied land and mobile columns of soldiers scoured the countryside. Feeling the pressure, many Seminoles, including head chief Micanopy, signed the Articles of Capitulation at Fort Dade in March of 1837. The Seminoles slowly gathered for emigration near Tampa, but in June they fled the detention camps, forcing a resumption of the war.



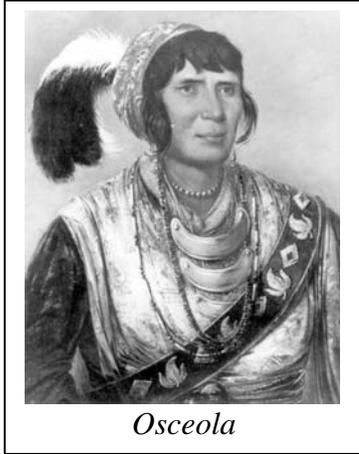
*Governor Call*



*Gen. Jesup*

Jesup also employed the navy. It was the only time the maritime branch of the military was utilized in an Indian war. Because the government believed the Seminole forces were being supplied by Bahamians and Cubans, the navy had been patrolling the coasts since the beginning of the war. Jesup expanded the navy’s role by using coordinated attacks from land and sea. Surplus sailors were used to man forts and Marines came ashore to take the place of foot soldiers.

Incensed at what he felt was Seminole treachery for surrendering then leaving the detention camps, Jesup responded in kind, taking many Seminole leaders prisoner while negotiating under a flag of truce. The most important captive was Osceola, who would later die in captivity. Other chiefs, including Micanopy, were also taken in this manner. While the practice was successful in removing many Seminole leaders,



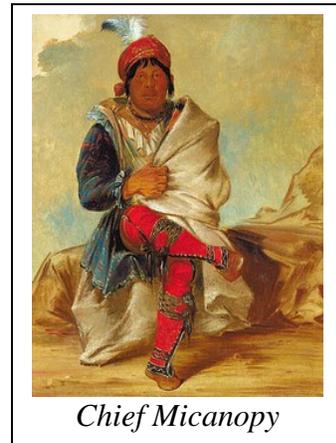
*Osceola*

it also helped solidify the native resistance and created an outpouring of white sympathy for the Seminole cause.

In November of 1837 Jesup launched a massive campaign employing over 9,000 men, approximately half of them volunteers and militia forces. This was a large army for the time, in light of the fact that at the beginning of the war the entire U.S. Army numbered only 7,000 men. The offensive swept southward through the peninsula in several large columns and culminated in the Battle of Okeechobee on Christmas Day, 1837 and in the Battle of Loahatchee several weeks later. The American forces, led by Col. Zachary Taylor, would hail the Okeechobee battle as a great victory, but it could also be considered a Seminole victory, as it stopped the army, inflicted severe

casualties on the Americans, and provided time for the Seminole women and children to escape.

General Jesup and the senior officers on his staff felt as if they had at last won the war. They had killed or captured the majority of the Seminoles and their senior leaders and had driven the remnants deep into the Everglades. By offering freedom to many of the Black Seminoles, Jesup had removed most of them from the conflict. Realizing the futility of trying to follow the Indians into the Everglades, Jesup asked the War Department to declare an end to the conflict. Secretary of War Joel Poinsett, not wishing to compromise the Van Buren Administration's Indian Removal policy by allowing any Seminoles to remain in Florida, refused to let the war end.



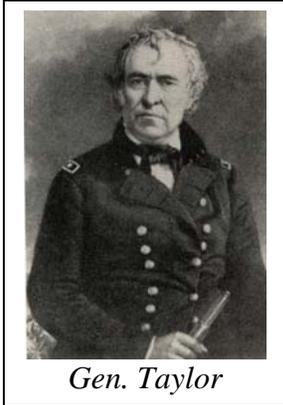
*Chief Micanopy*



*Secretary of War  
Poinsett*

Feeling he had done all that he could, Jesup asked to be relieved and was replaced by Zachary Taylor, who had been promoted to Brigadier General after the Battle of Okeechobee. The war now entered a new phase, a war of attrition that would last another four years and accomplish very little, other than the loss of hundreds of lives (black, white, and Seminole) and the expenditure of millions of dollars. Taylor fought a defensive war, concentrating on protecting the settled portions of the Territory and building numerous roads and bridges.

By early 1839, the government realized that it would be almost impossible to drive the remaining Seminoles from Florida. President Martin Van Buren dispatched the army's highest officer, Maj. Gen. Alexander Macomb, to negotiate a peace with the Seminoles. It was the only time Native Americans were able to force the United States to sue for peace. An agreement was reached with a



*Gen. Taylor*

portion of the Seminoles that would allow them to remain in southwest Florida, but the peace was shattered in July of 1839 by an Indian attack on a trading post located along the Caloosahatchee River. The government saw no alternative but to continue the war until every last Seminole was removed.

After two years in command and with no end to the war in sight, Zachary Taylor asked to be relieved. He was replaced by Brig. Gen. Walker K. Armistead, who began a policy of continuing the offensive operations during the summer months, penetrating the Everglades by canoes and small boats, hoping to force the Seminoles from their safe havens. The policy was not aggressively pursued, however, and the Seminoles became more em-

boldened. Fighting against Armistead were two of the Seminole's most courageous leaders, Abiaca (Sam Jones), an aging medicine man who remained one step ahead of the army, and Coacoochee (Wild Cat), a young chief who took the war north, into the settled portions of the Territory. Still, as small groups of Indians surrendered or were taken prisoner, the Seminole forces dwindled.

In May of 1841, Armistead was replaced by Col. William Worth, who increased the pressure on the Indians. Finally, in the summer of 1842, after seven years of desperate warfare, an agreement was reached with the few hundred remaining Seminoles, allowing them to live in southwest Florida. America's



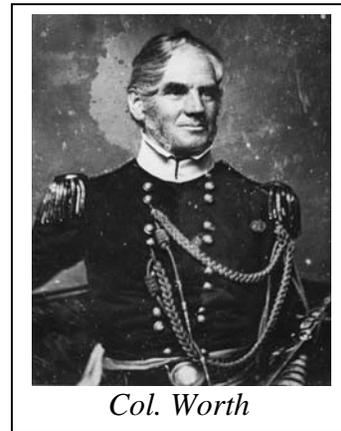
*Gen. Armistead*

longest Indian war was over. Losses included nearly 1,500 men in the army, about 50 in the navy, and uncounted hundreds of volunteers, militiamen, and civilians. Hundreds of Seminoles died during the conflict, either at the hands of soldiers or from malnutrition and disease. Over 3,000 Seminoles were forcibly removed from their homes and sent to inhospitable lands in what is now Oklahoma. Many did not survive the trip to their new homes while others succumbed shortly after their arrival.

The Second Seminole War cost the government approximately \$30 million, at a time when the entire annual federal budget was only \$25 million. Thousands of soldiers from all over the nation returned home ravaged by fevers, other debilitating diseases, and wounds that never healed. Florida itself suffered, with its major industries destroyed and thousands of settlers forced to look elsewhere for a place to live. No one won the Second Seminole War; they only survived it.



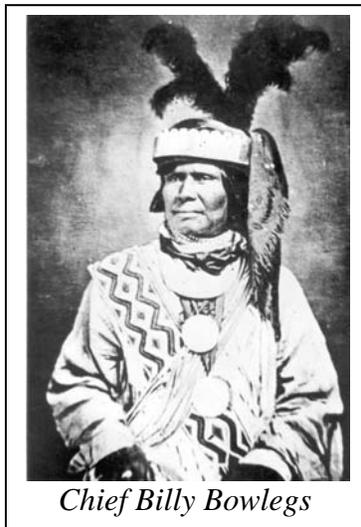
*Gen. Maccomb*



*Col. Worth*

## The Third Seminole War

Florida became a state in 1845, but settlement was hampered in part by the effects of the Second Seminole War. Throughout the war, people had heard that the land was worthless, often under water, and plagued by disease and unbearable temperatures in the summer. In addition, the presence of the remaining Seminoles, whose tenacity and ferocity in the past war had become legendary, made other portions of the nation appear more favorable for settlement. Wanting to remove the perceived Seminole threat, the government



*Chief Billy Bowlegs*

government began to pressure the remaining Seminoles to emigrate to Oklahoma. Chief Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco) refused, and war erupted in December of 1855.

Once again the government brought in thousands of soldiers and began to patrol the Everglades in search of Seminole hideouts. The frontier population fled to the cities or nearby fortifications as the Seminoles raided isolated homesteads. This time, however, the war was confined to the southern portion of the peninsula. In the early part of the conflict, raids occurred near Tampa, Bradenton, and Sarasota. In mid-June of 1856, a small battle took place near Fort Meade, where an important Seminole leader, Ossen Tustennuggee, was slain. From then on, most of the fighting took place south of Lake Okeechobee.

The fighting continued for another two years, with numerous small skirmishes and few large battles. Having learned the lessons of the Second Seminole War, the military dispatched numerous “boat companies” into the Everglades and the waterways that surrounded it. Villages and fields were located and destroyed. Small groups of Indians were captured and sent west. At the same time, delegations of Seminole chiefs were brought from the western Indian Territory in hopes of convincing their eastern brethren to join them. For the most part, the Florida Seminoles refused to negotiate.

The war of attrition continued until the spring of 1858, when Billy Bowlegs agreed to emigrate after meeting with chiefs who had been brought from the reservations in the west. Less than 200 Seminoles remained in Florida, led by the aging medicine man Abiaca, who, with his small group of followers, refused to give up the land they loved.

The legacies of the Seminole Wars are all about us. Many of Florida’s important cities, such as Tampa, Miami, Fort Myers, Orlando, and Fort Lauderdale began as military outposts. From Dade County to Osceola County, from the town of Micanopy to the city of Gainesville, and from Lake Poinsett to Lake Worth, the map of Florida is dotted with remembrances of people from both sides and from all races who fought desperately for their dignity, their freedom, and their way of life.

## **John & Mary Lou Missall**

John and Mary Lou are authors of the book *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict* published by the University Press of Florida. They are editors of *This Miserable Pride of a Soldier: The Letters and Journals of Col. William S. Foster in the Second Seminole War* published by the Seminole Wars Foundation and the University of Tampa Press. They are also editors of *This Torn Land: Poetry of the Second Seminole War*, published by the Seminole Wars Foundation. They have been members of the Board of Directors of the Seminole Wars Historic Foundation since 2002.

## **The Seminole Wars Foundation**

The Seminole Wars Foundation was founded in 1992 with the goal of preserving sites significant to the Seminole Wars, establishing educational programs to disseminate information about the wars, and to publish books and other matter pertaining to these important but little understood conflicts.

To that end, the Foundation has published seven books, several pamphlets, and its members have given numerous talks throughout the state. The Foundation has also preserved the site of Fort Dade, and been instrumental in the preservation of the sites of Camp Izard and Fort King.