

# Territorial Florida

## Second Seminole War, 1835-1842

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Castillo de San Marcos National  
Monument, St. Augustine, Florida



Seminole Indians, c. 1850

### Southern Migration

The original native inhabitants of Florida had all but disappeared by 1700. European diseases and the losses from nearly constant colonial warfare had reduced the population to a mere handful. Bands from various tribes in the southeastern United States pressured by colonial expansion began moving into the unoccupied lands in Florida. These primarily Creek tribes were called *Cimarrones* by the Spanish-- “wanderers” or “wild ones”. This is the probable origin of the name *Seminole*. Runaway slaves or “Maroons” also began making their way into Florida where they were regularly granted freedom by the Spanish. Many joined the Indian villages and integrated into the tribes.

### Early Conflict

During the American Revolution, the British, who controlled Florida from 1763 to 1784, recruited the Seminoles to raid rebel frontier settlements in Georgia. Both sides engaged in a pattern of border raiding and incursion which continued sporadically even after Florida returned to Spanish control after the war. Despite the formal treaties ending the war the Seminoles remained enemies of the new United States.

### Growing America

At the beginning of the 19th century the rapidly growing American population was pushing onto the frontiers in search of new land. Many eyes turned southward to the Spanish borderlands of Florida and Texas. Several attempts at *filibustering*, private or semi-official efforts to forcibly take territory, occurred along the frontiers. The Patriot War of 1812 was one such failed American effort aimed at taking East Florida. Hostilities continued during the War of 1812 as the British encouraged the Creek tribes to attack Americans. Andrew Jackson became a national hero in these years, defeating the Indians in the Creek War of 1813-1814, then the British at New Orleans in 1815, and finally leading an invasion in 1818 into the Spanish West Florida territory to destroy the Seminole strongholds along the Suwannee River. This became known as the First Seminole War. Despite the international repercussions arising from Jackson’s actions, the United States eventually was able to purchase Florida from Spain in 1821 for five million dollars. Andrew Jackson was appointed governor of the new territory.

### Trails of Tears

Land pressure and Indian trouble continued. Although an 1823 treaty with the Seminoles that reduced them to a reservation in Central Florida was negotiated, the provisions of the treaty were only slowly implemented, and the Seminoles were reluctant to move onto the reservation. As plantation agriculture grew in North Florida the runaway slave problem continued to aggravate negotiations.

In 1828 Andrew Jackson was elected President of the United States. As a security measure and a way of easing land hunger, the United States adopted a national policy of Indian removal, essentially trading lands in the west acquired by the Louisiana Purchase for those held in the east by the tribes. Originally a policy of encouragement and negotiation, with the passing of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 it became a policy of reluctant and often forcible emigration for tens of thousands of American Indians to the West. A new treaty was negotiated with some of the Seminole chiefs to remove them to the Creek reservations in Oklahoma. This split the tribe with some groups agreeing to go west and other refusing to abide by any treaty agreements. Internal tribal conflict, clashes with white settlers and clandestine aid from Spain quickly sparked armed conflict.

## The Second Seminole War

By December 1835 open warfare had erupted. Osceola, a respected Seminole warrior, and some of his followers killed the Indian Agent Wiley Thompson at Fort King (near present day Ocala) while 50 miles away in the area of present day Bushnell, a column of 108 soldiers led by Brevet Major Francis Dade was ambushed and wiped out almost to a man. A single surviving soldier made it back to Fort Brooke (present day Tampa) to tell of the battle. The Second Seminole War had begun.

The War lasted from 1835 until 1842. The Seminoles inaugurating a guerilla war raiding plantations along the rivers and coasts, displacing much of the civilian population, and damaging the economy. The United States countered with a massive military buildup of 10,000 regulars backed by 30,000 militia. Establishing a chain of forts across the state to protect supply lines, the Army sent expeditions against the Seminole villages, burning houses, running off cattle and destroying crops. The Seminoles attempted to negotiate. In 1837 Osceola and several others were captured under a flag of truce and imprisoned for a time in the Castillo de San Marcos, then known as Fort Marion. Threatened with starvation, the majority of Seminoles finally gave in, and fighting faded out by August of 1842. Approximately 200 to 300 Seminoles were left hiding in the Everglades, a nearly impenetrable, swampy, unexplored wasteland.

### Aftermath

Prior to the Vietnam War, the Second Seminole War was the longest conflict that the US Military would ever take part in. The war cost an untold number of Seminole lives, the lives of 1500 US Military and Militia, and approximately \$20,000,000. At the end, between 4000 and 5000 Seminoles had been gathered up and shipped west to Oklahoma. The War did accomplish the aim of opening up central Florida to white settlement, but it would be many years before any appreciable-sized population moved into the area. Cattle ranching became the major industry in the interior and Florida today remains the second largest cattle producing state in the country.

A third and final Seminole War broke out in 1855 and ended in 1858 just prior to the Civil War. This conflict began with an act of vandalism against an Indian camp by a US Army surveying team in the Everglades. They destroyed a prize garden and homestead of Chief Billy Bowlegs. The Seminoles retaliated, and the war was renewed. As with the Second Seminole War before it, the US Military left the Seminoles in the depths of the Everglades. Having never surrendered, the Florida Seminoles remain the only Native American Indian tribe yet to make a formal peace treaty with the United States, and they still refer to themselves as the "Unconquered People."

The Seminole Wars are a unique part of Florida's history. They were typical of the conflicts between colonists and Native Americans that would continue throughout the 19th century as American sought to accomplish the ideals of "Manifest Destiny", establishing a single nation from coast to coast. Fort Marion continued as a prisoner of war camp for captured Indian chiefs and their families during other conflicts with native peoples. In the 1850s members of the Plains tribes were held here, as were Geronimo's Apaches in the 1880s. Eventually, the Indian Wars came to a close, and nearly all Native American tribes were resettled onto reservations where many still remain.

