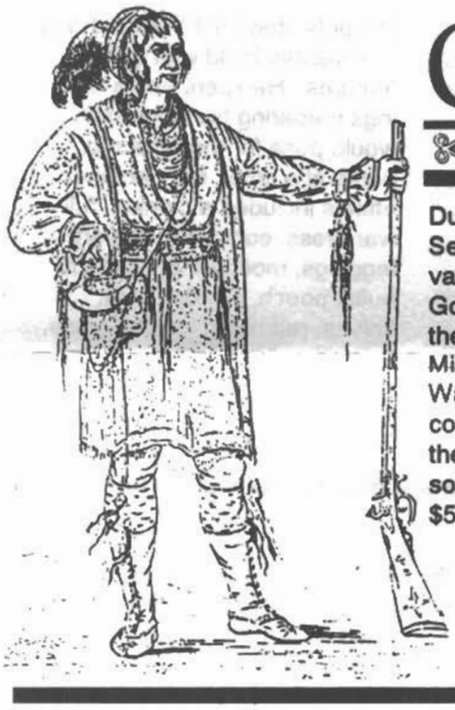
Fort Moultrie

Fort Sumter National Monument
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



OSCEOLA

During the 1830s Osceola led the Seminole people of Florida in a valiant attempt to resist U.S. Government efforts to relocate them to a reservation west of the Mississippi River. The Seminole Wars were the longest and costliest Indian wars fought by the United States with over 2,000 soldiers killed and an estimated $50,000,000 spent.

Osceola's death at Fort Moultrie in 1838 foreshadowed the outcome of their struggle and the majority of the Seminole people were eventually forced from their traditional homeland.

The word Osceola is a corrupted English pronunication of the Seminole name for Black Drink Singer. During purification rites, a Seminole warrior drinks a black liquid brewed from the leaves of holly bushes. The word "Asi-yoholo" or "Assin-ye-o-la" is the long, drawn-out cry that accompanied the ceremonial drinking.

Early Life

There is little known for sure about Osceola's early life. It is believed he was born in Alabama in 1804 and that his mother was a Creek Indian. Osceola was also of Scottish descent and his step-father was a man named Powell. As a child Osceola went by the name Billy Powell but years later he would sever those connections and claimed that, "no foreign blood runs in my veins".

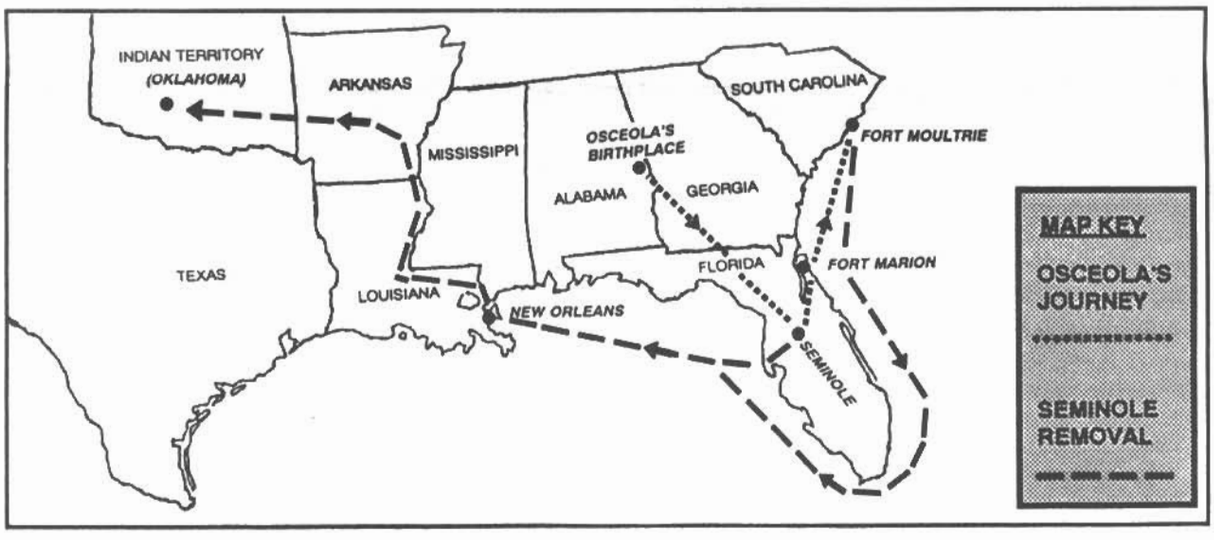
When he was nine years old, Osceola and his mother were one of many families displaced after the Creek War of 1813-1814. They moved from Alabama to Spanish-held Florida, homeland of the Seminole. The Seminole were one of the "Five Civilized Tribes" that included the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw and Chickasaw. The Seminole were a people made up of refugees from several southeastern tribes and runaway black slaves. The name Seminole comes from the mispronounced Spanish word "cimmarones" meaning wild.

Indian Resistance

In 1823 some of the Seminole agreed to live on a reservation in central Florida. By the 1830s pressure from white settlers convinced the U.S. Government to attempt removing all of the Seminole further west.

Osceola stood out as a strident defender of his people and became viewed as the leading Seminole voice for resistance. Beginning in 1835 with successes during the Second Seminole War, Osceola gained fame as a fierce and cunning fighter.

In October 1837, while negoiating under a white flag of truce near St. Augustine, Florida, Osceola was taken prisioner. While Osceola's capture was cheered there was also public outcry at the dubious tactics employed by the army. He was imprisoned at nearby Fort Marion under the guardianship of Captain Pitcairn Morrison of the 4th U.S. Infantry. In December 1837, after several prisoners escaped, Osceola and 237 of his people were transferred to Fort Moultrie in South Carolina.



Osceola at Fort Moultrie

The Seminoles landed on Sullivan's Island on New Year's Day 1838 causing a sensation in Charleston's social circles. Osceola was not the typical prisoner. He was not locked in a cell but instead allowed liberty of the fort and received numerous visitors. On January 6th he attended a play called "Honeymoon" at a downtown Charleston theater.

Upon hearing the news of Osceola's capture, the famed artist of Indian life and customs, George Catlin, sought a commission from the War Department to obtain portraits of the Seminole leaders. Catlin was only one of several artists present but he was Osceola's favorite. Catlin was immediately attracted to Osceola's individuality and described him as "a most extraordinary man ... a cunning and restless spirit." Many evenings, Osceola spoke to Catlin about his people's continued struggle against removal from Florida.

Osceola stood 5' 8" tall and was of a slender build with delicate features. He spent entire mornings preparing his attire and would pose for the artists for hours at a time. His personal effects included a blanket; full war dress, consisting of shirt, leggings, moccasins, war belt, bullet pouch, powder horn, knives, red paint, looking glass, knife sheath, turbans and three ostrich plumes; a small whalebone cane and silver spurs, gorgets and beads.

End of the Journey

By the end of January Osceola's health had quickly faded. Dr. Weedon, who had attended the Seminoles from Florida, diagnosed the warrior's illness as a throat infection resulting from a recurrence of malaria. Near the end, Osceola would not allow further help from the white doctors and sought comfort from only his fellow Seminole healer/prophet.

Though unable to speak, Osceola gestured through hand signs to summon his two wives and children, all his chiefs and the military officers. He lay upon the floor attired in his full war dress and then proceeded to paint half of his face, neck, wrists and the back of his hands red. He shook hands with Dr. Weedon and the officers. Then he was laid upon his bed where he placed his knife across his breast. Death came for Osceola at 6:20 p.m. on January 30, 1838.

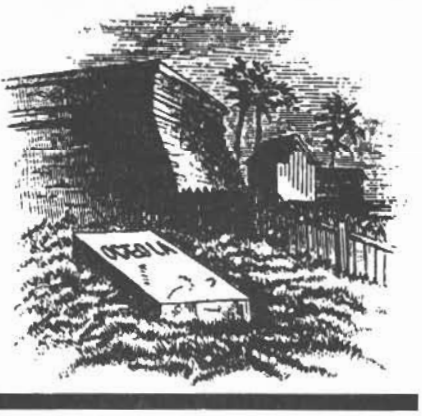
At the end of February, the Seminoles remaining at Fort Moultrie were taken to New Orleans where they began the journey to their new reservation. From 1835 to 1842 over 4,000 Seminoles were removed to Indian Territory.

Burial

"... [T]he body was interred, and a military salute fired over the grave. At the same time, the ramparts of the fort, which overlooked the spot, were crowded with the men, women and children of his tribe, who seemed to be much affected and pleased with the honors paid to their chief".

Dr. Strobel
Attending physician at Osceola's death

Osceola's grave was enclosed by a wooden paling and the marble stone placed over the site was inscribed with the words, "Patriot and Warrior". During the 1880s the paling was replaced by the present iron railing and in 1969 a new gravestone was installed. The original gravestone is on exhibit in the Fort Moultrie Visitor Center.



Shrouded in Mystery

Osceola's request that his bones be permitted to rest in peace was not honored. Though the reason why may never be known, Dr. Weedon removed Osceola's head prior to the burial. Scientific research appeared to be his motivation but it is interesting to note that the doctor's brother-in-law, General Wiley Thompson was killed by Osceola. The physician gave the head to his son-in-law who in turn presented it to Dr. Valentine Mott, founder of the New York University Medical School. The head was displayed in the school's medical museum until 1866 when it was allegedly lost in a fire.

In 1966 evidence was found that someone had been digging at the gravesite. A National Park Service archeological dig found that the grave had not been disturbed. The investigation confirmed the story of Osceola's missing head but also raised another mystery. A second coffin was found at the site. It was the remains of an infant, perhaps a newborn. Some speculate that one of Osceola's wives miscarried over the trauma of her husband's death.

The lack of information on Osceola's life and the fact of his untimely death combine to make his story seem more legendary than real. Though much about Osceola's life will remain a mystery, his role as defender of his people is undeniable.

Fort Moultrie is a unit of Fort Sumter National Monument and is administered by the National Park Service. For additional information, write to Superintendent, 1214 Middle Street, Sullivan's Island, SC 29482.