

*the Battle of*

# OKEE CHOB EE



A RE-ENACTMENT OF FLORIDA'S FIERCEST SEMINOLE WAR BATTLE  
FEBRUARY 24TH & 25TH 2018

# *Unfinished Business:*

## The Okeechobee Region in the Third Seminole War

The Battle of Okeechobee on December 25, 1837 marked a turning point in the Second Seminole War, but it was certainly not the end of the conflict. When the war was declared over four-and-a-half years later, peace came to the peninsula, but only temporarily. The ultimate fate of the Florida Seminole had yet to be determined.

At the end of the war there were as many as four hundred Seminole still in Florida. Most of them lived south of Lake Okeechobee in the Everglades and Big Cypress, spoke the Mikasuki language, and were led by Abiaki (Sam Jones) and Holata Micco, better known as Billy Bowlegs. Abiaki was an elder and tended to avoid contact with the whites, while Bowlegs (whose name was a corruption of his ancestral name Bolek) was more outgoing and thus engaged in most of the tribe's diplomacy. Because of this, whites considered him the ruler of all the Seminole, but tribal politics was much more complicated than that, and his power was limited. Whatever the case, Billy Bowlegs was the face of the Seminole people, both in peace and in war.

To the north of Lake Okeechobee dwelt another group of Indians, distinct from their brethren to the south, yet erroneously considered by whites as part of the Seminole tribe. These people, less than a hundred strong, were descendants of Muskogee-speaking Creeks who had fled the Alabama/Georgia area at the end of the Creek War in 1814. Although they cooperated closely with the Seminole against their common

American enemy, differences in language, location, and attitudes toward the whites distinguished them as a separate entity. When fighting did eventually break out, it was these Creek bands who most effectively took the war to the surrounding white settlements.

No treaty was signed at the end of the Second Seminole War in August of 1842. A simple agreement was reached whereby the government said that if the Seminole remained peaceful, they could continue to live on a reservation that included nearly all of southwest Florida, including areas between the Peace and Kissimmee Rivers where most of the Creeks lived. For seven years the peace held, until a group of five outlaw Indians committed murders at Fort Pierce and at a trading post on the Peace River. Anxious to maintain the peace, Bowlegs had the perpetrators hunted down and turned over to the white authorities. It was a brave gesture, but it did the Seminole little good. Fearful



“BILLY BOWLEGS” AND HIS RETINUE.

whites and speculators who held dreams of draining the Everglades and opening it for settlement began to pressure their political leaders to complete the removal of the Seminole to the Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma.

For five years the government applied pressure to the Seminole, first through friendly persuasion, then with bribes and intimidation, and finally with the buildup of a military presence. Bowlegs and a delegation were even taken on a trip to New York and Washington to impress them with the power and majesty of the United States government. None of the attempts proved



successful. The Seminole steadfastly refused to give up their homes and their way of life. Finally, in December 1855, the Seminole reacted to the pressure and ambushed an army patrol in the Big Cypress. What would become known as the Third Seminole War had begun.

Because Billy Bowlegs and the majority of the Seminole lived in the Big Cypress and Everglades, most of the army's attention was directed in that quarter. For their part, Bowlegs and Abiaki fought a defensive war, only engaging the army when it was to their advantage or when their homes were threatened. As in the previous war, their strategy was to outlast the will of the American people to make war on them. To the north, among the Creeks, the situation was different. Their homes were closer to the white settlements, and their animosity toward Americans was more deep-seated. In the early months of the war they went on the offensive, conducting daring raids at Sarasota, Bradenton, Alafia, and as far north as Dade City. The Creek offensive finally ended in June 1856 after a string of small but desperate battles near Fort Meade that left a number of warriors dead, including their leader, Ossen Tustennuggee.

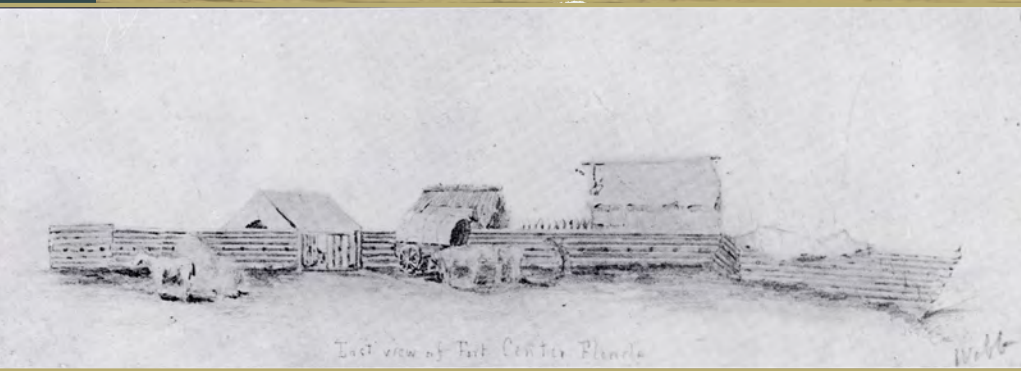
The success of the Creeks forced the army to shift some resources north. Besides forts as far north as Orlando, on the east coast, and along the Peace River, three of the most important posts were Fort Kissimmee, about forty miles north of Lake Okeechobee on the Kissimmee River, Fort Center on Fisheating

Creek at the west side of the lake, and Fort McRae on the east side of the lake. From these posts the army hoped to control and capture the scattered Creek bands who inhabited the area.

*The landscape back then was much different than it is today.*

There was no dike around Lake Okeechobee, the Kissimmee was a slow, meandering river that hadn't been dredged and straightened, and no massive drainage projects had removed the water from the surrounding swamplands. For anyone to get around, be it soldier or Seminole, boats and canoes were a necessity. The Seminole had been building sturdy dugouts for years and were well supplied, but the army was forced to import shallow-draft vessels from elsewhere in the nation, going as far as to send a pair of expensive copper boats to Fort Center for use on the lake. Special volunteer "Boat Companies" travelled up and down the Kissimmee and its tributaries in search of small camps or farms, intent on capturing the Indians or starving them out.

It was harsh duty, especially for soldiers who were unfamiliar with boat handling. Lt. Alexander Webb described an expedition out onto Lake Okeechobee from Fort Center. "A storm arose, and, after pulling against it for three and one-half hours without gaining a foot, we tried to put in to a point which appeared to afford a landing. After pulling a long time, we reached a point where we



rested for one hour. A second attempt to move N.E. proved ineffectual, nor could we point to Fort McRae. Finally, at 2 p.m., we rigged up a square sail and let drive before the wind, the men being too exhausted to row. But our mast broke and we were driven ashore and had to labor hard for two hours to get off. The wind drove the boats about as if they were shells, and oars were ineffectual. The men here got into water up to their armpits. Driven along the coast for six hours, night overtook us, driving us ashore a second time nearly six miles from the creek. Here we lay, thumping on the bottom at each wave all night.”

*In the area along the Kissimmee, the army and Florida Volunteers scored small but devastating successes against the Seminole.*

Charging a wooded hammock, two nervous young volunteers saw a pair of Indians and opened fire, killing them both. One of those slain was a boy of about eleven or twelve and the other a young warrior between sixteen and eighteen. Not far away, a girl of about twelve was captured. In a running pursuit near Lake Istokpoga that covered five days and perhaps fifty miles, Capt. Abner Johnston’s company killed one warrior and

two women, along with capturing five women and children. The Creeks, with such a small population, could ill afford to lose so much of the next generation.

*The Kissimmee River could be both beautiful and intimidating, depending on a person’s perspective.*

Army Surgeon Thomas McParlin noted, “The river flows along in a clear current by a succession of wooded knolls thickly overgrown with a luxuriant underwood among the stately oaks rising 150 feet in height.” Volunteer Andrew Canova saw it differently. “I had heard of alligators—of rusty old monsters, equal to trees in size, and vicious as wolves—but I was not prepared for the sight that met my gaze, as our boats passed down the Kissimmee. To say that they were lying on the banks as thick as leaves in an autumn forest, would be scarcely an exaggeration.” Thick mats of vegetation known as water-lettuce slowed the boats’ progress, and getting out of the vessels had its own difficulties. Canova reported, “The saw-grass was much higher than our heads, and the ground very boggy; we had to step from one fern ‘tussock’ to another in order to keep above water; and anyone failing to gain foothold was precipitated up to his waist in the mud.”

The Creeks were scattered and in hiding, but the army and volunteers kept up the pressure. Capt. William Kendrick came upon a small party of Indians and reported, “We fired at them as they ran through the thickest swamp I ever saw; killed one, a young warrior about twenty-five years old, and captured one child between three and four years old. We got their plunder, which consisted in cooking utensils, axes, hoes, bear skins, knives, clothing etc., etc., etc.” Most of the Indians had escaped but were now without nearly everything they needed for daily survival.

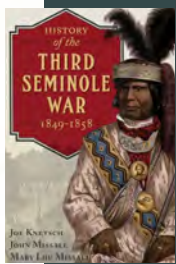
To the south the pressure was also unrelenting. Expeditions from Fort Myers travelled south by foot and horseback into the Big Cypress and by boat into the Everglades. The landscape was mapped and thoroughly examined, and every Indian trail was followed, often exposing hidden villages and fields. At one such discovery the officer in charge reported, “There were about thirty lodges and about 40 acres of lands cleared and in cultivation. Large quantities of pumpkin, potatoes, peas, corn and rice was found. The corn, peas, & rice, hid away carefully in houses built off in the swamp, the trails leading to which were carefully concealed. The pumpkins were in the fields, and the ground was literally covered with them of all ages and sizes. Even the trees were full, the vines having run over them. The ground was full of potatoes. Everything was destroyed that could be.”

Throughout southern Florida, the Seminole were running out of supplies and places to hide. Near the end of 1857 the last, indecisive battle was fought. With his people starving and in need of shelter, Billy Bowlegs realized

the futility of keeping up the fight. Cautiously responding to flags of truce, he at last came in to negotiate the surrender of his band. In May 1858 he and more than a hundred followers boarded ship for their new homes in the west.

Yet there were still Seminole in Florida. Bowlegs had been leader of a little more than half of the Indians in the Big Cypress and Everglades, and many, especially those in Abiaki's band, refused to turn themselves in. For its part, the government didn't really care. In their eyes, Billy Bowlegs had been the prize, and with his removal the government could claim victory. In a way, his surrender allowed the other Seminole bands to retain their Florida homelands.

Farther north, in the Okeechobee/Kissimmee area, the remnants of the Creeks began to gather, warily wondering if the peace would last. It did, and in the twentieth century the government established the Brighton Reservation on the northwest side of Lake Okeechobee, where the majority of the Creek descendants live to this day and thrive as cattle ranchers and agriculturalists. In 1957 the federally recognized Seminole Tribe of Florida was formed, of which the Creeks are a part of, along with the majority of the Mikasuki speaking Indians from South Florida. The Seminole's armed struggle against the United States lasted over forty years, but through it all they persevered and refused to give up the things that were important to them. Their "unconquered" spirit lives on, part of a proud, but tragic, legacy of Florida history.



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## A Valuable Learning Experience

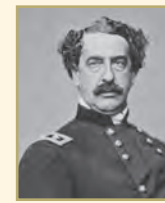
Many of the junior officers who served as captains and lieutenants against the Seminole soon found themselves as generals leading large armies on both sides of the Civil War. Among those who fought together at Gettysburg were the following:



### Major General Oliver Otis Howard

was sent to Florida in 1857. A deeply religious man, he considered resigning his commission to take

up the ministry, but gave up the idea when the Civil War began. He was given the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of Fair Oaks, but wounds received at the battle led to the amputation of his right arm. Although his performance at Gettysburg was controversial, by the end of the war he was one of Gen. Sherman's most trusted officers. Howard later served against the Indians in the West, and was one of the founders of Howard University.



### Major General Abner Doubleday

is most famously known for the myth that he invented the game of baseball. After serving in the

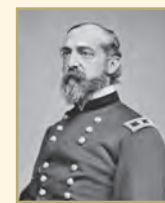
Mexican War and the Third Seminole War, he was transferred to Fort Sumter at Charleston, SC, where he had the distinction of being the first person to fire a cannon in defense of the Union. Temporarily in command at the beginning of the Battle of Gettysburg, he was outnumbered and forced to retreat through the town, setting up his defense on Cemetery Ridge. For the remainder of the war he served primarily at Washington, where he and his wife were close friends of the Lincolns.



### Major General Alexander Webb

was sent to Florida soon after graduating from West Point in 1855. He earned fame and a Medal of

Honor at Gettysburg for rallying the troops by placing himself in an exposed position during Pickett's Charge, calmly leaning on his sword and smoking a cigar. At the Battle of Spotsylvania he was hit by a bullet that passed from his right eye and out his ear, but was able to return to duty about six months later. Webb would later serve as president of the City College of New York from 1869 to 1902.



### Major General George Gordon Meade

was an 1835 graduate of West Point but resigned his commission the next year, after service in

the Second Seminole War. Meade reentered the army in 1842 and fought with distinction in the Mexican War. Working primarily as an engineer, he designed lighthouses in New Jersey and Florida, and when panic broke out after Indian attacks in Florida in 1849, he built a string of forts across the peninsula, including Fort Meade by the Peace River. Fame came after his skillful command at the Battle of Gettysburg, but for much of the remainder of the Civil War he was overshadowed as second in command to Ulysses S. Grant.