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DEATH IN THE LAND OF FLOWERS:
ENVIRONMENT AS ENEMY IN THE SECOND SEMINOLE WAR

by

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B.A. Florida State University, 2002

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Florida's natural environment was one of the United States Army's most formidable enemies during the Second Seminole War (1835–42), and that environmental factors, more than hostilities from Native peoples themselves, led the United States to abandon the War. Many White soldiers from the North were unprepared to cope with the environmental challenges posed by Florida. In order to build a foundation for this argument, the thesis examines how previous newcomers to Florida dealt with the environment, from the original First Peoples who arrived several thousand years ago, to European explorer/colonizers, to White Americans in the decades preceding the Seminole conflicts. After establishing some basic history and context for the War, the thesis then turns to examples of naïve Romantic illusions that some soldiers carried into the War, which made them even more mentally unprepared. This Romantic outlook amplified the disillusionment, dread, and loss of morale among soldiers from the ground up. By examining letters, speeches, reports, and editorials from various Senators, Congressmen, Presidents, Generals, and journalists, the thesis demonstrates that the natural environment, including its inherent diseases, caused far more damage to the Army than the Seminoles did. Conversely, the very same obstacles of heat and water that plagued the Army were used advantageously by the Seminoles. Using new data that has been compiled by researchers in the Veterans Legacy Program, this thesis shows the true depth and consequences of the environmental challenges of the War in ways that have eluded previous historians. Data previously obtainable only through meticulous reading can now be absorbed visually, allowing researchers to juxtapose ideas in new ways. This data allows scholars to “see” the true scope of the environmental impact upon the troops,

including the impacts of disease. Though some historians, most notably John T. Mahon and C.S. Monaco, have mentioned Florida's natural environment as a factor in the Seminole Wars, no prominent historian has submitted a lengthy, extended analysis of this idea. That is what I hope to add to the conversation.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Florida's natural environment has long plagued Europeans, from the original *conquistadors* to today's incredulous tourists who emerge from hermetically-sealed airplanes into Orlando's unfathomable humidity. For those who are unprepared, Florida's climate can be shockingly hellish. Not only the temperature, but the insects, wild animals, and frequent storms combine to make living in Florida a challenge even today. Before the late nineteenth century, no one in Florida had electricity, let alone air-conditioning.¹ Yet the place contained an undeniable natural beauty. It was a unique mixture of the miserable and the sublime.

It was also the setting of the United States' longest and most costly Native American conflict, the Second Seminole War, which lasted from 1835 to 1842.² This thesis will argue that Florida's natural environment played a major role in the outcome of the Second Seminole War. In fact, the environment might have been a bigger threat to U.S. soldiers than actual combat with the Natives. Many Seminole War historians have mentioned environmental factors, sometimes at length—especially the Seminoles' strategic use of the Everglades toward the War's end—but no prominent historian has explicitly attributed the war's outcome to the environment. My thesis contends that the United States ended the war largely because of environmental factors. Using digital data unavailable to previous historians, this thesis differs from other studies in the field, not

¹ Raymond Arsenault, "The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture," *The Journal of Southern History*, Nov., 1984, Vol. 50, No. 4, 597-628.

² Many Seminoles do not recognize the distinctions between the three official U.S. Seminole Wars, and instead view the conflicts as one continuous war of removal that lasted throughout the century. For more on Seminole perspectives, see Susan Miller's *Coacoochee's Bones*; as well as the official Seminole tribal website, www.semtribe.com.

only in its utilization of such data, but in the way it juxtaposes this information alongside the seemingly unrelated topic of Romanticism to make new connections regarding the mindset of troops during the Second Seminole War.

The second chapter of the thesis will set the stage for an examination of human interaction with Florida's environment. It will discuss the original Native American inhabitants and their relationship to the land, as well as the reactions of Europeans who arrived later, such as the members of the disastrous Narvaez expedition. By the eighteenth century, the original inhabitants—Timucuan and other pre-Seminole tribes—had vanished, leaving a polyethnic mixture populating the peninsula. This population was comprised of scattered remnants of other tribes who had resisted relocation, as well as fugitive slaves. In the early nineteenth century, white settlers also began to cultivate the outer fringes of the peninsula and to develop immunities to the diseases that would later plague white soldiers who came from elsewhere to fight in the Seminole Wars. Of course the natural landscape also had begun to change: parts of it that had grown back to wilderness after the original inhabitants were displaced, were cleared once again for agriculture. This chapter will culminate in a discussion of botanist William Bartram's effusive praise of Florida—praise which would later influence a generation of young soldiers in the Seminole Wars.

The third chapter will provide a brief overview of the Second Seminole War, including an introduction to many of the major players, themes, and locales of the war. This chapter should provide context for subsequent chapters which will refer to these persons and events. This chapter also briefly discusses factors such as politics, slavery,

and the economy; and introduces the settler-colonist mindset that permeated U.S. society at the time.

The fourth chapter will examine the beliefs and expectations of young U.S. soldiers. Influenced by Bartram and by Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley, a generation of white men entered into combat against the Seminoles with what historian Alice Conklin would later dub “a civilizing mission,” i.e. the belief that white expansion was synonymous with so-called “progress.” This paternalistic mindset was also naïve; soldiers who had expected to find an orderly, Edenic landscape peopled with animalistic “noble savages” instead found a cruel, miserable, and unforgiving environment filled with recalcitrant Natives who knew the land much better than the whites did, and used that knowledge to their advantage. The harsh climate shattered many soldiers’ idealistic illusions, and fostered bitterness and resentment from the ground troops all the way up to the command level.³

Continuing this theme, chapter five will examine many of the elements soldiers on the ground had to contend with, including heat, cold, wet, storms, droughts, insects (and the fevers they brought), wild animals, and more. Letters and journals from these soldiers reveal how desperately unhappy many of them were, and chronicle ways in which they tried to escape their duty, by requesting lengthy furloughs, or even by suicide. This section will provide a groundwork to demonstrate how Florida’s environment led to a sense of fatalism among soldiers and officers alike.

The sixth chapter will discuss how the very same environmental conditions that plagued U.S. soldiers actually benefited the Seminoles. Perhaps no factor was more

³ Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

important than water: the Seminoles possessed knowledge of its depth, frequency, cycles, and patterns; the all-white U.S. Army did not have that same knowledge. Understanding Florida's "liquid landscape" (to borrow a phrase from English professor and environmental historian Michele Navakas) was key to the Seminoles' ability to avoid confrontation and/or capture.⁴ It is just one example of how the natural climate helped the Seminole tribe to remain officially unconquered.⁵

The penultimate chapter will analyze the debate within the government regarding the Seminole War, particularly regarding environmental factors. This section will also examine the public discourse surrounding the war, including newspaper articles and editorials of the time. After the previous chapters have documented reactions of human beings to Florida's environment, established a mood of childlike romanticism among common soldiers (a mood that often evaporated once they arrived in the territory), described nearly-unbearable environmental hardships, and evaluated how the Natives used the land to their advantage, the essay will now shift to command-level evidence: letters, journals, and papers from prominent politicians at the time (such as Presidents Martin Van Buren and John Tyler) as well as important generals (Thomas Jesup, Winfield Scott, Zachary Taylor, William T. Sherman).

The thesis will conclude by evaluating these various ideas and factors in terms of their juxtaposition. The cumulative effects of naiveté at both the command and ground levels, difficult terrain, Native mastery of that terrain, infectious disease, and other

⁴ Michele Currie Navakas, *Liquid Landscape: Geography and Settlement at the Edge of Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

⁵ This thesis uses the terms "Seminoles" and "Natives" interchangeably, with the understanding that both terms, in this context, refer to an ethnically heterogeneous people whose backgrounds may have been Creek, Miccosukee, Apalachee, Cherokee, African, or even white; but who identified primarily as Native American Seminoles.

specific environmental challenges led the United States to end the war without a full victory, allowing for a scenario wherein both the United States and the Seminoles could claim to have “won.”

CHAPTER TWO: FIRST CONTACT: OUTSIDERS WHO ARRIVED IN FLORIDA

This chapter will examine various hardships experienced by newcomers to the land now known as Florida. It begins with descriptions from an economic historian and a naturalist, both of whom identify pre-European North America as a vast wilderness; their notions are undercut, however, by the assertions of environmental historian William Cronon, who maintains that pre-Columbian Native peoples altered the natural landscape, sometimes drastically, and that it was far from being a wilderness.⁶ Cronon's research is supported by subsequent work from Charles C. Mann and Jared Diamond.⁷ The chapter then segues into the challenges these Native peoples must have faced, going all the way back to the First Peoples who inhabited the peninsula. Finally, after briefly detailing the disappearance of these tribes due to contact with Europeans, the chapter ends by describing the contrasting experiences of two white travelers in the Florida territory: would-be conquistador Cabeza de Vaca, and 18th-century botanist William Bartram.

*

John Steele Gordon, in *An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power*, describes the experiences of Europeans arriving for the first time in what they perceived as a "New World." Though not writing about Florida specifically, Gordon provides a good illustration of the awe in which some Europeans must certainly have beheld the American continent. "The land that would become the United States

⁶ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang Books, 1983).

⁷ Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005); Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

presented a world that was at once hauntingly familiar and quite unlike the one in which the first European explorers had grown up. Western Europe was a world of dense population ... limited wildlife ... and carefully husbanded forests.” America, on the other hand, was a “wilderness,” and “[t]his wilderness was a forest larger than all of western Europe, broken only by the occasional beaver meadow, bog, swamp, rock outcropping, mountain bald, and the slash-and-burn fields of Indians.”⁸

Naturalist writer Bill Bryson describes the continent similarly, noting that when Europeans first arrived in North America, around 950 million acres of woodland occupied the land that would become the lower forty-eight states. “[It] was part of an immense, unbroken canopy stretching ... from the shores of the Atlantic to the distant grasslands of the Missouri River.”⁹ Bryson, like Gordon, also mentions mountain-balds: “No one knows why the balds are there, or how long they have existed,” he says. “For unknown numbers of years they were used first by Indians and then by European settlers for grazing summer livestock” Now these mountain-balds are becoming overgrown and starting to disappear; Bryson argues that it is the responsibility of the U.S. Park Service to preserve them.¹⁰ If negligence is causing them to disappear, then it seems logical to surmise that Native peoples must have created or at least maintained them. Thus the North American “wilderness” was not as untouched as it may have seemed to European arrivals.

This mountain-bald example reinforces the message of William Cronon’s *Changes in the Land*, which argues that Native Americans exercised much more control

⁸ John Steele Gordon, *An Empire of Wealth: The Epic History of American Economic Power* (New York: Harper, 2004), 3-4.

⁹ Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods* (Ontario: Doubleday Canada Ltd., 1997), 46.

¹⁰ Bryson, *Walk*, 98.

over the natural landscape than traditional historians have given them credit. Though writing primarily about New England, Cronon's thesis can be applied across both American continents. From the tip of Patagonia to the remote villages of Yellowknife, Native peoples adapted to their respective environments for thousands of years; certainly they did not survive all that time without harnessing or controlling the land.¹¹

Not much is known about the original inhabitants of the Florida peninsula. Most archaeologists agree that human beings occupied the North American continent at least twenty thousand years ago, and perhaps as far back as forty thousand years ago.¹² Evidence suggests that relatively advanced civilizations existed in Florida at least five thousand years ago.¹³ Native American historian Jake Page describes the pre-Seminole Native peoples of Florida as having a "highly developed society" with one tribe containing perhaps as many as ten thousand people. Page notes that this was "unusual for any society without an agricultural base," but it was possible because of Florida's abundant natural resources. Original inhabitants of the region must have encountered a "vast flat realm where freshwater flowed in a stately and eternal sheet across the land through cypress groves and endless stands of saw grass." Fish and shellfish were abundant, and according to Page, the local tribes could claim the title of "the most advanced fishing societies ever known."¹⁴

As with the New England tribes described by Cronon, these Florida tribes also used and altered the land. They cleared trees and burned out canoes that could hold up to

¹¹ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 7.

¹² Jake Page, *In the Hands of the Great Spirit: The 20,000-Year History of American Indians* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

¹³ Jerald T. Milanich, "The Timucua Indians of Northern Florida and Southern Georgia," *Indians of the Greater Southeast: Historical Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).

¹⁴ Page, *Spirit*, 123-4.

forty people. They constructed huge burial mounds that overtook certain islands. And they dug canals to connect natural inland waterways. Some of these canals were thirty feet wide, enough for two lanes of canoe traffic; one canal stretched for seven miles.¹⁵ Certainly this correlates with Cronon's thesis that Native Americans did not co-exist with the natural environment as peacefully and sustainably as has been assumed by previous historians. Whatever challenges these First Peoples faced as they spread into the American southeast, they adapted gradually over thousands of years to not only survive, but to manipulate the environment to their advantage. Some of the tribes that flourished in the Florida peninsula were the Timucua, Calusa, Apalachee, Yamasee, and others.¹⁶

¹⁵ Page, *Spirit*, 124.

¹⁶ Map of Native American tribes in Florida: <http://bakerblockmuseum.org/nahistory.htm>.



Figure 1 Map of the Florida peninsula showing some of the pre-Seminole tribes and their respective territories

Source: Baker Block Museum, <http://bakerblockmuseum.org/nahistory.htm>

Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas in 1492 sparked an Age of Exploration for Western Europe. Throughout the sixteenth century, thousands of sailors, slavers, colonizers, and *conquistadors* traveled from Spain, Portugal, France, and England to the so-called New World. The results for Native Americans were largely disastrous. Besides the deliberate violence of explorers like Columbus, Francisco Pizarro, Hernan Cortés, and many others, the Natives had to contend with mass deaths from diseases for which they were not prepared.

By the early sixteenth century the Florida peninsula had been effectively depopulated by sickness and genocide due to contact with European explorers. Epidemics “swept away” the Timucuan people. Smallpox wiped out the remaining Catawba Indians. According to historian J. Leitch Wright, the “Apalachees and Yamasees in 1700 still reckoned their populations in the thousands, yet before the century was out both tribes had become extinct.”¹⁷ Those First Peoples who had cleared trees and built mounds and dug canals were gone, and in their absence, the Florida wilderness crept back in. Once again the peninsula became a formidable backwoods—now especially to European explorers.

One example of the hardship suffered by Europeans in Florida can be found in the story of the Narvaez Expedition. Many schoolchildren learn about the harsh conditions at Jamestown or Plymouth Rock. Perhaps fewer learn about Narvaez, a story that demonstrates how harsh Florida’s natural climate can be. In 1527, six hundred Spaniards arrived in Florida on an exploratory mission under Captain Panfilo de Narvaez, “a red-

¹⁷ J. Leitch Wright, *The Only Land They Knew: The Tragic Story of the American Indians in the Old South* (New York: The Free Press, 1981).

haired, one-eyed man with a tall, powerful frame.”¹⁸ Nearly a decade later, four survivors staggered into Mexico City—Narvaez not among them—having traveled mostly on foot across the American south after a series of disasters.

Sailor and diarist Cabeza de Vaca was one of these survivors. His writings give us specific examples of European hardship in Florida. Early in his journal, he describes some of his crew’s difficulties, including terrain that “was difficult to cross and strange in appearance, because it had very great forests, with wondrously tall trees. So many had fallen that our path was obstructed and we had to make long detours, which caused a great deal of trouble.”¹⁹

De Vaca refers to Florida as “the land into which our sins had placed us.” He writes at length about difficult lake crossing. One particular lake’s “water came up to our chests and had a great many fallen trees in it. When we reached the middle, a number of Indians assailed us from behind” This scene serves as harbinger, or template, for the white versus Native warfare that would unfold over the coming centuries. Exactly three hundred years later, white soldiers, exhausted from long marches, were *still* wading through Florida swamps and getting ambushed by Natives.²⁰

Not surprisingly, de Vaca and his crew got sick. He reports that one-third of his crew became “dangerously” ill. He does not elaborate on the nature of this illness. It may have been a measles outbreak, common among Native populations during the centuries of European takeover. It may have been a mosquito-borne disease such as malaria or yellow fever. It may have been dysentery or even cholera as a result of drinking stagnant or

¹⁸ Edwin C. McReynolds, *The Seminoles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 4.

¹⁹ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Shipwrecked Men* (London: Penguin, 2007), 18.

²⁰ C.S. Monaco, *The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018).

contaminated water. In any case, all these possibilities once again serve as predictors of what would happen in the future, when white soldiers attempted to displace Native Americans from the Florida peninsula in the nineteenth century.²¹

Given his experiences, it is no surprise that de Vaca called Florida “a land so foreign and evil,” and said that if his crew stayed there, “death would be our only prospect.” But he also found beauty there. He describes ancient virgin forests with a certain reverence; he mentions fields of corn and pumpkins, as well as the flower-filled meadows that gave Florida its name. He was also fascinated by the diversity of wildlife: deer, bears, rabbits, panthers (which he refers to as “lions”), and a creature de Vaca had never seen before, “one that carries its young in a pouch on its belly”—North America’s only native marsupial, the opossum.²² These themes and observations—misery comingled with beauty and fascination—would reappear in the writings of white or European visitors three hundred years later.

One final example of difficulties faced by newcomers to Florida is the experience of botanist William Bartram. Commissioned by a London doctor to take a biological survey of Florida, Bartram arrived in 1774, when anti-colonial rumblings were starting to take shape in the American northeast, and when Florida was still considered a wilderness frontier. He would publish an exuberantly descriptive account of his travels, which encompassed much of the southeast United States, almost twenty years later, in 1791.²³ Besides being a meticulous botanist, Bartram was a prose stylist whose flowery naturalist writings were influential in the Romantic literary movement, inspiring poets like

²¹ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 139.

²² De Vaca, *Shipwrecked*, 21–28.

²³ Francis Harper, “Introduction,” *The Travels of William Bartram: Naturalist’s Edition* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), i.

Wordsworth and Coleridge. The latter directly cited Bartram as the inspiration for two of his greatest works, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan.”²⁴ Those works would later inform the aesthetic values of a generation of men who served in the Seminole wars. We will return to the idea of romanticism in a future chapter; we mention it here merely to illustrate the cycle of thought that shapes so much of our perception of history. In this case, a verbose, Romantic botanist influenced some epic poets; those poets in turn influenced a generation of young white men, who again ventured into the same geographical place the botanist had been, but this time shaped by his literary and naturalist pretensions. It is *their* letters and journals—the writings of these everyday soldiers and servicemen—that provide windows of knowledge for us today. Thus it seems relevant to understand where, when, and how their perceptions were shaped, for they indeed shape our own.

Bartram’s descriptions echo de Vaca’s, but with a more optimistic or positive perspective regarding Florida’s natural environment. The differences in their respective missions undoubtedly played a part in this. Bartram notes the difficult river crossings, but with more fascination than annoyance at the complex system of swamps and waterways. He tends to focus on Florida’s beauty, mentioning its “gay lawns and green meadows” where “vegetation, in perfection, appeared with all her attractive charms, breathing fragrance everywhere.”²⁵ He also appreciates “trees of vast growth” that comprised “the most magnificent forest I have ever seen ... Describing the magnitude and grandeur of these trees would, I fear, fail of credibility.”²⁶

²⁴ Harper, “Introduction,” ix-xv.

²⁵ William Bartram, *The Travels of William Bartram* (Documenting the American South, 2001: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/bartram/bartram.html>), 34.

²⁶ Bartram, *Travels*, 37.

Perhaps most attention-grabbing are his anecdotes about wildlife. Like de Vaca, he mentions bears, wolves, snakes, and “tygers,” which we now know as Florida panthers. “They are a mischievous animal,” he says, “and prey on calves [and] young colts.”²⁷ He even describes an instance in which he and a wild cat were stalking the same deer. The situation was resolved when a fellow hunter fired a shot, scaring away both animals. Bartram presents Florida’s teeming wildlife as a positive thing.

He saves his most florid Romantic prose for the alligator: “At the approach of day, the dreaded voice of the alligators shook the isle, and resounded along the neighbouring coasts, proclaiming the appearance of the glorious sun.” A fight between two gators is narrated like a scene from a fantasy novel: “Clouds of smoke issued from his dilated nostrils The earth trembles with his thunder.” Needless to say, alligators do not breathe smoke or shake the ground like *Jurassic Park* dinosaurs; this was Bartram’s overactive Romantic imagination at work. But most harrowing are his descriptions of being surrounded by gators at dusk when trying to row across a lagoon. He was “pursued by several very large ones” who tried to capsize his canoe; finally he had to beat them off with his oar. Other stories describe alligators rushing at him in shallow water, although he insists “it is easy to outwalk them on land.”²⁸

These are many of the same phenomena described by de Vaca over two hundred years earlier, and by United States soldiers sixty years later. While others would (quite naturally) lament the abundance of snakes, alligators, swamps, and bogs, Bartram seemed delighted by these things. Even after his close encounters with gators, he maintained that

²⁷ Bartram, *Travels*, 46.

²⁸ Bartram, *Travels*, 106–120.

Florida was a paradise. “How happily situated is this retired spot of earth!” he wrote. “What an Elysium it is!”²⁹

For centuries the Florida peninsula has dazzled newcomers with its beauty, while also plaguing them with adversity. Ancient Florida’s original inhabitants certainly faced hardship, but over millennia they learned to adapt to the land, and to adapt the land to themselves. Later arrivals had neither the time nor inclination to such adaptation. Narvaez and his crew underestimated the environment and it cost them dearly—and left them with bitter memories about the land. Bartram, on the other hand, while surviving a few close encounters with wildlife, remembered Florida mostly in a glowing cocoon of praise. These disparate experiences established Florida as a place of sublime beauty and danger, and foreshadowed the troubles of those who would attempt to occupy or subdue the peninsula in the future—specifically, the soldiers involved in the Second Seminole War of the 1830s and ’40s.

²⁹ Bartram, *Travels*, 55.

CHAPTER THREE: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SECOND SEMINOLE WAR

This chapter will provide a brief summary of the events leading up to the Second Seminole War, a summary of the war itself, and brief discussion of some of the political motivations for starting and ending the war. This chapter seeks only to create a framework upon which to examine the Second Seminole War in further detail; it is not meant to be an exhaustive summary. Though some command-level goals and decisions are mentioned here, along with some allusions to the public narrative surrounding the war, the thesis will delve into those areas in greater detail in the final chapter.

*

Before discussing the Second Seminole War, some information and outcomes regarding the First Seminole War must be established. From 1816–19, before Florida was even a U.S. territory, then-General Andrew Jackson pushed the Seminoles in North Florida southward into the interior in order to make room for white settlers. This period became known as the First Seminole War. In addition to displacing the Natives, Jackson hoped to make Florida appealing to slaveowners. Nothing symbolized this twin persecution of Native Americans and African-American slaves more than the destruction of the so-called “Negro Fort” at Prospect Bluff, in an area that has since been designated the Apalachicola National Forest. As British-allied holdouts from the War of 1812, the Natives and runaway slaves who lived at the Fort flourished as a maroon community. They were able to live unmolested for a few years partially because of the difficult terrain surrounding the Fort. One section of the local forest later became known as Tate’s Hell, supposedly named for a white settler who got lost in the impenetrable cypress

hammocks.³⁰ Thick, swampy, and vulnerable to hurricanes, this environment proved too problematic for slave-catchers or even the Army to penetrate; the Fort was ultimately destroyed by cannon blasts from the Navy. Its demolition, and the death or capture of every runaway slave who lived there, sent two messages: first, that the Florida wars were deeply racist at their most fundamental levels, and second, that the natural environment was perhaps the oppressed people's greatest asset.³¹

The United States officially acquired Florida from Spain in 1821, and two years later, in September of 1823, the Seminoles agreed to sign the Treaty of Moultrie Creek.³² This relegated the Seminoles to a four-million-acre reservation in the heart of the peninsula, cutting them off from the ocean and thereby limiting their ability to trade with outside nations.³³

³⁰ Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, accessed September 14, 2020, <https://www.fdacs.gov/Divisions-Offices/Florida-Forest-Service/Our-Forests/State-Forests/Tate-s-Hell-State-Forest>.

³¹ Nathaniel Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2013).

³² Maps of Seminole lands under the Moultrie Creek agreement: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_Moultrie_Creek, and: <http://www.pbchistoryonline.org/page/seminoles-and-miccosukees>.

³³ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 16–7.

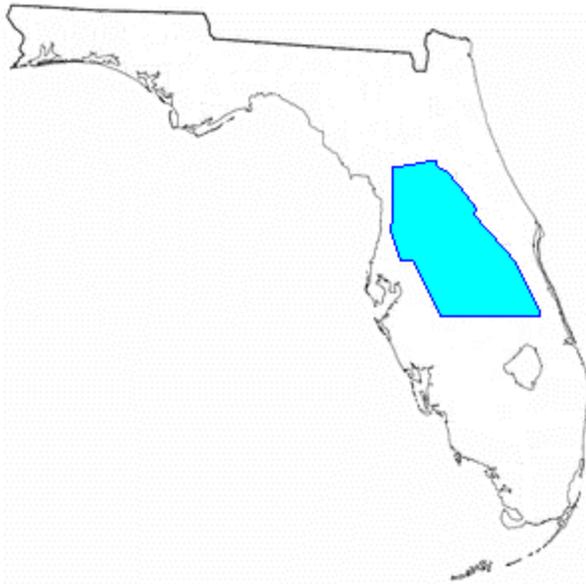


Figure 2 Map of the Florida peninsula showing the boundaries of the Moultrie Creek Treaty of 1823

Source: <http://www.pbchistoryonline.org/page/seminoles-and-miccosukees>.

Aside from the moral and ethical problems of forcing Native peoples off their land, the Moultrie Creek Treaty also presented plenty of logistical dilemmas. The newly-defined Seminole reservation was situated on heavily forested, sometimes swampy land that was less than ideal for agriculture. (Even at this early stage of the war period, the natural environment was proving to be a major factor in decision-making.) The United States had promised to deliver cattle and pigs to the Seminoles, but largely failed to deliver its end of the bargain. Some hunting was possible, but not nearly enough to sustain the thousands of people expected to live in the reservation. (Exact population numbers are difficult to ascertain; in 1812 there were only about 1,200 “official” Seminoles living in Florida, but over 25,000 people belonging to the Creek and Miccosukee tribes lived just over the territorial border, in present-day Georgia and Alabama. Many of these would become refugees who ended up joining the Seminoles, along with a steady influx of runaway slaves who sought sanctuary in the Florida wilderness.³⁴)

The Treaty of Moultrie Creek also stipulated that the United States had permission to criss-cross the reservation with service roads, which was a further humiliation to the Natives: the white army could legally occupy and alter their lands, while they were not allowed to set foot outside the reservation. The Seminoles faced starvation, or at the very least a massively degraded lifestyle, within the reservation’s borders. Not surprisingly, some Seminoles began to venture outside the boundaries, hunting lands that were no longer legally theirs, or stealing cattle from white settlers.

³⁴ Seminole Tribe of Florida, Historic Preservation Office, accessed September 14, 2020, www.stofthpo.com/History-Seminole.

Whites also sometimes encroached on the Seminole lands; friction between the groups was inevitable.³⁵

The Moultrie Creek Treaty also required the Seminoles to surrender any runaway slaves who might have existed among them. The Seminoles largely refused to honor this command. Runaway slaves had been fleeing to the Florida wilderness for decades, and many white slave-owners wanted restitution for their absconded human property. The Seminoles had a complicated relationship with slavery. Without a central or “federal” authority, there was no official law or rule about how Seminoles interacted with runaway slaves. In some tribal units, blacks discovered relatively egalitarian societies where they could inter-marry and become full-fledged members of the tribe. In other situations, blacks were welcomed but remained in positions of servitude. However, slavery as defined by the Seminoles was vastly different from the brutal chattel slavery practiced on most U.S. plantations. Most blacks would have considered life with the Natives a massive leap forward in terms of quality and opportunity.³⁶

This overall situation was untenable for the long-term for all involved parties. In addition to their escaped slaves, whites wanted the land to cultivate; Natives wanted to roam and hunt across the peninsula as their ancestors had done. Random skirmishes and hostilities began to break out, which allowed the United States to justify a mission for the total relocation of the Seminoles.

On December 28, 1835, a party of Seminole Indians ambushed a troop of United States soldiers under the command of Major Francis Dade, near what is now Bushnell,

³⁵ John and Mary Lou Missall, “Territorial Florida,” *Florida Seminole Wars: Heritage Trail* (Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, 2015), 4–5.

³⁶ Kenneth Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996).

Florida. The “Dade Massacre,” as the event came to be known, sparked a harsh military response by President Andrew Jackson, and led to the longest and most expensive Native American conflict in U.S. history.³⁷

Many scholars view the Dade incident as the war’s “official” starting point; placards at the battle site say as much.³⁸ But the conflict did not exist in a vacuum. Perhaps the killing of a U.S. mail carrier in Florida, some months before the Dade incident, was the true starting point. Perhaps the implementation of the Treaty of Moultrie Creek in 1823 was. Maybe any number of violent interactions between slave-catchers and Seminoles in the year or two before the Dade incident was the real starting point. Maybe Chief Osceola’s killing of U.S. Indian Agent Wiley Thompson, which happened the same day as the Dade incident, could be regarded as the event that triggered the war.

In any case, the Second Seminole War lasted seven years and essentially ended in a stalemate; although many people who identified as Seminoles were relocated to the Oklahoma territory, a small band remained unconquered in south Florida.³⁹ Only thirteen years after the Second War ended, another conflict broke out that would later be labeled the Third Seminole War. Some scholars might view the decades from 1817 to 1858 as one long, continuous war with intermittent periods of relative peace. Most contemporary Seminoles consider all three wars to be part of a centuries-long extermination and ethnic cleansing of Native peoples.⁴⁰

³⁷ John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835–1842* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1967).

³⁸ Frank Laumer, *Dade’s Last Command* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

³⁹ Brent Richards Weisman, *Unconquered People: Florida’s Seminole and Miccosukee Indians* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

⁴⁰ Edwin C. McReynolds, *The Seminoles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957).

This thesis will focus on the Second War as an independent conflict. Begun under President Jackson, the war would last the entirety of Martin Van Buren's and William Henry Harrison's (admittedly brief) presidency before coming to an end under President John Tyler in 1842. During that time, the war went through various changes. It was a lopsided affair in many respects: not just the numbers, manpower, and technology of the respective sides, but in its chronology as well.⁴¹ Usually one thinks of climactic battles as occurring at the ends of wars—Thermopylae, Waterloo, D-Day. But the climactic battle of the Second Seminole War, the Battle of Okeechobee, took place relatively early in the war—on Christmas Day of 1837, less than two years after the Dade incident which had sparked the conflict. How can a battle that took place less than a third of the way into the war be considered climactic? The answer is because this was the Army's greatest chance to vanquish the Seminoles, and the Army failed—largely due to environmental factors. This thesis will examine this battle in more detail in a later chapter.

After the Battle of Okeechobee, the war kept grinding further into what might have been described as an “unwinnable” quagmire. When General William J. Worth arranged an informal treaty with a starving band of Seminoles in August 1842, it was less a celebratory victory, and more like a relief to be rid of a heavy burden. To save face, General Worth ordered some grandiose military ceremonies to “bolster what would otherwise have been a rather hollow declaration” of the war's end. This included a parade with a military band and songs to honor fallen soldiers. Additionally, the remains of 165 men were “exhumed from their battlefield graves in the interior” and brought to St. Augustine to be reinterred at a burial ground that would later be designated a National

⁴¹ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 143.

Cemetery.⁴² All of Dade's men were included in this transference. The relocation of these bodies provided a symbolic sense of honor and closure for the United States, despite the fact that the government's goals had not been fully achieved.⁴³

And what had those goals been? The First Seminole War had been about containment. The Second War was about removal. It is difficult to describe the Second War as anything other than a campaign of ethnic cleansing—a process by which an “undesirable” ethnic minority is eradicated in favor of the preferred majority.

Command of the war changed hands several times. Before William J. Worth, well-known generals such as Winfield Scott, Thomas Jesup, and Zachary Taylor established or burnished their reputations by commanding troops in Florida. Taylor, of course, used his service to launch a political career that would eventually land him in the White House. But it was Jesup who left the biggest impact on Florida, despite the fact that he was ignominiously removed from his position in 1838 and obliged to relinquish control to the younger Taylor.

Jesup was already unpopular with the national press because of his dishonorable capture of Seminole chief Osceola under a flag of truce.⁴⁴ He had been pilloried in newspapers for months. But this was unlikely to bother the Democratic establishment, which supported Andrew Jackson's program of removal for Natives. Indeed, Jesup's removal was likely the result of his comments about Seminoles—that they should be allowed to remain in the peninsula. This was no sudden soft-hearted empathy on Jesup's part; rather, it was a cold reality. Much of Jesup's writings during this time reveal that he believed Florida's environment to be the true enemy, the thing that was unconquerable,

⁴² National Cemetery Administration, accessed September 14, 2020, www.cem.va.gov.

⁴³ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 133–4.

⁴⁴ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 166.

and furthermore, it was “a place not fit for the white man,” as he wrote in an 1838 letter.⁴⁵ He suggested ending the war and allowing the Seminoles to remain. This was unacceptable to President Van Buren’s administration for a number of reasons. First, according to Monaco, this was a cardinal violation of the colonial-settler mindset.⁴⁶ Acknowledging the notion that Native peoples should retain their lands was anathema to the pervading worldview of the early-19th century United States, and particularly to Van Buren’s Democratic party.

Jesup had also become popular with Van Buren’s political rivals: the Whig party, which represented a platform of fiscal responsibility. In saying that the United States should abandon the Florida War, Jesup was giving credence to Whig notions of curbing expenditure. While some politicians may have decried the injustice done to the Natives, the main argument put forth by the Whigs was a financial one: The ongoing war was wrecking the economy. One pro-Whig periodical in 1840 opined that “millions and millions [of dollars] have been uselessly sunk in the swamps of Florida.”⁴⁷ This invocation of Florida’s natural environment was no coincidence. Indeed, the environment was one of the main reasons for the army’s lack of results.

By the time William J. Worth was granted control of the war in 1841, the main goal was to end it. Secretary of War John Bell ordered Worth’s commission, believing Worth “had the determination to swiftly end the war.”⁴⁸ In the end, both sides claimed victory. The United States had managed to relocate over 2000 Seminoles to the Oklahoma territory, and effectively depopulated the interior of the peninsula (once again)

⁴⁵ Thomas Jesup, letter to Arnold Jones, February 9, 1838, <https://www.fold3.com/browse/1/h99iFMrKEJi4uShBsNjsSLFKPcZk7DebA>.

⁴⁶ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 110.

⁴⁷ “Mr. Ogle’s Speech,” *Log Cabin*, August 1, 1840.

⁴⁸ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 130.

to make room for white settlers. However, about three hundred Seminoles remained unconquered in the Everglades. Despite enormous hardship, they were never officially defeated. Members of the contemporary Florida Seminole tribe are the descendants of these holdouts; this community uses the term “unconquered” with a special pride.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Seminole Tribe, www.semtribe.com.

CHAPTER FOUR: ROMANTICISM AND DISILLUSIONMENT

This chapter will examine the idea of naïve Romanticism among some segments of soldiers during the Second Seminole War. It begins by defining the Romantic movement and explaining how such a mindset became popular in the West, partly as a backlash against the science-and-reason mentality of the Enlightenment. A few examples of famous Romantics' depictions of Florida will be provided, including excerpts from Bartram, Emerson, and others. The chapter then discusses three examples of soldiers who might be labeled "Romantics": George W. Patten, Alexander B. Meek, and Joseph R. Smith. Not only do their writings help illuminate the harshness of Florida's natural environment, they also show how quickly this environment sapped morale from soldiers, leading to apathy or antipathy regarding the war in which they were fighting.

*

Many young American men, filled with romantic notions inspired by the likes of Bartram and Wordsworth, joined the military with a sort of idealized zest in the 1830s and '40s. They had something similar to what postcolonial historian Alice Conklin has called "a civilizing mission"—a paternalistic savior quest—to make the rugged Florida wilderness palatable for white people.⁵⁰ To be clear, the Second Seminole War did not seek to "civilize" or culturally assimilate the Seminoles; it was not a civilizing mission in that sense, but rather it sought to civilize the land itself, to rid it of the Natives who, from a white perspective, were not worthy of inhabiting such a paradise. These young "Romantics in the arriving volunteer companies were full of zeal to free white citizens

⁵⁰ Conklin, *Mission*, 2–9.

from the clutches of savages and Negroes,” says John Mahon in his *History of the Second Seminole War*. “The officers were proud young men almost entirely from the gentry ... they were well armed ... [t]hey were also addicted to prose writing.”⁵¹

It must be noted that these young men’s collective racism and paternalism did not align with the open and tolerant views of Bartram, who was a Quaker; however, it likely *did* align with the worldviews of some of the Romantic poets. Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley could all be accused of having written literature that is condescending or orientalist.⁵² Also: the Romantic movement was largely a response to the Enlightenment; it was a backlash against science and reason, a call for the return of superstition and medievalism. Thus it is interesting to see the reverence these young Romantics had for the style of William Bartram, who, despite his florid prose, was a scientist at heart.

Bartram and the aforementioned poets were not the only influencers, of course. In “Interpreting Florida, Its Nineteenth-Century Literary Heritage,” English professor and historian Maurice O’Sullivan identifies several examples of Romantic prose written about Florida, usually by outsiders.⁵³ This includes passages by one of the movement’s literary godfathers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose writings about the territory show some degree of “uncertainty,” according to O’Sullivan. While Emerson praises the opportunity present in Florida, he also expresses dismay in what he perceived to be a culture of slow-moving Southern indolence. While this does not exactly match the complaints that would later

⁵¹ John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835–1842* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1967), 136.

⁵² “The Song of Hiawatha” by Wordsworth; “Kubla Khan” by Coleridge; “Ozymandius” by Shelley.

⁵³ Maurice O’Sullivan, “Interpreting Florida, Its Nineteenth-Century Literary Heritage,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (2016), 320-365.

arise from soldiers, it does share that same dichotomy of thinking: a perception of Florida as mixture of frustrating torpor and fatal beauty.

O’Sullivan also discusses a French novel from 1801 titled *Atala, or the love of two savages in the wilderness*, which was internationally popular and which helped reinforce the notion of Florida as a mythological paradise inhabited by primitive, almost magical people. According to O’Sullivan, the French author Chateaubriand helped to create the literary trope of “the wandering tale-teller of the Romantics,” as well as “permanently set the model for the romantic heroism and proud fatalism of the noble savage.” Not surprisingly, Chateaubriand had been influenced by Bartram, and had even translated Bartram’s work into French. He had also received a congratulatory note from a young Lord Byron on the completion of the novel. Thus Chateaubriand fits nicely as yet another link in the Romantic literary tradition of Florida, even though, like many soldiers who would later enlist to fight in the Second Seminole War, he had never actually set foot there.⁵⁴

One Romanticized book about Florida was published just a few years before the Second Seminole War began. *The Lost Virgin of the South*, written by a Florida preacher named Michael Smith and published in 1831, depicted a beautiful but dangerous land that could swallow up naïve outsiders. A staunch Jacksonian who also sympathized with the plight of the Natives, Smith wrote in bombastic, adjective-laden prose that portrayed Florida as a place that needed taming in order to be made safe and palatable for white settlers. The Natives, in his view, no matter how righteous their cause, were inevitably doomed in the face of U.S. expansion.⁵⁵ While individual soldiers may or may not have

⁵⁴ O’Sullivan, “Interpreting,” 321–4.

⁵⁵ O’Sullivan, “Interpreting,” 325–6.

been familiar with these books, certainly the ideas espoused within them had leaked into the larger popular culture and helped to shape American attitudes and perceptions in general.

The U.S. Army, of course, was comprised of more than just these young men from the Southern gentry. Plenty of soldiers, both officers and enlisted men, came from the North; some originated in Europe, including thirty-seven men in Dade's command alone.⁵⁶ It would be wrong to cast a wide blanket of Romanticism over all of them. However, Romanticism was an international movement, with many of its foundational thinkers originating in Europe. Even William Bartram, who was born in Pennsylvania, was financed by London-based investors. Thus it seems plausible that a sort of Romantic sensibility was in the air, and that an idealized sense of the natural world was common at the time. This would put an enormous strain on morale in the Second Seminole War as soldiers came to grips with the reality of their situation versus those idealized notions.

One example of a Romantic soldier was First Lieutenant George W. Patten, whose poems were published in the *Army and Navy Chronicle* throughout the Seminole Wars. These poems demonstrate a lyrical talent; his eulogy for a fellow soldier's dead child is particularly poignant. But a sample of his verse also reveals a certain racial otherizing, not uncommon for a soldier of his day: "Stern men were they whom many a field/ Had heard in measured tread/ Whom many a horn had roused at morn/ To face the conflict red."⁵⁷ The "conflict red" is, of course, the threat of Native Americans.

Another example of a Romantic soldier was Alexander Beaufort Meek, a bookish young man from Tuscaloosa who had supposedly memorized the entire New Testament

⁵⁶ Veterans Legacy Program, <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/semwartableau.html>.

⁵⁷ John Mahon, "Letters from the Second Seminole War," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1958): 348.

as a teen and earned a law degree at age twenty-two.⁵⁸ Some of his writings invoke romanticized feelings for the landscape and its people. He describes a certain Seminole named Yellow-Hair the way an epic poet might: “Possessed of great personal strength and beauty, he is 6 feet 4 inches high, finely and perfectly formed with all the muscular vigor and strength of a Hercules, and all the symmetry and activity of an Apollo.”⁵⁹ This passage seems almost like a caricature of the stereotypical “noble savage,” and shows how romanticism and racism often overlapped. These and other effusive passages on Florida’s natural beauty reveal that Meek was, to quote Mahon, “soaked in romanticism.”⁶⁰ However, after a short of amount of time in Florida, Meek’s journal quickly devolves into complaints about the food, water, and overall conditions. He ends with complaints of sickness: “The water at this place is ... deeply impregnated with Sulphate of Iron, making it so nauseating that I cannot drink it without pain. To supply the want I use Claret wine ... Many of the men are today quite unwell, being troubled with diarrhoea [sic] produced no doubt by the bad water and the great and unusual exposure. They have likewise bad colds and coughs”⁶¹ To sum up his experience, he simply says: “Great dissatisfaction prevails.”⁶²

This disillusionment was typical of the so-called Romantic experience in the Seminole wars. Men who arrived with idealized notions of Florida soon turned bitter or even desperate. One particular soldier left a detailed and quite entertaining record of his hardship: Lieutenant Joseph R. Smith, graduate of the United States Military Academy,

⁵⁸ John K. Mahon, “The Journal of A. B. Meek and the Second Seminole War, 1836,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1960): p. 302.

⁵⁹ Mahon, “Meek,” 308.

⁶⁰ Mahon, *History*, 225.

⁶¹ Mahon, “Meek,” 309.

⁶² Mahon, “Meek,” 315.

had served fourteen years, all of them in the North, before being assigned to Florida in 1837.⁶³ Once there, he hated it immediately. Writing to his wife in February of 1838, he said: “I never can think of coming South to live. This may drive me out of the army.” Historian John Mahon, who edited Smith’s letters, suggests that Smith was a sort of pseudo-aristocrat who initially attended West Point as a way to avoid manual labor (though not necessarily physical hardship). Blue-collar work was seen as something beneath his station, even though he needed money to support his burgeoning family.⁶⁴ Smith’s writings can get somewhat melodramatic; he seems to have held the opinion that joining the army was what respectable upper-class young men did, especially those with any sort of Romantic inclinations.

When he fell sick in March, he wrote again to his wife: “I am sure, that with your care, and affectionate attentions, and the northern atmosphere, and by the blessing of God, I might soon be well.” He seemed convinced that an escape from the heat and humidity would cure him quickly. He applied for a leave of absence, but General Jesup denied him. Thus Smith was obliged to stay in Florida; but even after a fourteen-year career, he writes: “I may be compelled to resign rather than sacrifice my health here during the summer.”⁶⁵ (Officer resignations were a problem, as over a hundred officers resigned or abandoned their posts in 1836 alone. Many of these were men who left the Army rather than join their companies in Florida. As Adjutant General Roger Jones noted in his report to Congress in 1837, the troops had a “miserable, deplorable situation ... in the [Florida] Territory.”)⁶⁶

⁶³ Mahon, “Letters,” 331.

⁶⁴ Mahon, “Letters,” 338.

⁶⁵ Mahon, “Letters,” 340.

⁶⁶ H.R. Doc. No. 183, 24th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1837).

Later that month, Smith gave a morbid and melancholy update, complaining of dysentery and diarrhea, along with an acute case of melodrama: “I am writing this letter, supposing it may be the last one I shall write you. I have thought much of dying lately.” He continued to languish throughout March; finally on April 14 his doctors agreed that he “must go north immediately if I would save my life.”⁶⁷

Smith made it to New York and spent the next several months applying for sick leave from service in the South. Eventually, after much red tape and bureaucracy, he got his wish and was allowed to take an extended absence. But when he had recovered in late 1839, he was once again sent back to Florida. At first, things seemed to be going well:

[T]wo days in pursuit of Tiger Tail, Lusty Hadjo⁶⁸ ... but missed them But the best of all (and for which I feel thankful) in all my hard marchings, in wet and cold and heat, in sand and water, through the hammocks, the cypress ponds, the saw grass marches, on the pine barren, eating nothing but hard bread and pork or ham, my health continues good, my appetite ravenous. Our kind Heavenly Father preserves me from harm ... I have been more successful than any other troops for a long time; and you may feel a proper pride⁶⁹

It seemed as though Smith’s fortunes were turning. But once he realized he would have to spend the entire summer in Florida, his letters again turned to complaining. Ironically, the supposed punishment of a Florida assignment was because his regiment had performed so admirably. “Gen. Wool inspected and reviewed our battalion day before yesterday,” he says, “and said we appeared better under arms, considering our hard service, than any other troops he had inspected in the territory. He thinks there is no

⁶⁷ Mahon, “Letters,” 339–42.

⁶⁸ Tiger Tail and Hadjo, two prominent Seminole leaders in the late 1830s.

⁶⁹ Mahon, “Letters,” 342–52 .

prospect of our going north this summer.” Of course, this news did not sit well with Smith: “If you think I am not distressed at this separation from all I hold dear in the world, you don't know me,” he says. Parts of the letter seem intended to induce guilt in his wife: “But I am here to earn bread for us all. I am here to support us all respectably. Oh how delighted I should be to see you all tonight. But I am here, uncomfortable, wretched water, eaten up by insects in an unhealthy climate, suffering from heat, indifferent food, scarcely any fresh meat, and this to support my family. I say no more.”

Letters such as these eventually persuaded Smith’s wife to join him in Florida in 1840 or ’41. There she gave birth to another son, who died in infancy. Smith’s superior, Lieutenant G. W. Patten, previously mentioned as a Romantic poet, wrote a verse about the lost child. On one copy of the poem, someone wrote the following sentence in pencil: “Mrs. Smith accompanied her husband through one campaign in the Florida Seminole Indian War but she always took the side of the Indians.”⁷⁰

This comment is worth pausing over. It reminds us of the fact that many soldiers—and spouses of soldiers, apparently—lost their naïve illusions not merely because of environmental hardship, but because of the inherent injustice of what they were being asked to do. Smith’s wife “always took the side of the Indians.” Who wrote that comment on the back of the poem? The poet Patten himself? Some other bystander? Either way, it is evident that Mrs. Smith felt no shame in vocalizing her beliefs. She thought the removal of the Natives was wrong. What sorts of conversations did she have alone with her husband, a deployed soldier? What level of empathy did ground-level troops have for the Natives? How did this affect morale? The point here is: many factors played roles in respective soldiers’ disillusionment (or lack thereof), including the

⁷⁰ Mahon, “Letters,” 342–52.

inherent injustice of the core mission, and the witnessing of or participating in violence and slaughter; but as this thesis is devoted to environmental aspects of the war, it will remain focused on that, while acknowledging the existence and importance of other factors as well.

Despite his illnesses, Joseph R. Smith survived the Seminole Wars and later served in the war against Mexico in the late 1840s. He remained an active-duty officer through the end of the Civil War. He died at the age of 67 in Michigan. His letters from Florida provide us with deeper insight into the day-to-day realities of U.S. soldiers during the Second Seminole War.⁷¹

Faced with such conditions and illness, the young Romantics lost much of their zeal. Their writings are now important documents, “containing useful information not to be found elsewhere,” according to Mahon, and filled with “much introspection on how it felt to go to war, to leave home, and to plunge into a savage wilderness.” According to Mahon, this loss of idealism is noticeable and slightly ridiculous, even as the historian dips his own toe into the pseudo-Romantic sea, mentioning: “the rosy hue before their minds’ eyes” and the “yells and howls in the night [that] caused more than one sentry to desert his post and run into camp.”⁷²

Eventually, says Mahon, “the romantic approach to the Seminole War died.” One soldier, after spending much of a summer burying his fellow servicemen, commented sarcastically: “And this is warfare—glorious, noble, chivalrous warfare!” The mood around the war was beginning to change. Brutal reality was shattering the idealized notions with which many soldiers had entered the war.

⁷¹ Mahon, “Letters,” 352.

⁷² Mahon, *History*, 137.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONDITIONS ON THE GROUND

This chapter will examine several primary sources, such as books, journals, and letters written by soldiers who served in the Second Seminole War, as well as periodicals such as the *Congressional Globe* and the *Army and Navy Chronicle*, in order to illustrate the harsh environmental conditions of Florida during the War. This chapter will also examine data from the Veterans Legacy Program, which relies on primary sources such as veteran chronicler John T. Sprague, but which juxtaposes the data in new ways visually and spatially, in order to better illuminate certain aspects of the war. The first part of the chapter discusses climate and weather, the middle part mosquitos and disease, and the third part discusses terrain and topography. These difficulties contributed to low morale, incapacitation, desertion, and even suicide among soldiers.

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Soldiers' feelings about the war were certainly shifting—but were these young idealistic poets simply being melodramatic? Was Florida really *that* bad? For twenty-first century residents—who take for granted things like electricity, air conditioning, clean water services, transportation, and insect control—contemporary life in Florida does not seem too hard at all. But for many soldiers in the early nineteenth century, tours of duty in Florida were miserable. For a few, they were unbearable.

Joe Knetsch, author of *Florida's Seminole Wars, 1817–1858*, says that “the insects, vermin, alternate cold and hot and the nearly constant dampness caused untold

miseries among the United States forces.”⁷³ A Tennessee volunteer named Henry Hollingsworth thought of Florida as “swampy, hammocky, low, excessively hot, sickly and repulsive in all its features.”⁷⁴ Army surgeon Jacob Rhett Motte “found it remarkable for nothing except flies, fleas, and heat.”⁷⁵ Whatever Romantic pretensions these soldiers might have had melted away in the Florida humidity. According to Mahon, during soldiers’ first few weeks on the peninsula, they received “their baptism of fire.”⁷⁶ Often this baptism was achieved not through combat with Seminoles, but simply from the everyday experience of living in Florida.

Many soldiers in the Seminole Wars did not come from Florida, or even the American south—they often came from the northeast or, in some cases, Europe. For example, of the 108 soldiers in Dade’s command, thirty-seven came from Europe, including one from the Northern Scottish highlands. Of the rest, all but seven were born north of the Mason-Dixon line—and of those seven, the southernmost place of birth was North Carolina. Most of the recruits came from New York and Pennsylvania.⁷⁷ The makeup of Zachary Taylor’s forces at the Battle of Okeechobee was similar. Of the twenty-six U.S. soldiers who died in that battle, at least nine were from Europe. Several others were from northern states such as Pennsylvania, New York, and Vermont.⁷⁸

Thus for many the heat was a formidable factor. The U.S. forces handicapped themselves further by refusing to adopt any semblance of Seminole attire, thereby

⁷³ Joe Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety on the Florida Frontier: Articles on the Second Seminole War* (Dade City: The Seminole Wars Foundation Press, 2008), 128.

⁷⁴ Mahon, *History*, 133.

⁷⁵ Jacob Rhett Motte, *Journey into Wilderness* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1953), 95.

⁷⁶ Mahon, *History*, 137.

⁷⁷ Veterans Legacy Program, <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/semwartableau.html>.

⁷⁸ Battle of Okeechobee enlistment data, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1198/>.

repeating the same mistake other haughty Europeans had made in other climates.⁷⁹ “It was readily assumed,” Knetsch says, “that the regular soldier could be sent from the Falls at Niagara directly to the St. John’s river in Florida without a change of clothing, accouterments, or food.” Naturally, Knetsch concludes that “military planning by the army of 1835 was not a well-developed art.”⁸⁰

Upon arrival in Florida, soldier and chronicler John T. Sprague describes troops still wearing their winter clothing because a shipment of goods had been delayed in Tampa. As a result, they found the heat “so oppressive that the troops could not execute even ordinary marches from this cause alone.”⁸¹

On another occasion, Mahon tells us, a soldier from South Carolina—not exactly a land of bitter tundra—found the Florida heat so unbearable that he resorted to lying naked inside his tent during the day. It happened to be the day General Winfield Scott stopped by for an inspection; the General poked his head inside the naked man’s tent, causing some embarrassment. Scott, known as “Old Fuss and Feathers” with a reputation for his strict adherence to military regulations, was “clad in his heavy military coat.”⁸²

In 1836, Major Julius F. Heilman begged the U.S. War Department for horses, saying that long marches were impossible because “the intense heat and burning sands rendered foot soldiers useless after one day’s march.” However, Heilman added

⁷⁹ See *The Man Who Ate His Boots: The Tragic History of the Search for the Northwest Passage* by Anthony Brandt for numerous other examples, set in a much different climate!

⁸⁰ Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety*, 264.

⁸¹ J. T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1964), 141.

⁸² Mahon, *History*, 140.

ominously, “[e]ven with mounted men it would be hard to accomplish much in the fiery summer.”⁸³

But it was not just the heat—it was also the precipitation. Florida is known for its frequent storms and showers, particularly during the summer months. Marching soldiers often had to cross bodies of water, sometimes up to their waist or higher, as well as sleep in damp conditions. Lieutenant Edward Orr complained of this very occurrence, adding: “We ought to be brevetted for our sufferings, and have a year’s leave of absence when the war is over to polish up and see the ladies.” Mahon notes that water presented the biggest environmental hardship after disease: “soldiers practically lived in it.”⁸⁴

Lieutenant Robert Buchanan tells of similar experiences, saying that every time his regiment marched, they had to trudge through numerous ponds and sinkholes.⁸⁵ He describes long delays spent building bridges over bogs and swamps. On one occasion, while searching for a certain Seminole camp, he and his fellow soldiers found themselves in “a saw-grass swamp three quarters of a mile wide and several miles long. The mud in the swamp was knee deep, and we were completely tired out before we reached the hammock.”⁸⁶

Naturally, in addition to these difficulties, there was, just as in the times of de Vaca or Bartram, no shortage of wild animals. “Most entrants dreaded the gators,” Mahon says, which may or may not explain the fate of a certain Sergeant Miller, who spotted an alligator in a lake, pulled out his gun and fired at the animal, and then waded in after it. Miller never emerged from the lake. His death was officially recorded as a

⁸³ Mahon, *History*, 175.

⁸⁴ Mahon, *History*, 318.

⁸⁵ Frank F White and Robert C. Buchanan, “A Journal of Lt. Robert C. Buchanan during the Seminole War,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1950):135.

⁸⁶ White, “Journal,” 146.

drowning.⁸⁷ William Bartram would likely have warned the Sergeant against this sort of behavior.

On top of all this, there was something else that disturbed the soldiers. Mahon tells us that newcomers were often bothered by “the clamorous howling of the wolves at night. With the roaring of the gators, the screaming of panthers, and the hooting of owls, the wolf howl made many a volunteer soldier feel he had offered to do duty in Hades.” The subtropical peninsula must indeed have felt like a particular level of hell. “As for rattlesnakes,” says Mahon, “certain areas were so infested with them that not even Seminoles could live there.”⁸⁸

Given these conditions, it is not difficult to imagine the soldiers’ unhappiness. “Under such circumstances,” Knetsch tell us, “the misery of frontier life became almost too stark and bleak to bear. For many it simply was too much, and suicide became a viable alternative to such a life.”⁸⁹ Indeed, on June 15, 1836, less than a year after the official start of the Second War, Lieutenant Thompson B. Wheelock committed suicide. This came in the aftermath of a frustrating battle near Micanopy, during which seventy U.S. soldiers, despite having superior weapons, failed to oust a group of 250 Natives who had baited them into combat. (Mahon notes: “[H]ad this remarkable engagement occurred in an open area, European style, it would surely have brought the annihilation of the Indian fighting force.”)⁹⁰ Of course this military failure was not the sole reason for Wheelock’s decision—he was in the throes of a fever and delirium, as well—but perhaps

⁸⁷ *The Army and Navy Chronicle*, 26 April 1836.

⁸⁸ Mahon, *History*, 133.

⁸⁹ Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety*, 128.

⁹⁰ Mahon, *History*, 174.

it was a final straw of sorts: despite months of misery, the U.S. still could not achieve its most basic objectives.⁹¹

Sometimes soldiers who survived bouts with malaria were left mentally unbalanced because of brain damage caused by the disease. This might have been the case with Captain William S. Maitland, for whom the central Florida town of Maitland is named. After surviving numerous battles and being granted medical leave, in 1837 Maitland found himself on a boat entering Charleston harbor, where he was arriving to take his repose. But he never made it—as the boat entered the harbor, Maitland underwent a “fit of derangement” and hurled himself into the bay, where he drowned.⁹²

Lieutenant John W. Phelps, in his letters from 1837–8, describes another suicide, this time of Colonel John F. Lane, who killed himself in a particularly gruesome manner. Lane was, according to Phelps, “affected in the brain from an extreme mental and bodily excitement,” and “he ended his career by self-extermination. No one had observed anything peculiar in him, having finished a long conversation with an officer at the Post, he retired to his tent and apparently posed the hilt of his sword upon the ground, kneeled down, and brought his eye to its point, which by thrusting his head, entered his brain.”⁹³ Sprague reports the same event, but leaves the details vague, saying only that “Colonel Lane met with a melancholy death.”⁹⁴

Thus Lane’s death might not be fully understood by researchers who have only consulted Sprague. Interestingly, even though Sprague mentions Lane’s death in his narrative, there is no listing for Lane in the book’s Appendix, which purports to catalog

⁹¹ *The Army and Navy Chronicle*, 21 (July 1836), 41.

⁹² Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 148–9.

⁹³ John W. Phelps, “Letters of John W. Phelps, USA, 1837–38,” *Florida Historical Society Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1927): 77.

⁹⁴ Sprague, *Origins*, 162.

every serviceman who died in the Second War. Wheelock is listed, but his death is attributed to disease rather than suicide. Of course, pain or delirium from a fever could have compelled him to take his own life. So, in a way, either listing is appropriate.

Ultimately we will never know some of these details. But there are groups dedicated to documenting as much as possible about Seminole War casualties. The National Cemetery Association has partnered with the University of Central Florida, and other schools, to create the Veterans Legacy Program, which seeks to honor and memorialize veterans from wars throughout U.S. history. Teams of researchers have produced graphic representations of when, where, and how individual soldiers died. Since their information regarding the Seminole Wars is mainly derived from Sprague, some of it is bound to be inaccurate. But the overall project provides a great broad-strokes representation for the larger causes of death among soldiers in the Second War.⁹⁵

Over 1,500 soldiers died in the Second War, but according to the VLP (which, again, is based on Sprague's data), only 223 were killed in action. Another twenty died of wounds. That leaves fewer than 250 troops who were actually killed by Seminoles. Of that number, nearly half were killed together on the same day, during the Dade Battle of 1835—which means that over the next seven years, fewer than 150 were killed in combat. The Seminoles also killed militia, volunteers, and civilians at different times throughout the 19th century. But the focus of our discussion here is official U.S. servicemen.

So how did all the other soldiers die? Twenty-four died in random accidents—in one case, a wagon ran over someone.⁹⁶ Thirty-nine others drowned. For fifty-four people,

⁹⁵ Veterans Legacy Program, <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/semwartableau.html>.

⁹⁶ Veterans Legacy Program, <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/semwartableau.html>.

the cause remains unknown. But for the vast majority of deaths—over a thousand—the cause was illness or disease. This means that roughly one out of every seven soldiers serving in Florida died of disease; two-thirds of all deaths during the war were from disease. As J.R. McNeill points out in *Mosquito Empires*, that amounted to fourteen percent of the Army’s overall forces, not just those in Florida.⁹⁷

Of those thousand, 411 are listed as having died of an “unknown” disease. That does not mean their contemporaries were baffled at what killed them. It simply means that we do not have the details or information necessary to pin down a specific cause of death today. Most of the deaths we know about came from “fever.” Other causes seem rather expected: malaria, dysentery, consumption. But for the purposes of this thesis, two categories stand out: “debility,” which essentially means weakness; and “disease incident to climate and service in Florida,” which might be a euphemistic way of saying certain soldiers simply could not handle the hot, wet, tough conditions. And it was not just a few random weaklings: Between these two categories, over seventy people are listed as dead.

This data from the VLP is not new; however, it has been processed in a new way, using digital technology to create spatial representations that were unavailable to previous historians. According to digital historian Anne Kelly Knowles, author of the geographically-minded *Placing History*, taking so-called “old” data and juxtaposing or rearranging it visually can provide new insights.⁹⁸ She has done this with her own work: her *Smithsonian* article “A Cutting-Edge Second Look at the Battle of Gettysburg” describes her decade-long project to shed light on Confederate military movements

⁹⁷ J.R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁹⁸ Anne Kelly Knowles and Amy Hiller, *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redland: ESRI Press, 2008).

during one of the Civil War's most decisive battles. Because of information obtained through Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology, Knowles is able to demonstrate why Generals Lee and Longstreet were unable to communicate effectively during the battle. Contrary to traditional belief, Longstreet was not defying his orders or "dithering," but rather was able to see Union movements better than Lee could from his position, and was forced to take alternative action. Scholars have long wondered why Lee chose to make certain strategic decisions during the battle; many southerners disparaged Longstreet in an attempt to whitewash the record of their hero Lee. Now, visual representations have validated Longstreet.⁹⁹

Similar insight can be gained through the VLP's visual representations of the Second Seminole War. Perhaps no generals will be validated, but other aspects of the war could be illuminated. For example, scanning through Sprague's lists of casualties might inform a meticulous observer that the year 1841 saw a jump in deaths of U.S. soldiers—but on first glance, such information might not necessarily jump out at every reader. The jumble of names and dates, especially when listed out of chronological order, could muddle the interpretation. Thus, the information could be considered "Big Data." According to historians Shawn Graham, Ian Milligan, and Scott Weingart, who collaborated to produce *The Historian's Macroscope*, the term "Big Data" can refer to any batch of information "that requires computational intervention to make new sense of it."¹⁰⁰ Seeing this information represented visually allows researchers to immediately

⁹⁹ Anne Kelly Knowles. "A Cutting-Edge Second Look at the Battle of Gettysburg," *The Smithsonian*, June 27, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ Shawn Graham, Ian Milligan, Scott Weingart. *The Historian's Macroscope: Big Digital History* (2015), http://www.themacroscope.org/?page_id=597.

absorb the statistics, and to compare these statistics quickly with other information, without painstakingly combing through Sprague's notes.

Causes of Death by Rank (Private)

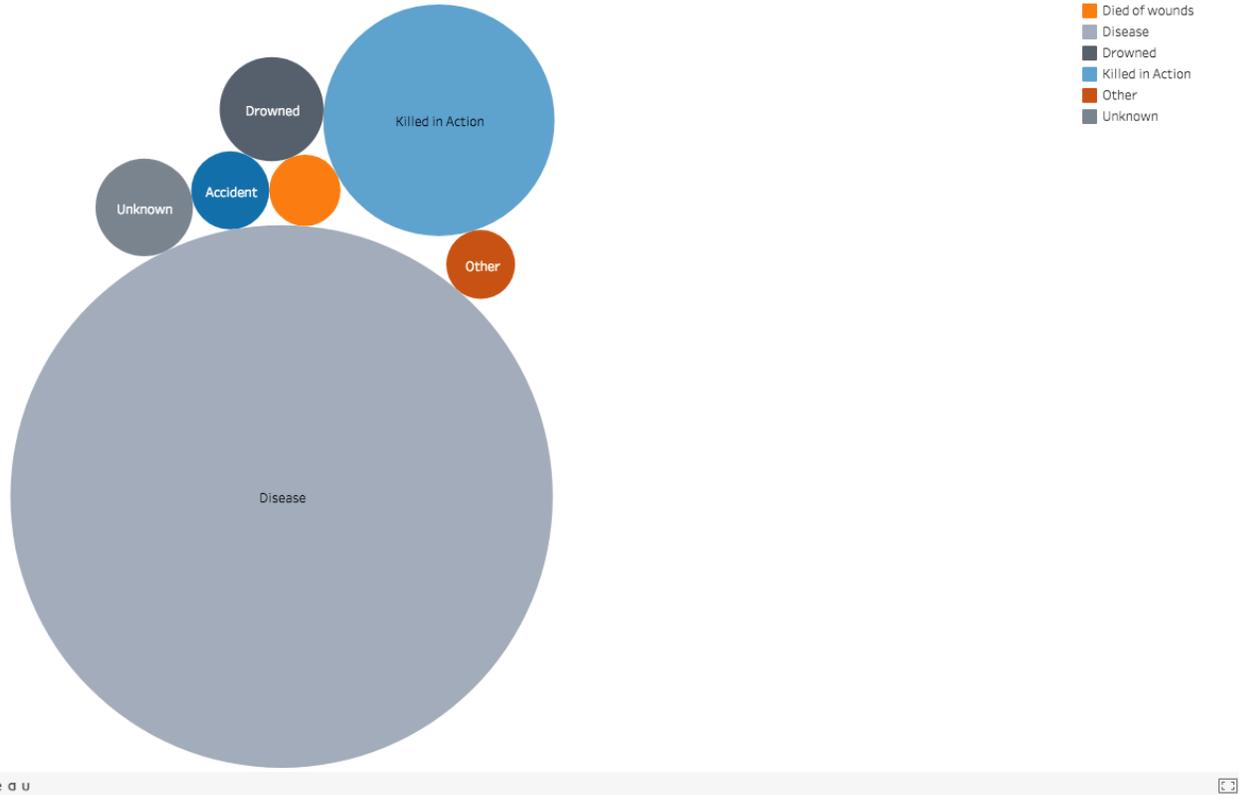


Figure 3 Visual representation of Second Seminole War casualties (causes)

Source: Veterans Legacy Program, , <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/semwartableau.html>

Of course, these technological breakthroughs offer more than just convenience for research. Seeing information represented visually allows the human brain to process it differently. Reading a list of numbers on a page does not affect our understanding in the same way that a visual representation might. Seeing that huge spike in deaths makes it very clear why the war ended when it did—the death rate had jumped more than 100%, from 172 deaths in 1840 to 372 in 1841.¹⁰¹ New insights will likely continue to emerge over the coming years, as contemporary scholars continue utilizing technology to which previous historians such as Mahon and Monaco did not have access.

¹⁰¹ Veterans Legacy Program, <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/semwtableau.html>

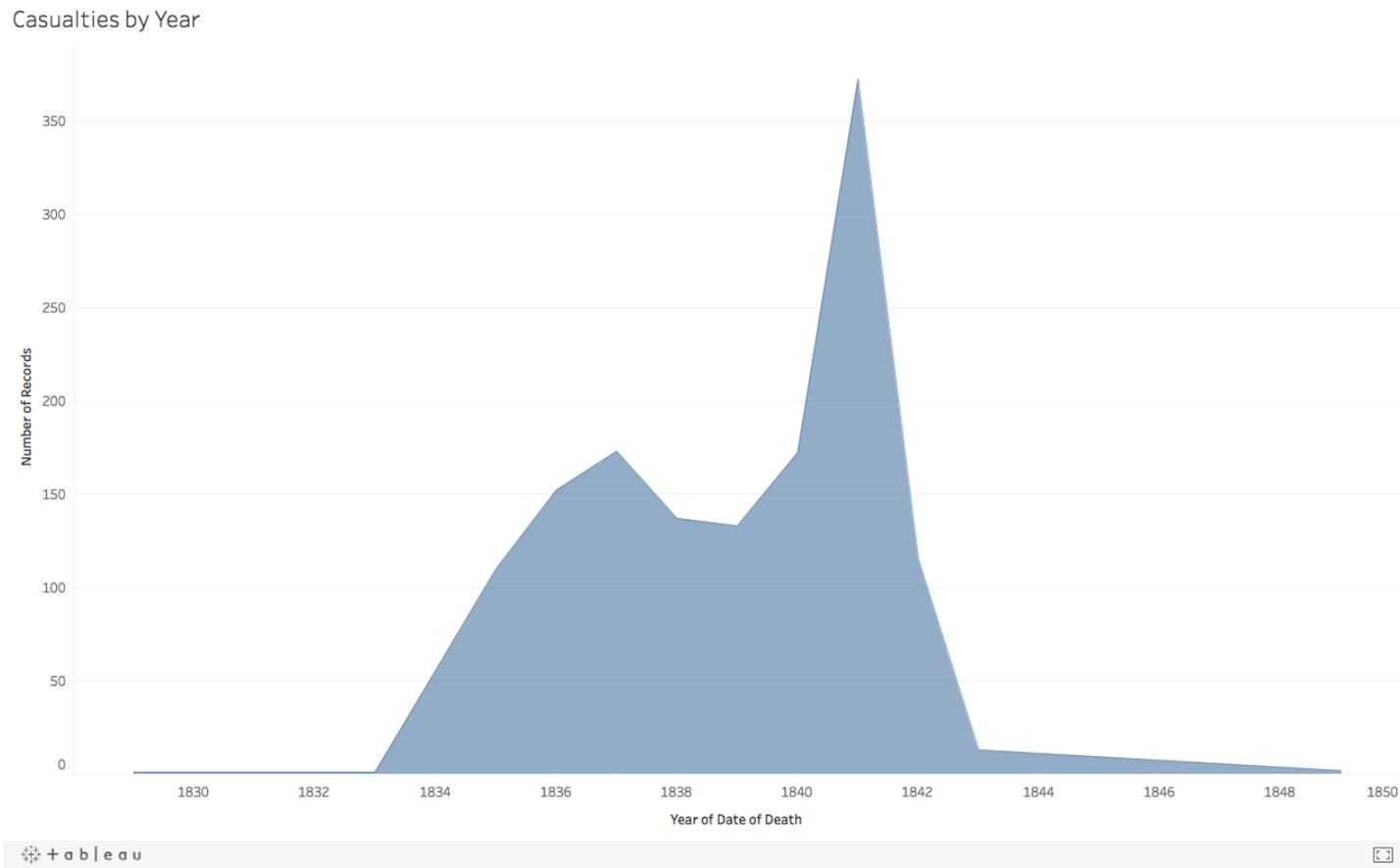


Figure 4 Visual representation of Second Seminole War casualties (amount/year)

Source: Veterans Legacy Program, , <https://vlp.cah.ucf.edu/semwartableau.html>

That spike in the death rate in 1841 may have dismayed some outside observers, but it should not have come as a surprise. Disease and illness were such problems that the summer months had become known as the “sickly season”—a time when military operations ground almost to a halt. Knetsch says that “[m]edical authorities had warned the army about the dangers of summer campaigns in such illness-prone areas as Florida.”¹⁰² The year 1836 was particularly bad. General Richard K. Call was urgent to finish the U.S. mission and drive the Seminoles out of Florida, yet even he himself could not stay healthy: “It was an uncommonly sickly season, and Call himself was from time to time severely indisposed.”¹⁰³ Indeed, disease seemed to be sweeping across the peninsula. Of course, Native peoples had been ravaged by European germs for centuries. But now measles was breaking out among populations of white settlers too. Because of disease and warfare, the peninsula’s interior was abandoned by whites, except for a few small outposts.¹⁰⁴

According to Sprague, officers could not avoid being exposed to fevers and dysentery because of what he calls “the vicissitudes of the climate.” Every day they were wet to the skin, stuffed inside their military uniforms, marching through oppressive heat and humidity. Blasting sun might give way at any moment to a terrifying storm. Sprague says that on one march across the interior in 1837, two hundred and twenty out of six hundred men were reported sick—an illness Sprague attributes to “wading in swamps and hammocks.” Out of that number, one hundred and thirty were sent to the general hospital,

¹⁰² Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety*, 187.

¹⁰³ Mahon, *History*, 173.

¹⁰⁴ Mahon, *History*, 175.

“totally unfit for any duty whatsoever.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, more than a third of the available troops for that march were, well, unavailable.

Bacteria and viruses, naturally, paid no heed to prestige or rank. Major Julius Heilman, who had performed heroically during battles in June of 1836, and was concocting methods by which the army might overcome the “sickly season,” suddenly caught a fever and was dead by the end of that very month. Army surgeon Jacob Rhett Motte, himself accustomed to dealing with soldiers who had suffered severe physical trauma, also caught a fever and had to be taken care of by the very soldiers he was assigned to help. In his journal, Motte minces no words in his opinion of Florida. “My sickness produced at the time feelings of perfect disgust for Florida, and the life we necessarily led there. Oh! that I could only have escaped its detested soil, thought I! That I might once more live like a human being; that is, as a human being should live.”¹⁰⁶

Motte of course goes on to blame the conditions: “For four continuous months had I been compelled to sleep, without a night’s exception, with all my clothes on, even to boots and spurs. Indeed, the ceremony of disrobing was rendered quite superfluous, going to bed being nothing else but wrapping oneself up in a blanket, and tumbling upon the dewy ground; sometimes sheltered by a tent, but often, alas! too often! pavilioned only by the starry vault of heaven.”¹⁰⁷ According to Mahon, not surprisingly, “[f]ew wanted to serve in the peninsula during the ‘sickly season.’ Some said they would run away if drafted, others threatened bodily harm to anyone who undertook to conscript them.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Sprague, *Origin*, 282.

¹⁰⁶ Motte, *Journey*, 206.

¹⁰⁷ Motte, *Journey*, 207.

¹⁰⁸ Mahon, *History*, 172.

To make matters worse, no one at the time truly understood what diseases were, or where they came from. Says Knetsch: “This was a day and age when physicians worried more about ‘miasma’ and damp, rainy weather than with the actual causes of the fevers that killed so many. Nothing was known about germs or viruses or how they were transmitted. Infection and sterilization were concepts not yet fully grasped. The only thing done to prevent the spread of disease was to move the garrison to another location and bury the dead far from the site.”¹⁰⁹ No primary sources mention mosquitoes as the root problem, though they are mentioned as annoying vermin. It seems highly plausible that the mosquito hypothesis idea occurred to literally no one serving in the field during the entirety of the war.

Other causes for sickness seem like common sense. Several sources report stagnant water, and Mahon tells us that sometimes there “could be drought so severe that it was hard to find drinking water on a march....”¹¹⁰ Perhaps Sprague captures the situation best when describing his regiment’s hydration options: “[T]he sink-holes, or ponds, on which both men and horses had generally to rely for water, were now, many of them, dried up; and in others the water was tepid, besides being filled with vegetable matter and animalculae.”¹¹¹ One need not be a medical doctor to recognize the association between drinking water filled with rotting flora and fauna, and becoming gravely ill.

Yet as the war dragged on, the army began to ramp up campaigning during the summer months, despite the ravages on its soldiers. Why? The answer is simple: U.S. military inertia gave the Seminoles time to sow and harvest crops, to rebuild villages or

¹⁰⁹ Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety*, 214.

¹¹⁰ Mahon, *History*, 130.

¹¹¹ Sprague, *Origin*, 141.

move to new ones, to reconvene, strategize, to basically live unmolested, in peace, until the U.S. war machine started rolling again in the fall. Sprague concedes that when the “army had been burdened with the sick and feeble ... this gave the Indians ample time to plant and gather their crops.” Once the U.S. forces gathered enough momentum and experience to start campaigning during summers, Sprague felt the end would be near for the Natives. Indeed, after a successful battle in the summer of 1840 in which over 180 Seminole homes were burned, thirty-two fields of crops destroyed, and small parties of Natives driven to “remote and unhealthy hiding places,” Sprague had reason to be optimistic. “The enemy found,” he wrote, “to their sorrow, that they could be pursued at all seasons.”¹¹² The mood of the war had already changed; now the logistics were changing too. The United States’ shift in summer campaigns sped up the pace of events that would bring the war to its close.

In *Mosquito Empires*, J.R. McNeill says that traditional historians have dismissed the role of disease in warfare; they have “tended to regard epidemics as random and therefore not worth deep investigation. Although their effects might be important, their causes seemed to lie outside the province of the historian.” But, says McNeill, times are changing. More recent historians have “demonstrated how crucial disease often was in intersocietal encounters.”¹¹³ The idea that disease was capricious and affected opposing armies equally made sense when studying ethnically homogeneous warfare. For example, McNeill says that when “Europeans fought against other Europeans, or when Chinese fought against other Chinese, in most cases diseases did not serve as arbiters of prolonged struggles, even if they might destroy an army here and there.” But the notion changes

¹¹² Sprague, *Origin*, 282–3.

¹¹³ McNeill, *Mosquito*, 8.

when considering armies who “fought far from home in unfamiliar disease environments, or fought against people with sharply different immunities and susceptibilities to disease.”¹¹⁴ This describes many of the early conflicts between Europeans and Native Americans; of course it applies to the Seminole Wars as well.

Seminole War historian C.S. Monaco also goes into great detail regarding these phenomena. In *The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression*, Monaco devotes two full chapters to environmental challenges, focusing closely on mosquito-caused deaths. He agrees with McNeill in claiming that previous historians have overlooked or underestimated so-called “natural factors” in war—terrain, climate, weather, disease. As McNeill asserted, this was because many historians viewed things like weather and disease as impartial, factors that would affect both sides equally. That line of thinking, in this case, could not be more wrong.

Monaco says that, despite traditional historians’ emphasis on human action and agency, mosquito-borne illnesses “far outweighed the considerable threat posed by Native forces.” Soldiers from Northern climes were most susceptible to disease, as they had never been exposed to subtropical viruses and bacteria. The Natives, who had built up immunity to mosquito-borne diseases over thousands of years, enjoyed a distinct advantage in this category. So did African-Americans, many of whom inherited a genetic tolerance or resistance to mosquito-borne illnesses from their subtropical forbears. Although measles, mumps, chicken pox, and other European-based illnesses had decimated Native populations for years, the local mosquito-based diseases also inflicted damage on whites.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ McNeill, *Mosquito*, 9.

¹¹⁵ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 139–41.

McNeill makes sure to note that the mosquito-borne diseases that plagued soldiers in the Seminole Wars, no matter how troublesome, were not “swords of civilization like smallpox and measles, scything down hitherto isolated populations.” In fact, those particular swords had already been wielded centuries before, during the early years of European contact. Those events, of course, led to the depopulation of the Florida peninsula, which provided an empty place for the Seminole tribe to form and grow. Thus we see that disease has many different effects, micro and macro, on different populations, in different climates, at different times.

In addition to disease and sickness, Florida’s physical terrain itself made military operations extremely difficult. In fact, it might be these difficulties, as much as illness, which ultimately led the U.S. to abandon the war. Of course, Florida was not the only place whose physical terrain flummoxed white invaders. In 1739, a full century before the Seminole conflicts, France was attempting to wage war on the Chickasaw tribe near present-day Cincinnati. But the French army’s “cannons got stuck in the mud, draft animals died, the French soldiers got sick, draftees deserted...” The environment seemed to be thwarting them on its own. Additionally, instead of engaging the French in battle, the Chickasaw wore them down by continually feinting and dodging, refusing to square off on a proper battlefield. In other words, the Natives let their natural environment do most of the work for them. By the next spring, the French had lost over five hundred men to disease. They were never able to defeat the Chickasaw.¹¹⁶

Decades after the Seminoles Wars, the Lakota (Sioux) people would use the Black Hills of the Dakota territory to play a similar sort of cat-and-mouse game with the

¹¹⁶ John J. McKay, *Discovering the Mammoth: A Tale of Giants, Unicorns, Ivory, and the Birth of a New Science* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2017), 140.

U.S. Army. The stark environment provided places for the Natives to hide, regroup, and plan attacks. Although the Lakota were eventually defeated, their environment allowed them to outlast other tribes, and to deliver some powerful blows to their enemies in the process, such as the famous Battle of Little Bighorn in what is now Montana.¹¹⁷

Perhaps the climate that most rivaled Florida in its harshness and difficulty was that of the Comanche tribe in the American southwest. Although the environment was vastly different than Florida's, the results were often similar in terms of human misery. The main reason, according to historian S.C. Gwynne, "was rainfall. Or lack of it." This was the opposite of Florida, which was inundated with floods and hurricanes. The desert, by contrast, was an ecology of fire, sometimes sparked by lightning, sometimes by humans; creating "conflagrations that cut enormous swaths through the plains." These high plains were perhaps the least hospitable climate in all of North America. The summers featured intense heat and scorching winds; and the winters brought blizzards and temperatures that could plunge fifty degrees in an hour. This brutal atmosphere constituted an "actual, physical barrier" that led to the Comanche being one of the last tribes to be conquered. The American southwest was, essentially (with perhaps the exception of Alaska), the last geographic region to be settled by white colonists.¹¹⁸

Florida, then, was not unique in providing difficult physical terrain. But the nature of its terrain, the details of its difficulties, were uniquely Floridian. In western territories distances could be vast and hazardous but were generally straightforward. Florida's paths, by contrast, tended to meander around swamps and impenetrable hammocks, just as de Vaca and Bartram had described in centuries past. Mahon tells us that when the

¹¹⁷ Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1970).

¹¹⁸ S. C. Gwynne, *Empire of the Summer Moon* (New York: Scribner, 2010).

United States took over the territory from Spain, there was only one road in its eastern half, a road that ran from the St. Mary's River to St. Augustine. Later, in the mid-1820s, a track was established from St. Augustine all the way to Pensacola, but because it "ran through wilderness, some portions of it were soon overgrown."¹¹⁹ There just was not enough traffic to keep the road maintained.

Naturally, mail was slow-moving. News of the Dade battle, one of the major events that started the war, took a full three weeks to reach President Andrew Jackson in Washington, D.C. Information, according to Seminole War historians John and Mary Lou Missal, "spread slowly in a nation where railroads and steamboats were in their infancy and the telegraph had yet to be invented."¹²⁰ The relatively short trip from St. Augustine to Jacksonville took a full twelve-hour day. Mail traveling from Tallahassee to Micanopy took four days. "Pack mules carried supplies," Mahon says, "but as often as not they caused more labor than they saved. It took six men to drag one mule through some of the bogs. As much as five hours in water no less than knee deep, beating one's feet against logs, snags, and cypress knees, while seeking traction in the slime, moving in a sunless medium—all this was hard for white men to bear."¹²¹

Logs and cypress knees were not the only hazards. Another is described by Lieutenant Henry Prince, an engineer who designed bridges and fortifications for the army, including Fort Foster, which was described as "one of the best field fortifications ever erected on this continent."¹²² In March of 1836, Prince recorded in his diary that he

¹¹⁹ Mahon, *History*, 132.

¹²⁰ John and Mary Lou Missal. *The Miserable Pride of a Soldier: The Letters and Journals of Col. William S. Foster in the Second Seminole War* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 2005), 16.

¹²¹ Mahon, *History*, 319.

¹²² Frank Laumer, *Amidst a Storm of Bullets: The Diary of Lt. Henry Prince in Florida, 1836–1842* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 1998), xv.

“crossed a portion of prairie on the skeletons of cattle that had sunk there and died.”¹²³ A fittingly morbid bridge, perhaps, for an engineer/warrior. The next year, Prince mentions another swamp crossing that was “not deep enough for the horses to swim and too soft for them to stand.” His regiment spent an hour crossing a twenty-yard stretch of marshy land; almost every man had to dismount in order to lessen weight on the horses. On another occasion, they had to march around a large swamp, and spent a day criss-crossing barely-existent trails, hopping from island to island, trying to find a way across. “Our rate,” says Prince, “was about three steps forward and one back.”¹²⁴ Such unwieldy movements did not bode well for basic communication, let alone extended military operations.

Colonel William S. Foster traveled in the same regiment as Prince and mentions him in his journals as “the Principal Engineer” who is “busily employed at the works.”¹²⁵ At the time, the army was building a bridge across the Hillsborough river. Foster reports that crossing the Hillsborough caused “much trouble owing to the depth of the water and bold banks on each side.” A few days later, they passed “several horses that had been left, being unable to travel further, besides the carcasses of others on the road side.”¹²⁶ In this respect, traveling through Florida seems akin to clichés of desert travelers passing skeletons by the road. It was that much of a wilderness.

Indeed, in the War’s later years, one of the Army’s main jobs was to build roads and bridges. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton acknowledged as much in 1839, in a speech to Congress in which he argued to end the war immediately. In his speech, Benton

¹²³ Laumer, *Amidst*, 37.

¹²⁴ Laumer, *Amidst*, 91–3 .

¹²⁵ Missall, *Miserable*, 45.

¹²⁶ Missall, *Miserable*, 52.

expounded on the terrible environmental conditions in Florida, claiming that the Army had done all it could do against the Seminoles; and now that most of the Seminoles had been relocated to Oklahoma by this point, the Army's main job had devolved into construction work. Benton introduced the first of many Homestead Acts, proposing land grants for settlers.¹²⁷ The senator also took an idea from the Biblical prophet Joel, who had urged ancient Jewish yeomen to beat their ploughshares into swords—that is, to take up weapons and defend their farms. In 1839, Benton argued that settlers should not only receive land, but also weapons. He said the Army had done its job by building “many hundred of miles of wagon roads” and “some thousands of feet in causeways and bridges.” Now it was the settlers' turn to take advantage of this basic infrastructure and clear the land. It would be their job to defend themselves. This, Benton said, was the only way to truly defeat the enemy. He refers to Seminoles as “ferocious beasts” who displayed “unparalleled treachery and savagism,” and says: “The heart of the Indian sickens when he hears the crowing of the cock, the barking of the dog, the sound of the ax....”¹²⁸ In other words, it is domesticity that will defeat the Natives, and domesticity can only be achieved when the land is conquered. Thus conquering the Seminoles necessarily entails conquering the environment. Benton's bill was defeated in Congress (we do not have a record of the exact vote, only that it was defeated), but certainly it reveals the burgeoning mindset among politicians of the time: that the Army was having a harder time fighting the environment than fighting the Seminoles.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Michael E. Welsh, “Legislating a Homestead Bill: Thomas Hart Benton and the Second Seminole War,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 57, No. 2 (Oct., 1978): 157-172.

¹²⁸ *Congressional Globe*, 26th Congress, 1st session, appendix, 71.

¹²⁹ Welsh, “Legislating,” 162.

Dense hammocks posed another obstacle. In his journals, Foster frequently says things like: “Progress of the Army being impeded by these hammocks.” Some days his regiment managed to travel only four or five miles because of the thick brush. According to John and Mary Lou Missal, this period of hardship and frustration from 1836–38 would be “the most difficult two years of [Foster’s] life.”¹³⁰

In March of 1836, General Winfield Scott established a goal of reaching a certain unnamed Seminole village in the interior of the peninsula. Says Mahon: “The first two days the troops traveled but seven miles; the going was so heavy that horses died of exhaustion.” Scott’s company missed its self-imposed deadline; the “date came and passed with the left wing still hacking its way through the wilderness.” By the time they reached the Seminole village, it had been abandoned, and the mission had defeated its own purpose.¹³¹

John T. Sprague also mentions the problematic hammocks. “The undergrowth is almost impenetrable,” he says, “consisting of scrub oak, palmetto, and grape-vines; so thick that a passage can only be made with the assistance of an axe, cutting a foot path as through a wall. At the distance of ten feet, an individual is totally obscured.” The palmetto plant was a particular pain to both soldiers and horses, as it sliced open their legs and sometimes destroyed men’s uniforms. Palmettos grew so thick that they “made it almost impossible for troops to get from lake to lake. Their clothes were torn to pieces, and their feet, legs, and hands lacerated, as if cut by a knife.”¹³²

Keeping fresh provisions was another difficulty. Joe Knetsch tells us that the biggest difficulty in maintaining a wilderness fortification was being able to continually

¹³⁰ Missal, *Miserable*, 12.

¹³¹ Mahon, *History*, 156–7.

¹³² Sprague, *Origins*, 282.

acquire fresh supplies. The absence of proper roads, or even consistently navigable rivers, meant that wagons and boats—“the most basic of transportation needs,” according to Knetsch, were extremely hard to come by. Delivering these types of vehicles depended on access to consistent waterways. But “[d]uring Florida’s dry season, even such large rivers as the Apalachicola and Chattahoochee dry to such low levels as to not allow normal passage.”¹³³

However, when it did rain, it often poured. Soldiers sometimes found themselves deluged by storms of tremendous power. Joseph R. Motte recalls the harrowing experience of a thunderstorm in 1837, describing “the roaring storm, the mournful whistling of the chilling wind as it went rushing by, and pouring of watery torrents around my head....” Sleeping was almost impossible: “My slumbers were destined to be of short duration; for scarcely had an hour elapsed when I awoke with sensations of suffocation, and found my couch of rest the bed of a rapid stream, which flowing with accumulating force and depth, threatened soon to merge the unconscious slumberer in a ‘sleep which knows no waking.’”¹³⁴ In other words, a flash flood almost swept the young surgeon away.

The year 1837 was a particularly bad year for storms. While we do not have accurate numbers for exactly how many hurricanes or tropical storms may have hit Florida that year, several sources mention the frequency and severity of bad weather. In August, a St. Augustine newspaper reported a storm that smashed multiple steamboats, wrecked a schooner, and left the Tolomato River (a tributary of the St. John’s) blocked by trees. Remnants from that storm lingered for days and created choppy conditions

¹³³ Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety*, 130–1.

¹³⁴ Motte, *Journey*, 134.

offshore, which led to a boat of soldiers capsizing, resulting in the deaths of five people. That same month, storms ravaged the town of St. Marks, just outside Tallahassee, where vast quantities of government supplies were washed away in the flood. September saw reports of severe storms up and down the East coast, which caused delays in the delivery of supplies. These storms were not only on the Atlantic coast, but in the Gulf of Mexico as well. The whole state was getting battered.¹³⁵

According to Knetsch, General Thomas Jesup had hoped to finish the war by year's end, but the unrelenting storms thwarted any progress he had hoped to make. "Constant delays in the delivery of boats, foot gear, troops and forage made what appeared on paper as a wonderful, workable plan into a logistician's nightmare." Several steamboats were also destroyed; another boat capsized, drowning four soldiers.¹³⁶ Another surgeon, Samuel Forry, wrote in October of that year: "Disasters by sea are now everyday occurrences."¹³⁷ Florida's environment, both by land and sea, was taking a tremendous toll on both the army and navy.

White men encountered all these problems merely by trying to exist in Florida: to build bridges, create roads, maintain supplies. But aside from the violence of man against nature, the war effort also demanded violence of man against man. This was not just a foul-weather training exercise. U.S. soldiers had to go into battle.

¹³⁵ Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety*, 266.

¹³⁶ Knetsch, *Fear and Anxiety*, 267–8.

¹³⁷ Samuel Forry, "Letters of Samuel Forry, Surgeon U.S. Army, 1837–38," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, No. 7 (July 1928): 90.

CHAPTER SIX: SEMINOLE ADVANTAGES

This chapter will examine some of the ways in which environmental factors that plagued the U.S. Army actually helped the Seminoles in their struggle. The chapter begins with a brief description of Seminole leader Coacoochee, meant to serve as an example of how deeply Native American culture and identity were intertwined with the natural environment. The impenetrable hammocks and murky waters that stymied white soldiers provided means of concealment or escape for Seminoles. The Battle of Okeechobee provides a perfect example of this dichotomy between the ways in which whites and Natives interacted with the environment. After detailing this Native mastery of the land, the chapter ends by quoting an early-19th century speech from John Quincy Adams in which Adams derides the Natives as having no true claim to their ancestral lands because they were not true masters of it. The placement of this quote within the thesis is meant to illustrate how ironic and out-of-touch many politicians were regarding treatment of Native Americans.

*

Coacoochee, known to whites as Wildcat, was one of the most prominent Seminole leaders during the Second War. He was captured by Thomas Jesup in 1837 and taken to the Fort Marion prison (formerly the old Spanish *castillo*) in St. Augustine, from which he famously escaped. Whether he bribed the guards, found a secret key, or simply squeezed between the bars as he claimed, the incident gave a spark of enthusiasm to Seminoles who had been struggling against oppression for so long. Coacoochee was not one of the final holdouts; he was not among those who could claim to be officially

unconquered. He surrendered in 1841 and tried, mostly without success, to petition for Native rights through the U.S. government system. He later emigrated to Mexico.¹³⁸

We mention Coacoochee here because his story provides a good example of how the Seminoles were connected to their natural environment. He told it through a translator upon his surrender in 1841. The story expresses his regrets about leaving his homeland.

Coacoochee was born with a twin sister, which, according to Seminole historian Susan Miller (who is a descendant of Coacoochee), was considered good luck by the tribe. Coacoochee was thought to have “special spiritual gifts” and he “lived easily among the spirits.”¹³⁹ One night, as a young man, when he was deep in the forest on a bear hunt, he heard a “strange noise—it was something like a voice, which told me to go to her [his twin sister]. The camp was some distance, but I took my rifle and started. The night was dark and gloomy; the wolves howled about me as I went from hammock to hammock; sounds came often to my ear—I thought she was speaking to me.” When he arrived home, his sister was dead.

Some time later, again while hunting, Coacoochee had a vision. He was seated beneath a large oak, and “in the moss hanging over me, I heard strange sounds.” His sister appeared, clad in white like a ghost, and gave him a cup filled with water. By drinking from it, he was guaranteed an afterlife in a good land where “game is abundant.” His sister left him with some white beads, which symbolized peace, and which Coacoochee claimed were stolen from him in prison.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ John and Mary Lou Missall, *Florida Seminole Wars: Heritage Trail* (Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, 2015), 25.

¹³⁹ Susan Miller, *Coacoochee's Bones: A Seminole Saga* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 21.

¹⁴⁰ Miller, *Coacoochee*, 21–3.

This story offers a glimpse into the Native worldview. First, the narrator is named after a creature of the forest—the wildcat. (Mexicans would later call him *Gato de Monte*, the Mountain Lion.)¹⁴¹ He also seems to harbor no fear at being alone in the woods, at midnight, with wolves howling around him as he hunts bears. This seems contrary to the sentiments of white soldiers regarding dark forests and wild animals. Coacoochee’s family was the Wind Clan, named after yet another force of nature.¹⁴² And his idea of heaven involved an unspoiled wilderness where he could roam and hunt.

These details reveal how deeply connected the Seminoles were to their land. Of course, Indian culture had been intertwined with nature for centuries. Historian Edwin C. McReynolds, in his history of the Seminoles, notes how “[t]he Florida Indians produced an abundance of food in their fields and from the forests, streams, and lakes.” They enjoyed “venison, hominy, milk, and corn cakes,” as well as “bear’s ribs, varieties of fish, roasted turkeys,” and a type of jelly made by “chopping the roots [of a certain briar] into small segments, pounding them to a pulp, and mixing with water.”¹⁴³ These were likely the same foods eaten, and the same general lifestyles practiced, by pre-Seminole Native Americans in times past. “Certainly,” McReynolds says, “there is a close similarity between the food patterns of [the] seventeenth century culture and that of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Indians in the same region.”¹⁴⁴ In one way or another, Native peoples had been co-existing with this landscape for centuries.

Some whites failed to recognize that Natives were so comfortable with the land as the result of adaptation over thousands of years, and instead regarded Native peoples as

¹⁴¹ Miller, *Coacoochee*, 131.

¹⁴² Miller, *Coacoochee*, 25.

¹⁴³ McReynolds, *Seminoles*, 17.

¹⁴⁴ McReynolds, *Seminoles*, 6.

having a sort of magical quality respecting the natural environment. Of course it is condescending or even racist to suggest that Native Americans had a “sixth sense,” or some sort of preternatural ability to connect with nature. They were human beings, after all, not magically stylized literary creations. This particular strain of paternalism shows up in the work of the aforementioned Romantic poets, who tended to view Natives with a sort of backhanded respect, the respect due to the “Noble Savage,” i.e. one who lives at peace with nature because he is merely a step above an animal himself. What these white poets did not realize was that the Natives had actually mastered the land in far more effective, and sustainable, ways than whites ever had.

This played out in battle as well. It may sound clichéd to say that Natives, when pursued, would simply “melt into the forest,” but that is exactly what many white soldiers describe. Sprague, explaining the difficulty in apprehending Seminoles or even engaging them in proper battle, says: “Forty-seven thousand square miles in the territory of Florida, was occupied by an enemy by nature vindictive and revengeful, treacherous and subtle, striving for their rights, and for the soil made sacred by those superstitious influences which became part of an Indian’s nature, by his duty to the Great Spirit.” Sprague continues, explaining the Natives’ elusiveness: “Every hammock and swamp was to them a citadel, to which and from which they could retreat with wonderful facility. Regardless of food or the climate, time or distance, they moved from one part of the country to the other ... while the soldier, dependent upon supplies, and sinking under a tropical sun, could only hear of his foe by depredations committed in the section of the country over which he *scouted* the day before.”¹⁴⁵ The italics are Sprague’s; they convey the frustration of white soldiers who knew the enemy was all around them, but could never

¹⁴⁵ Sprague, *Origin*, 296–7.

pinpoint exactly where. Essentially, as Mahon tells us, “[t]here were large swamps in all quarters of the territory where the Seminoles were at home, and where the white man could not go without an Indian or a Negro guide.”¹⁴⁶ In analyzing the Seminoles’ guerilla tactics, political activist and historian Howard Zinn, in *A People’s History of the United States*, maintains that no invading force wanted to face the Seminoles in the Florida swamps.¹⁴⁷

Naturally, this led to certain strategic decisions by the Natives. “Knowing their numerical inferiority,” says Mahon, “and utilizing their terrain, the Seminoles were less willing to engage in battles than some tribes, and were more difficult to corner and to force to fight because of their semi-tropical home.”¹⁴⁸ These circumstances forced U.S. commanders to alter their own techniques, striking at villages, crops, and herds instead of the warriors they could not find. Thus the environment dictated military strategy.

The United States changed its tactics in terms of who or what was targeted, but not in terms of basic fighting style. The hundred or so soldiers who were slaughtered under Major Francis Dade, in one of the triggering events for the Second War, were marching in old-fashioned columns, lugging heavy equipment, and decked out in full military uniforms.¹⁴⁹ They knew the Seminoles were, in all likelihood, following and watching silently, waiting for the right moment to attack. But they never considered changing the way in which they fought.

Winfield Scott’s campaigns fizzled for similar reasons. Scott, taking command in 1836, embarked on an aggressive offensive strategy that was based on “scant knowledge

¹⁴⁶ Mahon, *History*, 129.

¹⁴⁷ Zinn, *People’s History*, 144.

¹⁴⁸ Mahon, *History*, 323.

¹⁴⁹ Frank Laume, *Dade’s Last Command* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

of Indian warfare.”¹⁵⁰ Scott had a reputation as a pretentious, haughty man who denigrated the capabilities of those serving under him. He likewise underestimated the fighting skills of the Seminoles. According to Mahon, Scott “was almost certain to fail because the Indians were too mobile and too vigilant to be caught between the slow-moving, noisy columns trying to converge upon them.”¹⁵¹ Howard Zinn describes the Seminole strategy as “a series of guerilla attacks,” which were “the classic Indian tactic against a foe with superior firearms.” Zinn wonders why the lessons of the Revolutionary War, only sixty years prior, did not stick with U.S. leaders in the Seminole Wars. After all, the United States had earned its independence largely through guerilla-style methods. Zinn invokes a George Washington quote that may have behooved strategic U.S. decision-makers: “In three words, beware of surprise ... again and again, General, beware of surprise.”¹⁵²

The Battle of Wahoo Swamp offers an excellent example of U.S. ineptitude. Led by civil governor Richard Keith Call, who envisioned ending the war with one decisive victory, units of volunteer militia and army soldiers embarked on a mission to remove Seminoles from the Withlacoochee Cove area in 1836.¹⁵³ Simply put, Call was not a good military leader. He held no official army rank, and had trouble maintaining order among his men, especially the local militias. The journey itself was a disaster. During the march, the men ran out of food and were forced to eat their horses, many of which were already dying from lack of forage—over six hundred horses died on the campaign. Each

¹⁵⁰ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 75.

¹⁵¹ Mahon, *History*, p. 166.

¹⁵² Zinn, *People's History*, 145.

¹⁵³ McReynolds, *Seminoles*, 161.

morning, soldiers burned the saddles of their dead mounts, rather than carry them along the trail.¹⁵⁴

On November 21, Call and his men reached the Wahoo Swamp, where the enemy awaited. During the opening volleys, Call's men became disoriented. "The entire attacking line, now badly disorganized, floundered through the dense swamp in search of the foe. Wading through mud and water for a mile and a half..." The parties traded gunfire all day, but ultimately Call decided to stand down rather than try to traverse the swamp any farther. A large factor in this decision was the water's opacity. Because of its blackness, the soldiers could not see the bottom, and had no idea how deep the crossing was. Thinking it too risky, they withdrew. Later, it was discovered that "the narrow branch could easily have been forded. The blackness of the water concealed the fact that it was only three feet deep." If the soldiers had managed to get across, they would have discovered a thriving village on an island in the swamp's interior, where over six hundred Seminole families had lived since the start of the war.¹⁵⁵

Call's ineptitude led to a falling-out with President Jackson, who suffered "some loss of confidence in the leaders of his armies in Florida."¹⁵⁶ Jackson later wrote that "the whole Florida war from the first to the present time has been a succession of blunders and misfortune."¹⁵⁷ But it must be noted that the environment itself, as much as resistance from the Natives, forced the white soldiers to retreat. Florida itself had beaten them back.

One of the Second War's defining battles took place on Christmas Day in 1837. Colonel Zachary Taylor had pursued the remaining Seminoles—those who had thus far

¹⁵⁴ Mahon, *History*, 181.

¹⁵⁵ Mahon, *History*, 181.

¹⁵⁶ McReynolds, *Seminoles*, 161.

¹⁵⁷ McReynolds, *Seminoles*, 218.

resisted relocation—into the southern half of the peninsula. Like Jesup and Call before him, Taylor hoped to end the war with one swift stroke. He led a force of almost a thousand men to the marshy shores of Lake Okeechobee, where around 450 Seminoles awaited. It was not a trap, exactly—Taylor knew the enemy was there—but the Natives had intentionally drawn the U.S. army to this spot and arranged the battlefield so that it would be advantageous to themselves. They had cut a sort of tunnel through the dense sawgrass in order to make a corridor for fire; they had carved notches on the trees by which they could steady their guns. “Never,” according to Mahon, “had Indians prepared a battleground with greater care.”¹⁵⁸

Frank Laumer, author of *Dade’s Last Command* and many other books about the Seminole Wars, says: “It was a superbly selected location. Indeed, throughout the war, the Seminoles had shown themselves to be master tacticians.” Taylor, on the other hand, had no inclination for subtlety. He organized his men into three flanks, but there was little mystery about their plan, which was a full frontal assault. Says Laumer: “In contrast to the Seminoles, who had shown considerable imagination in preparation for battle, Taylor relied on simple brute force.” He thought his soldiers would simply storm the Natives’ stronghold and annihilate them.

The battle was chaotic from the start. Taylor’s volunteer militia panicked and broke apart during the first volley from the Seminoles. According to Mahon, “The volunteers [later] denied Taylor’s claim, asserting that they had to crawl through the sawgrass, stand to fire, and drop down again....”¹⁵⁹ Still, the army pushed forward, into a swamp “three-fourths of a mile in breadth ... totally impassable for horses, and nearly so

¹⁵⁸ Mahon, *History*, 227.

¹⁵⁹ Mahon, *History*, 228.

for foot, covered with a thick growth of sawgrass, five feet high, and about knee-deep in mud and water....”¹⁶⁰ One can imagine the U.S. commanders looking at each other and saying, “Not *again*....”

From their hidden position in a hammock—a spot “so thick a man could not see two feet ahead of him”¹⁶¹—the Seminoles opened fire on the struggling whites. Bodies began falling into the mire. Slowly, the soldiers made their way across the swamp, onto firmer ground. But they found little success there. The Natives were too good at hiding among the trees; they “easily avoided their heavy-footed pursuers” and escaped in their getaway boats, heading “for islands hidden in the vast watery expanse.”¹⁶²

The battle had lasted a few hours, but now the white soldiers were stuck languishing in a swamp, disorganized, with twenty-six dead—including at least four officers—and over a hundred wounded. Many of the wounded were unable to walk and had to be dragged out of the swamp. Meanwhile the Seminoles had disappeared. They had suffered only eleven casualties.¹⁶³

Because of his losses, Taylor could not pursue the enemy any farther. He ordered a wooden footway to be built over the swamp, in order to carry out those incapacitated by injuries. The rest of Christmas Day, and the entire next day, was spent tending to the wounded and rounding up herds of Seminole cattle, which the Natives had had to abandon.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ Kenneth Porter, *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 89.

¹⁶¹ Porter, *Black Seminoles*, 92.

¹⁶² Porter, *Black Seminoles*, 91.

¹⁶³ Mahon, *History*, 229.

¹⁶⁴ Mahon, *History*, 229.

In this aftermath, Taylor “soberly considered his options.” To chase the Seminoles deeper into the swamps, far removed from any supply lines, with a large contingent of wounded men, was impossible. Taylor’s mission had been to either relocate or exterminate the Seminoles; he had done neither. Kenneth Porter, author of *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People*, describes Taylor’s men as a “battered force” that “struggled back to Fort Gardner on December 31.”¹⁶⁵

“It had been,” according to John and Mary Lou Missall, “the largest and bloodiest battle of the war.”¹⁶⁶ Taylor, of course, decided to spin the narrative: he claimed the battle as a major U.S. victory. After all, they had driven the Natives into the swamps and requisitioned all their livestock. In an 1839 letter, he explicitly blamed Florida’s environment for any failing on the part of his men:

[S]uch is the nature of [the Seminoles’] country that concealment is found to be more efficacious than opposition, and they leave the climate to fight their battles, which certainly has proven more destructive to our troops than the rifle or scalping-knife. If nature has so organized the Indian that he is fleeter of foot than the white man, and given him a country where no tracks are left when he flies; and if we have not overtaken him, it is our misfortune, not our fault.¹⁶⁷

Taylor’s words are worth analyzing. He says the Natives allowed “the climate to fight their battles,” and that climate “certainly has proven more destructive to our troops” than the Natives themselves. Taylor is obviously trying to justify any perceived failure and turn it into a political victory. According to him, the savage Natives did not defeat the whites; *nature itself* defeated the whites—and that, after all, is nothing shameful. Judging by Taylor’s later political success, it seems his story was accepted. “Though no one could

¹⁶⁵ Porter, *Black Seminoles*, 91.

¹⁶⁶ Missall, *Miserable*, 128.

¹⁶⁷ Sprague, *Origin*, 226.

have predicted it at the time,” John and Mary Lou Missall tell us, “Taylor had taken his first steps to the White House.”¹⁶⁸

The Seminoles also considered the battle a victory. They had suffered relatively few casualties, and while they lost their livestock, none of their remaining people were captured or forced to relocate. Though Coacoochee and others would eventually surrender years later, the tribe continued living in the Everglades, remaining officially unconquered. The U.S. war effort continued for almost five years, with little to show for it. Campaigning in the Everglades was even more difficult than the marches in northern Florida had been. In praising his men’s fortitude, Col. Samuel St. John-Rogers wrote, “One single scout of seven days will disable men of any other character.”¹⁶⁹ In other words, a week hiking through the Everglades was enough to incapacitate the strongest soldier. “It is indeed doubtful,” says Mahon, “if United States ground forces endured harsher field conditions anywhere.”¹⁷⁰

According to historian James W. Covington, “[s]even years of conflict came to an end when the military authorities and President John Tyler realized that total Seminole removal was impossible.”¹⁷¹ The U.S. had been stuck in a quagmire, both literally and figuratively, and then abandoned the war without any clear demarcation of victory. Basically, the war just fizzled out.¹⁷²

In *The Disinherited: The Lost Birthright of the American Indian*, novelist and historian Dale Van Every describes the types of relationships eastern Native Americans

¹⁶⁸ Missall, *Miserable*, 129.

¹⁶⁹ Christopher Kimball, “Campaigning in the Everglades,” *Florida Seminole Wars: Heritage Trail* (Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, 2015), 47.

¹⁷⁰ Mahon, *History*, 240.

¹⁷¹ James W. Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 106.

¹⁷² Zinn, *People’s History*, 146.

had with their lands: “He lived in the open. He knew every marsh, glade, hill top, rock, spring, creek, as only the hunter can know them. ... [H]e loved the land with a deeper emotion than any proprietor. He felt himself as much a part of it as the rocks and trees, the animals and birds. His homeland was holy ground....” Van Every also goes on to say that “the adaptation of the Seminole to his environment was to be matched only by the crane or alligator.”¹⁷³ The key word here is *adaptation*. Van Every is not necessarily falling into the racist trap of labeling Natives as “noble savages.” Rather, he is stressing that their mastery over the land was less the result of inherent abilities and rather the result of thousands of years of adaptation.

In 1802, nearly thirty years before the Second Seminole War, future President John Quincy Adams gave an address in which he summarized the U.S. viewpoint regarding Native Americans. “Their cultivated fields; their constructed habitations; a space ... for their subsistence ... was undoubtedly by the laws of nature theirs. But what is the right of the huntsman to the forest of a thousand miles over which he had accidentally ranged in quest of prey? Shall the liberal bounties of Providence be claimed by a few hundreds? Shall the lordly savage not only disdain the virtues and enjoyments of civilization himself, but shall he control the civilization of the world?” The racism, paternalism, and hypocrisy of these words hardly needs pointing out. “Savages” may eschew the comforts of “civilization,” Adams is saying, but they cannot force the rest of us to do the same. And if, by their very existence, they threaten our own comfort or convenience, then it is they who must be removed.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Dale Van Every, *The Disinherited: The Lost Birthright of the American Indian* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966).

¹⁷⁴ McReynolds, *Seminoles*, 88.

In a later speech, Adams posed the question: “What is the Indian title? It is mere occupancy for the purpose of hunting. It is not like our tenures; they have no idea of a title to the soil itself. It is overrun by them, rather than inhabited. It is not a true and legal possession.” Again: the Natives are scarcely better than animals, perhaps even vermin—for what else would “overrun” the land?

Considering the Seminole victories that would come in subsequent decades, Adams’s words are dripping with irony. The Seminoles, who merely “occupied” the land and had no “true and legal” right to its possession, knew the land far more intimately than whites did. One might ask Adams who really deserved ownership of the land (if such a thing is possible): those who could thrive by cultivating it sustainably? Or those who could not cross three feet of water because of all the mud?

It must be noted that Adams’s views evolved over the decades. In the early part of the nineteenth century, he championed the rights of white settlers. But as the United States continued to expand, and Adams was exposed to more Native peoples, he changed drastically, swinging from an approbation of Removal to the radical (at the time) idea that the United States was very much in the wrong, that indeed the country’s treatment of the Natives was “among the most heinous sins of this nation” and “a sickening mass of putrefaction.” These beliefs led him to decline the post of Chairman of the House Committee on Indian Affairs offered by the Whig party in 1841, and later to oppose the Mexican-American War, which he came to see as an excuse to expand slavery and to genocide the Natives.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Lynn Hudson Parsons, “‘A Perpetual Harrow upon My Feelings’: John Quincy Adams and the American Indian,” *The New England Quarterly*, Sep., 1973, Vol. 46, No. 3, 339-379.

But while Adams was able to expand and evolve his beliefs, such critical thinking and self-awareness eluded most Americans, and those early views expressed by Adams continued to persist throughout the nineteenth century, even if the man himself repudiated them.

CHAPTER SEVEN: COMMAND DECISIONS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

This chapter will examine some primary sources regarding the end of the Second Seminole War, specifically in terms of how environmental factors led to the war's conclusion. The chapter will start by discussing correspondence from Generals Jesup and Scott, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas Hartley Crawford, and President Martin Van Buren. The latter part of the chapter will focus on some of the public discourse that was taking place in newspapers at the time, much of which reinforces the idea that environmental factors led to the war's end.

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In an 1837 letter, General Thomas Jesup wrote that his “troops have endured every hardship and privation; they have been exposed to the drenching rains, the noxious vapors, and the scorching sun of an almost torrid climate; they have waded rivers, made long marches over burning sands, traversed almost impassable swamps, and sought the enemy in fastnesses such as American soldiers had seldom penetrated before”¹⁷⁶ Jesup wanted to praise his men, but perhaps he also sought justification as to why he had failed to completely relocate the Seminoles. The environment, the climate, was simply too demanding.

Jesup was not the only high-level commander to feel this way. General Winfield Scott, in an 1836 letter to Secretary of War Lewis Cass, said that while he agreed that soldiers returning from the Florida War should be granted acreages, these land-grants should be provided elsewhere, outside of Florida—otherwise it would be a fraud. He was implying that no soldier would consider land in Florida to be a reward. Such a stinging

¹⁷⁶ Sprague, *Origin*, 182.

dismissal of Florida's natural environment reveals how difficult Scott found the place to be. It was, in the opinions of him many others, not a climate suitable for civilized people.¹⁷⁷

Another general who had a distaste for the local environment was William S. Harney. On marches, Harney would burn the land indiscriminately, setting fire to hammocks in order to drive out wild animals which he then used for target practice. Lieutenant John Phelps rode along with some of these marches. In his personal journal, Phelps remarks that fire and destruction seemed to follow "wherever Harney's men set their feet," and he describes their wake as a hellish trail of nihilism, "desolate and filled with smoke." Perhaps Harney's most sadistic episode occurred when he captured two porpoises, dragged them up the beach, tied their tails together, and proceeded to taunt and torture them to death. To say that Harney had an antipathy for Florida's flora and fauna would be an understatement. His behavior seems almost Caligulan; few others went to such extremes to express their unhappiness; but it does serve as one more example of how Florida's environment sparked hatred among command officials on the ground.¹⁷⁸

As for command officials in Washington, D.C., the attitude might best be described as one of apathy rather than antipathy. The absence of material regarding the Seminole Wars among the official Presidential papers of both Martin Van Buren and John Tyler begs the question: How high was this issue on their respective radars? Van Buren did mention the war in his Fourth (and final) Annual Message—roughly the equivalent of the modern State of the Union address. Whereas contemporary State of the Union speeches are typically delivered in February, Van Buren gave his address on

¹⁷⁷ Winfield Scott, letter to Lewis Cass, June 14, 1836, in *American State Papers, Military Affairs*.

¹⁷⁸ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 158.

December 5, 1840, after he had already lost the election to Harrison, but before he officially left office the following March. In this wide-ranging speech, Van Buren mentions the Seminole War only briefly, and mainly in the context of deflecting blame for its apparent lack of progress. “That this contest has endured so long is to be attributed to causes beyond the control of the Government,” Van Buren said. After praising his “experienced” generals and “distinguished” soldiers, he claimed that the true reason the War had not come to its proper conclusion was the “vast extent of the theater of hostilities”—that is, the physical dimensions of the Florida peninsula—and “the almost insurmountable obstacles presented by the nature of the country, the climate, and the wily character of the savages.”¹⁷⁹ According to Van Buren, the reason the Florida war had devolved into a metaphorical quagmire was not an inept government, or military weakness, but rather the fact that Florida was a literal quagmire.

Van Buren’s thinking may have been influenced by another speech given just over a week before his Annual Message. On November 25, Thomas Hartley Crawford, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs who had been appointed by Van Buren, delivered his own annual report. He had a lot to cover. Besides the Seminoles, the U.S. government was simultaneously dealing with the relocation process of dozens of tribes, including the Creek, Cherokee, Choctaw, and others; and was beginning to take part in skirmishes against the Plains Indians farther west. Still, Crawford devoted a few lines to the Florida war, though he preferred to think of it as a “harassing conflict,” rather than a full-blown war. (This line of reasoning seems comparable to the United States labeling the 20th-century Vietnam conflict a “police action” rather than an official war.) “War it hardly

¹⁷⁹ Martin Van Buren, Fourth Annual Message, December 5, 1840, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fourth-annual-message-4>.

deserves to be called,” Crawford said, “were it not so prolific of expense, hard service, disease, and death.” He claimed that the Army’s services were “not appreciated by the country,” and that soldiers had to deal with numerous hardships specific to Florida’s natural environment: they “must travel over arid sands, and wade through morasses and lakes, and struggle through hammocks—to chase the shadow, while the substance is invisible, through all these difficulties—bring sickness and death, if a bullet from a concealed foe spares its intended victim for a more painful end.”¹⁸⁰ In other words, getting shot would have been the quick and easy way out; those who survived actual combat had to face far more dangerous and painful foes. Again, the theme is that the environment—not the Natives themselves—was what kept the Army from achieving its goals. Despite these concerns, the Van Buren administration was in favor of continuing the war until the Florida territory was free of Seminoles, a scenario that seemed increasingly unlikely, as the recalcitrant holdouts in the Everglades were nearly impossible to root out.

In the government, there seems to have been genuine concern from certain bell-ringers like the aforementioned Senator Thomas Hart Benton, who clamored for an end to the war on both economic and moral grounds. And much of the nation sympathized with Seminole chief Osceola, who was captured under a false flag and died under poor treatment.¹⁸¹ But in many ways, the war was separated from ground-level reality and turned into a partisan political issue. In 1840, it was just one footnote among a larger socio-economic conversation that was taking place in the United States. As typically happens in American politics, the challenging party—in this case, William Henry

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Hartley Crawford, Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, November 25, 1840, https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t47.d48.401_h.doc.2_5?accountid=10920.

¹⁸¹ Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 178.

Harrison's Whigs—framed itself as morally superior and fiscally more responsible than the lame duck party, Van Buren's Democrats—the ones who had gotten the country into the war in the first place. The Whigs argued that they never would have allowed this, and some prominent Whig-friendly media outlets used the ongoing quagmire as an example of the Democrats' fiscal irresponsibility. One of the biggest reasons for the financial waste, they said, was the fact that Florida's environment was too harsh to ever be truly conquered or settled. Thus the objectives of the war were flawed and unattainable from the beginning.

Editorials from the *New York Star*, the *Baltimore Sun*, the *National Intelligencer*, the *Niles Weekly Register*, and other newspapers promoted this viewpoint of Florida as a place unfit for decent humans to live comfortably, calling it, variously, “lost to all use,” “dispirited in heart and feelings,” filled with “disease and death,” and a battleground, not with the Natives, but with that “terrible enemy, the fever.”¹⁸²

Journalism was not the only way to convey this message. Popular fictions also played a role in defining the public discourse surrounding Florida at this time. One of these, *The Miraculous Escape of Mary Godfrey*, which originally appeared as a pamphlet in New York and Rhode Island under anonymous authorship, painted a wild picture of Florida. The narrative purported to be a real-life account of a settler who survived an Indian attack and, along with her four children, braved the wilderness—until they were helped by a kindly runaway slave.¹⁸³

In *Liquid Landscape*, Michele Navakas examines the psychology behind this story: Was the runaway slave meant to represent abolitionist views, or paternalistic

¹⁸² Monaco, *Second Seminole War*, 160.

¹⁸³ Navakas, *Liquid*, 110.

slaveowners' views? Was the story intended to be pro- or anti-war? Regardless of the symbolism, one thing was clear: the territory itself was depicted as a fierce, unrelenting wilderness, with an almost-Brothers-Grimm atmosphere: a place of certain death for a woman and four children alone in the forest at night. Different actions by different characters may represent various political motivations of the time, but the backdrop for the entire drama is a nightmarish place of desolation. The narrative's conclusion says the "face of the country, full of cypress swamps and marshes, was impenetrable" and remained a "natural defense of the Indians."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Navakas, *Liquid*, 104–6, 111.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSIONS

Michele Navakas begins her book *Liquid Landscape* by posing a philosophical question: “What does it mean to take root on unstable ground? Ground that shifts, seeps, expands, and erodes cannot sustain the familiar practices of settlement that British colonists brought to North America’s Eastern Seaboard.” Likewise, such a landscape could not sustain traditional (from a white Eurocentric perspective) nineteenth-century methods of warfare. For U.S. soldiers in the Second Seminole War, long marches were extremely difficult. Fighting in open fields proved elusive. Lakes were treacherous; storms were capricious. Heat, insects, and wild animals were consistent threats. And the United States’ enemy, the Native Seminoles, used these factors to their advantage, for, as Navakas notes, human beings have lived on the peninsula for millennia, “despite the fact that Florida’s liquid landscape challenges crucial notions of land, space, and boundaries.” Though Navakas’s book deals mostly with “conceptual possibilities,” it also acknowledges the “pronounced physical challenges” for anyone attempting to inhabit the liquid landscape for an extended period of time.¹⁸⁵

Romantic ideals, especially in terms of a “civilizing mission,” justified what was essentially a war of white supremacy, not only against the Natives, but also against black slaves, as one of the biggest reasons for entering the war was to preserve the status quo of chattel slavery in the South. Many young men from the North, often inspired by the prospect of Florida’s scenic landscape, joined the war effort. As this thesis has demonstrated, many of them quickly became disillusioned after a short time in Florida’s environment. Various hardships and ailments led soldiers to seek medical leave; some

¹⁸⁵ Navakas, *Liquid*, 1–3.

were even driven to suicide. Mosquitos killed far more soldiers than the Natives did. Even the highest ranking officers revealed empathy with, or sympathy for, their soldiers in private letters and journals, and in their official correspondence. Generals Jesup, Scott, and Taylor all placed at least some portion of blame onto the physical environment—perhaps to deflect blame away from themselves, of course; but still the environment looms heavily as a backdrop. Senators and Cabinet members lamented Florida’s near-inhabitability. Even President Van Buren acknowledged environmental factors when explaining the United States’ failure to achieve its objectives.

Much has been written about the causes of the war. The war’s ending has received significantly less attention. Different historians have different goals and are writing from different perspectives, of course, but the Second Seminole War’s ending is worthy of reconsideration from an environmental perspective. Certainly there were financial considerations—but the war was only so expensive because of environmental difficulties. Environmental hardship, in its various forms, was the main reason the war ended when and how it did. Aided by the natural environment that had shaped them, and been shaped by them, the Seminoles of Florida were able to remain, as they do into the twenty-first century, the United States’ only officially unconquered Native American tribe.

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