

1929

An Indian Attack of 1856 on the Home of Willoughby Tillis

James Dallas Tillis



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Tillis, James Dallas (1929) "An Indian Attack of 1856 on the Home of Willoughby Tillis," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 8 : No. 4 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol8/iss4/4>

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF INDIAN ATTACKS
IN FLORIDA

AN INDIAN ATTACK OF 1856 ON THE HOME OF
WILLOUGHBY TILLIS

Narrative of James Dallas Tillis

In December, 1855, my father, Willoughby Tillis, and my mother, Celia Tillis, with their seven children moved from Tampa to within 31/2 miles of Fort Meade. Those children were myself, James Dallas Tillis, aged 6, Calhoun, aged 8, William W., a baby, and three sisters, Mary Ann, aged 10, Callie, and Cantacey. We had also one grown half-brother, Lafayette.

The Seminole War had impoverished all settlers in our part of the State and my father left Tampa to seek fertile grazing lands for his cattle and fine horses. Locating a homestead suitable for his purpose near Whidden Creek, he began work on a substantial house. While this home was in the process of building, our household goods were stored under a temporary shelter where we ourselves slept. Travelers repeatedly warned my father that the Seminole Indians had been ravaging solitary homes nearby, but being of a courageous and venturesome nature (having been through the Indian War of '36 and '37), he ignored these warnings, confident that he could ably protect his own. However, these warnings became so persistent that he was persuaded to move up within one mile and a half from Fort Meade where he shared a house with a Mr. Underhill, his wife and three children. This gentleman was also a refugee from his own home, an

Note-This narrative was dictated to the assistant editor of the *QUARTERLY* by James Dallas Tillis in October, 1929. Perhaps none now living, other than Mr. Tillis, have seen a hostile Seminole Indian.

unsafe distance from Fort Meade. A Mr. Russell had built and owned this house. It was constructed of pine logs, so finely notched that no cracks were visible between them, except in two or three instances where the brick chimney joined the logs. My father did not then appreciate the fine workmanship, but there came a time when he did.

A short distance from our new home was a large cattlepen enclosed by a worm rail fence. Into this my father drove his fine cattle. They immediately thrived in their comfortable quarters after having been penned in at Tampa for so long a period. Near the cattlepen was a barn in which my father's thoroughbred horses and a very fine animal of Mr. Underhill were stalled. A smoke-house adjoining the barn completed our little farm.

We lived contentedly in our new surroundings until May-I do not remember the exact date. The Indians, to all appearances, were quiet and at peace and were; therefore, far from our happy thoughts. One night my baby brother was ill, and after midnight, my father persuaded my mother to lie down and obtain a much needed rest. At sunup she arose and quietly prepared to go to the cattlepen to do the morning milking. As father had remained up all night, she wished to spare him this, and her consideration undoubtedly saved his life.

Waking our negro maid (Aunt Line, as we children called her), my brother Calhoun and myself, we made our way in the dim morning light to the cattlepen. Calhoun and I remained at the gap ready to lower the bars when the cows were ready for pasture. My mother and Aunt Line advanced towards the cows. From the first moment, my mother realized that all was not well with the cattle. The cows were restless and milled around, pushing against one another incessantly. She approached a cow which she knew from

experience was quite docile. The animal refused to stand and be milked. "Attempting to soothe it, she remarked, to Aunt Line, "Something is wrong with these cows."

Suddenly, the cow at whose side she knelt, bowed its head as though to charge and peered in fear towards the worm rail fence. My mother followed its gaze. Peering between the bars of the crude fence was the copper-colored face of an Indian! Instantly she discerned in the half-light many other faces lying close against the rails. She did not hesitate, but crying loudly, "Indians! Run for the house!" she suited her action to her words.

I can well remember my sensation at hearing that dread cry. My brother and I bolted in the direction of the house. I stumbled and fell. Precious moments were lost. The Indians were now firing rapidly. I rounded the smoke-house. A bullet struck the corner by which my small head had just passed. I skimmed a corner of the rail fence, scarcely touching the top. Under ordinary conditions, I could never have cleared it so easily, but fear lends wings to our feet.

After what seemed to us all an unendurable time we reached the door of our house. My father, who had heard us, rushed to the door, frantically trying to load his gun. He pushed us past him, shouting within, "My gun won't fire! Underhill, if yours will, for God's sake, shoot!" He then slammed the door and shot the wooden bolt in place, and it was not one moment too soon! A bullet from an Indian's gun splintered the planks and ploughed through the forehead of Aunt Line. She was painfully wounded, but my mother eventually nursed her back to health.

There is an explanation as to why we managed to escape the shower of bullets with only the one casualty. The milling cattle, thoroughly frightened, constantly came between the firing Indians and our flee-

ing figures. This, of course, interfered with their aim. A Seminole ordinarily shot straight.

My father and Mr. Underhill took up their places at each side of the brick chimney and fired on the Indians who were hiding behind the corner of the fence. Mr. Underhill, on his first shot, brought down one who fell outside the enclosure between the pen and the smoke-house. His comrades immediately reached out and drew his body to safety. We afterwards learned that it was a custom of the Seminoles to protect the bodies of their dead. If a white man's hand first touched the corpse, it was forever abandoned.

As the smoke from the guns of my father and Mr. Underhill indicated their positions to the Indians, they were obliged to fire and jump back to safety. This, of course, forced them to fire much more slowly than their enemies. One bullet struck a crack near my father's leaning body, but the logs were so finely notched that the bullet was deflected and my father's life spared. He ever afterwards boasted of the fine workmanship on our house.

Suddenly, we were horrified to hear my half brother, Lafayette, yell from the barn loft! A moment later we saw him leap to the ground and run for the house. We unbolted the door and he rushed through amid a shower of bullets. We had not even known he was on the farm. The day before, he had gone into Fort Meade and returning late that night had climbed into the loft so as not to disturb the baby.

Lafayette told us that the Indians were then attempting to set fire to the barn. He had watched them in horror from where he crouched. Preferring a death by bullet to one of fire, he had leapt to the ground and taken his slim chance.

After several attempts to burn the barn (it was difficult owing to their lack of matches), they drove Mr. Underhill's horse from its stall, cut its throat, and

left it to die. Crawling to my father's horses huddled together on the edge of a nearby field, they shot and wounded them wantonly. We in the house grieved over the cruel deaths of our animals of which we were very fond.

At length the sound of the firing was heard near Fort Meade by two small boys who were driving their father's cattle out to pasture. Running to their father, Daniel Carlton, they reported the firing. He knew that it was the general practice of the soldiers of Fort Meade to improve their aim by shooting at targets in the surrounding woods, but as the hour seemed too early for such practice, he took no chance, and reported to Lieutenant Alderman Carlton,¹ his father, who was commander of the garrison at Fort Meade. Lieutenant Carlton hurriedly mounted six men: Daniel Carlton, John C. Oates, William Parker, William McCullough, Henry Hollingsworth and Lot Whidden.

The galloping hoofbeats of their approaching horses warned our enemies, who crawled from their position behind our cattlepen and fortified themselves in the south end of a ten acre field to the south of our house.

Lieutenant Carlton, the first to round our house in a cloud of dust, called out, "Where are the Indians?"

My father indicated their direction, but shouted, "How many men have you, Lieutenant?"

"Only seven" was the reply.

My father cried warningly, "You are outnumbered more than two to one!"

Lieutenant Carlton whirled to give his command, but at that moment William Parker sighted the Indians moving cautiously in the field, and calling "Come on, boys, we'll charge them!" wheeled his horse and tore for the field. Behind him followed the other six.

¹ Lieutenant Alderman Carlton was great-grandfather of the present governor of Florida.

Three raced down one side of the field and four down the other, closing in on the Indians in the center. But the crouching Seminoles had the advantage. They were stationary and their brave attackers were mounted and moving rapidly. The Indians fired, and Lieutenant Carlton, William Parker, and Lot Whidden fell dead, while John Henry Hollingsworth was badly wounded.

McCullough, infuriated at the deaths of his comrades, dismounted, and ran towards an Indian whom he spied behind a pine tree. Pulling him out he grappled with him, man to man. Daniel Carlton ran to his aid and between them they bent the Indian to the ground and cut his throat with his own hunting knife.

Oates and McCullough then dragged the wounded Hollingsworth back to our house.

Daniel Carlton, deaf to the pleas of my father and his comrades, turned his horse in the direction of Fort Fraser and made for the open road, directly in the fire of the crouching Indians. As his horse shot past, they fired. The bullet ploughed through his horse's forehead and pierced his arm. Those watching thought it was the end, but Carlton only swerved in his saddle and galloped on. He had his father's death to avenge, and it would take more than one Seminole bullet to stop him.

I suppose his object in going to Fort Fraser was to solicit the aid of my mother's brother, Captain F. M. Durrance, who was in command there. The tie of blood would, of course, insure the promptest action.

After a day of horror and anxiety and constant firing, Captain Durrance, with a command of 50 men, came to our rescue. The Indians had by this time fled into the surrounding pine barren and Captain Durrance pursued them there relentlessly.

My recollection is that the attack on our home took place on a Saturday morning. Captain Durrance

did not overtake his quarry until sundown of the following Monday. At that hour, he and his command stole upon a sleeping Seminole sentinel. Killing him, they crept cautiously through the pine barren, confident that the remainder of the band lurked near. On a narrow bridge spanning a river east of where Bowling Green now is located, they came upon them. They were sitting in the water beneath the overhanging bridge waiting to take their pursuers at a disadvantage. A fierce battle commenced. Two soldiers under Captain Durrance were killed. These were privates Robert Pine and George Howell. Three were wounded; namely, J. L. Skipper, William Brooker and J. L. Whidden.

The Seminoles afterwards admitted fifteen casualties. Captain Durrance killed their chief and ring-leaders, but some of the band escaped into the pine barren.

This engagement was, I believe, the last of the Seminole hostilities in Florida.

Captain Durrance afterwards told my mother that he had come across the camp site of the Seminoles prior to their attack on our home. They had undoubtedly surrounded our cattlepen, where the rails protected them, soon after midnight Saturday, and were awaiting the exit of my father and Mr. Underhill from the house. Killing them, as they had planned to do, the women, and children would have been easy prey. The ill baby brother saved the lives of us all.

The body of the Indian whom McCullough and Daniel Carlton killed was buried in the stockade of Fort Meade, but was afterwards disinterred by a U. S. government physician for ethnological purposes. Examination of the body at the first burial disclosed the fact that the dead Seminole had undoubtedly been a medicine man of his tribe, for he carried secreted about his person many healing herbs and medicinal

plants. I do not now remember what became of his body. I never cared to look at it.

*A Confirmation from the Files of the United States War Department.*¹

In the time of the last Seminole War, 1856, Colonel John Munroe, 4th Artillery, was in command of the Department of Florida with headquarters at Fort Brooke, Tampa Bay. There were at the time garrisons of soldiers at different posts in Florida, including a garrison at Fort Meade in the present Polk County, where several companies were stationed. Among the companies there in June, 1856, were three companies of Florida Mounted Volunteers commanded respectively by Captain William B. Hooker, Captain F. M. Durrance and Captain Leslie. Captain S. L. Sparkman's Company of Florida Mounted Volunteers was stationed at Camp Gibson, not far distant from Fort Meade.

There are on file three lengthy reports relating to clashes with Indians in that vicinity in June, 1856, one by Colonel Munroe, the others by Captains Hooker and Durrance. It appears from these reports that on the morning of June 14 a party of hostile Indians in number some 30 to 50 attacked the home place of Mr. Willoughby Tillis about 2 1/2 miles from Fort Meade, wounding one of the occupants of the home, a servant, and killing the horses on the place. The men in the house made a successful resistance, firing through apertures in the walls, and killing, it was supposed, two Indians.

While that attack was in progress about 7 men under Lieutenant Carlton came to the rescue from the fort, when the Indians fled to a nearby thicket pursued by the soldiers. A fight ensued in which Lieu-

¹ This account was prepared from the files of the War Department through the interest of Senator Duncan U. Fletcher.

tenant Carlton was killed and several men wounded. Near noon of that day, June 14, a few more men went out from the fort and pursued the Indians for some distance, when, finding that the foe had been reinforced, returned to the fort late that day.

It is stated that the occupants of Mr. Tillis' house at the time of the attack were Mr. Willoughby Tillis, his wife and son, a Mr. Underhill and a colored woman servant.

On several days immediately following, a larger force from Fort Meade, aided by men from Captain Sparkman's Company, pursued and fought the Indians. Many details are given in the reports of Colonel Munroe and Captain Hooker.

It is stated that the body of an Indian killed June 16 was brought in for anatomical purposes, but nothing is found to show that the body was sent to Washington.