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THE PARENTAGE AND BIRTHPLACE  
OF OSCEOLA

By CHARLES H. COE <sup>1</sup>

It is commonly believed that the famous Seminole <sup>2</sup> Indian chief, Osceola, <sup>3</sup> hero of the long and costly Seminole War, was the son of an Englishman named Powell, a trader among the Creek Indians of Georgia, by a Creek Indian woman.

One of the earliest writers on the subject, however, claims that "Osceola's grandfather was a Scotchman, his grandmother and mother were full-blood Indians. His father was, of course, a half-breed, and Osceola was therefore a quarter-blood, or one-fourth white."<sup>4</sup>

The same author says: "Osceola's mother, after the death of his father, married a paleface of the name of 'Powell,' after whom the step-son was called."<sup>5</sup>

While this book "has been put to the press in less than thirty days from its being undertaken," says the author in his preface, it contains many facts about the Seminoles and the operations of the

1. Author of ***Red Patriots: the Story of the Seminoles.***
2. Benj. Hawkins, ***Sketches of the Creek Country in 1798-99.*** (The Georgia Historical Society 1848). pp. 10, 25-26. "Meaning *wild men*, emigrants; Creek Indians who left the parent tribe - the first group about the year 1776-and settled along the Gulf Coast of Florida north of Tampa Bay, on account of the milder climate, abundance of game, and richness of the soil. Thereafter they were called Istesemoles or Seminoles."
3. Lieut. of the Left Wing, ***Sketches of the Seminole War.*** (Charleston, 1836), p. 5 and footnote.
4. M. M. Cohen, ***Notices of Florida and the Campaigns.*** (New York, 1836), pp. 233-34.
5. *Ibid.* p. 235.

War, as well as much of a gossipy and unreliable character.

Other early writers adhere to the popular belief that Osceola's father was an Englishman named Powell. The first mention of this opinion, I believe, was by the anonymous author (Lieutenant of the Left Wing) of a book also published at Charleston in 1836, who says: "Osceola is a half-breed (his father an Englishman) of the Red Stick tribe of Creeks. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of claims<sup>7</sup> as to Osceola's parentage and that white blood flowed in his veins, all evidently originated with the author of this book. Which claim probably starting from nothing more than a rumor and which the present writer gives reasonable proof was an error.

Among others who took up the story that Osceola was of mixed parentage and made much of it, was General Thomas W. Woodward, of Alabama, Arkansas, and Louisiana. In private letters<sup>8</sup> written by him during the years 1857-58 to some of his friends, he says that "Osceola was the great grandson of James McQueen, and the son of an Englishman named Powell."

6. See reference 3 above.

7. Cohen, pp. 233-34.

Lieut. of the Left Wing, p. 5.

Samuel G. Drake, *Biography and History of the Indians of North America*, (1836), pp. 80-81.

J. R. Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, (Columbus, 1858), p. 58.

McKinney and Hall, *Indian Tribes of North America*, (N. Y. 1844), Vol. 2, p. 36.

John T. Sprague, *Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*, (N. P. 1847), pp. 100-101.

W. Brewer, Alabama: *Her History, Resources, Etc.*, (1872), p. 337.

8. Gen. Thos. W. Woodward, *Reminiscences of the Greek or Mucscogee Indians*, (1859. The Georgia Historical Society).

General Woodward further says: "Billy Powell or Osceola went with his uncle, McQueen, to Florida. I knew him well after that, and have seen him frequently. Capt. Isaac Brown and myself, with a party of friendly Creeks and Uchees, made him a prisoner in 1818, and he was then but a lad."

Strange to say, the General is silent as to the boy's offense.

Among those who doubted General Woodward was W. Brewer, author of a popular history of Alabama.<sup>9</sup> Referring to the General, he says: "He wrote a small volume of reminiscences about the Indians, which attempts to confute many of the statements made by Pickett, Meek, Coxe, and others."

Samuel G. Drake, author of one of the early histories of the Indian tribes (1836) says, referring to Osceola: "His father is said to have been an Englishman, and his mother a Creek Indian. He belongs to the Red Stick tribe. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

Captain John T. Sprague, who was in Florida and the army throughout the war, and who is the author of the best and most reliable history of that costly mistake, says of Osceola and his parentage: "His father's name was William Powell, an Englishman, who for forty years had been a trader in the (Creek) nation, and whose wife was an Indian woman. In the year 1808, when a feud occurred among the Creeks, they separated by mutual consent. . . . The mother and the boy, then four years old, settled in the vicinity of the Okeefeenoke Swamp. Soon after she was again married, when, with her child and

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9. W. Brewer, *Alabama: Her History and Resources*, (1872), p. 337.

10. Samuel G. Drake, *Biography and History of the North American Indians*, (1836, 1st ed.), pp. 80-81.

husband, she removed to a hammock near Fort King, Fla." <sup>11</sup>

It is strange that Sprague, who seems to have been careful in the preparation of his great work, should have perpetuated the early error in regard to Osceola's parentage.

We shall now consider the, evidence, both the doubtful and the conclusive, that the famous chief was a thoroughbred native American.

A prominent newspaper in the territory at this period intimates that Osceola was an Indian, saying: "It is proper to observe that he ought not to be called 'Powell' as that is only a nickname. His Indian name is Osceola, and by that he should be distinguished." <sup>12</sup>

The author of a carefully prepared book, <sup>13</sup> published at Baltimore, in 1836 (which is the equal of Sprague's as a reliable history of the Seminole War), says that "Assiola" is the correct orthography of the chief's name; that he is a Red Stick Creek Indian, and that "Assiola or Powell" does not speak the English language.

The fact that Osceola could not speak English is, in itself, evidence that he was a pure-blood Indian.

The author of this book is the only one of the earliest writers on the subject of the Seminole War or on Osceola, that does not claim the chief to be of mixed parentage.

The testimony of Dr. Andrew Welch, an Englishman, who resided at Jacksonville and Mayport during the Seminole War, is of interest and value.

11. Capt. John T. Sprague, *Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*, (New York, 1847), pp. 100-101.

12. *The Herald*, St. Augustine, Fla., Jan. 13, 1836.

13. Late Staff Officer. *The War in Florida*, 1836, pp. 10-11, 158.

Among the Indian captives brought to Jacksonville in the fore part of the war was a boy about six years of age. After learning that he was a nephew of Osceola and bore his name, the doctor was allowed to take the boy into his own family to civilize and educate, with the intention of adopting him.

Doctor Welch went to England with his protege in 1840, and in the following year published a book relating to the boy and his famous uncle. In this interesting work the author says of Osceola's parentage:<sup>14</sup> "Judging from all I have been enabled to learn from other Indians and from respectable white men who knew him from childhood, he was undoubtedly a thorough-bred Seminole." (That is, a full-blooded Indian.) "I am borne out in this opinion by Mr. Catlin, who is probably better acquainted with the physical as well as the moral structures of these people than any other white man living."

The most reliable and convincing testimony, however, is that of George Catlin, the famous painter of Indian portraits. No one then living was more competent to express an opinion on the subject. He had spent a lifetime among the Indians of North America, had painted the portraits of the most prominent chiefs, their home life and their hunting excursions. On learning of the capture of Osceola and his followers, and their confinement in Fort Moultrie, Charleston harbor, Catlin immediately journeyed to that place to meet them. He was well known to all Indians as their friend, and this group was especially glad to see him. Undoubtedly they hoped that he might do something to effect their release.

Every night, Catlin tells us, the chiefs visited with him in his room at the fort, telling him of their

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14. [Dr. Andrew Welch], *Osceola Nikkanochee*, Prince of Econchatti, (London, 1841), p. 23.

troubles and their treacherous capture by General Jesup under a flag of truce. During his visit he painted the portraits of the chiefs-two of Osceola. The painter thus had extended opportunity to closely study Osceola's features and actions.

A full account of his visits with the chiefs and his opinion of the parentage of their leader, is given in one of his priceless works, of which the following is an extract: <sup>15</sup> "I am fully convinced from all that I have seen and have learned from the lips of Osceola and from the chiefs who are around him, that he is a most extraordinary man, and one who is entitled to a better fate . . . in his manner and all his movements in company he is polite and gentlemanly, though all his conversation is entirely in his own tongue, and his general appearance and actions those of a full-blooded and wild Indian."

On one occasion, Osceola himself said: "I am an Indian-a Seminole." <sup>16</sup>

At another time, in the presence of an army officer, he repudiated with great scorn the rumor that he was part white, saying: "No foreign blood runs in my veins; I am a pure-blood Muscogee." <sup>17</sup>

If the reader has a remaining doubt that Osceola was a full-blooded Indian, he should examine a death-mask of the chief's head and shoulders made immediately after his death, now in the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. The high cheek bones and other marks of the Indian are plainly in evidence.

15. George Catlin, *Letters and Notes, etc.*, 1844, Vol. 2, p. 220.

16. Sprague, p. 86.

17. Chas. H. Coe, *Red Patriots: the Story of the Seminoles*, (1898), p. 28.

Thomas W. Storrow, *Osceola, The Seminole War Chief*. Knickerbocker, XXIV, 428.

There is considerable doubt about the meaning of his name. Most writers interpret it as "*Black Drink*,"<sup>18</sup> a purifying decoction taken freely before any great event. But the earliest and it seems to me the most reasonable and reliable definition is that *Hasse Ola* (Assiola), his Indian name, means "Rising Sun,"<sup>19</sup> Hasse being the early Seminole term for sun.

In my Seminole vocabulary, obtained many years since during my long residence in Florida "has-shay" or has-say" is the Seminole's term for sun.

Regarding the birthplace of Osceola, there is less diversity of opinion but more uncertainty. Some claim that he was born in Alabama, others that he was a native of Georgia. A writer in the former State says,<sup>20</sup> "Macon [county] feels a pride in him." But the author evidently was a Woodward disciple.

General Woodward is just as positive of the exact birthplace of the chief as he is of his parentage. Thus, he says in one of his private letters before mentioned:<sup>21</sup> "The railroad from Montgomery, Ala., to West Point runs within five feet, if not over the place, where the cabin stood in which Billy Powell or Ussa Yoholo was born. It was in an old field, between the Nufaubas and a little creek that the Indians called Catsa Bogah."

The authenticity of General Woodward's statements are questionable. It seems highly improbable that he could have given any reliable information regarding Osceola's birthplace, much less that he

18. Sprague, page 100 and footnote. (See reference 11).

19. Lieut. of the Left Wing, p. 5 and footnote.

20. See note 9.

21. See note 8.

could have designated the exact spot. It was more than twenty years after the boy and his mother are supposed to have moved to Florida that the General claimed to know so much about him.

It probably never will be known, beyond a doubt, which of the two States, Georgia or Alabama, is entitled to the honor of having produced this famous chief. But the present writer believes, after carefully considering the claims of the various authors and their reputations for accuracy, that Osceola was born east of the Chattahoochee River, in Georgia, about the beginning of the nineteenth century.