

Florida Historical Quarterly

Volume 33
Number 3 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 33,
Issue 3 and 4

Article 4

1954

The Disappearance of the Head of Osceola

May McNeer Ward



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

Ward, May McNeer (1954) "The Disappearance of the Head of Osceola," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 33: No. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol33/iss3/4>

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE HEAD OF OSCEOLA

by MAY MCNEER WARD

During the last few years interest in Osceola has been increased by the controversy between Florida and South Carolina over the grave of the famous Seminole chief. South Carolina has the headless bones of Osceola, buried on Sullivan's Island in Charleston harbor, where he died in Fort Moultrie, and Floridians think that the grave should be in Florida where he lived, and refused to leave voluntarily.

Ever since the death of Osceola on January 30, 1838, there have been rumors and much speculation about the disappearance of his head. Some historians have believed that vandals robbed the grave of the head, and there have been various accounts published.

Published stories about the taking of the head have said that the body was disinterred and the head stolen from the grave. That is not true. The descendants * of Dr. Frederick Weedon, of St. Augustine, Osceola's physician who was with him when he died, have always known the facts, but have not made them public generally.

The Weedon family, in Florida, had a close connection with Osceola, for Mary Thompson Weedon, the wife of the St. Augustine physician, was the sister of General Wiley Thompson, whose murder by Osceola was a cause of the Seminole War of 1835. Dr. Frederick Weedon, a colonel in the army of General Andrew Jackson, had settled in St. Augustine, had a plantation, and was the Fort Marion physician. He attended Osceola from the time that he was imprisoned in the fort, until he died at Fort Moultrie. Dr. Weedon was a friend of

* The great-grandchildren are: Dr. Frederick R. Weedon, of Jamestown, N. Y.; Mr. Harry Lee Weedon, of Tampa; Mrs. Mary Weedon Keen, of Tallahassee; Colonel James Weedon McNeer, of Alexandria, Va.; and the present writer, Mrs. May McNeer Ward, of Leonia, N. J. who has recently found additional documents which confirm and supplement those handed down in the family.

the Seminole chief, and went, at Osceola's request, to Charleston with the captive Indians.

While the Seminoles were in prison there, where they were sent on the steamer Poinsett, for safe-keeping after the sensational escape of Wildcat and twenty others from Fort Marion, George Catlin and some other artists came to paint the portraits of the chiefs. Catlin also became a friend of Osceola, and later published in his *Notes on the North American Indians* the following description of him:

"The most conspicuous at this time is Osceola, commonly called Powell, as he is generally supposed to be a half-breed, the son of a white man (by that name) and a Creek woman. In stature he is about at mediocrity, with an elastic and graceful movement; in his face he is good-looking, with rather an effeminate smile; but of so peculiar a character that the world may be ransacked over without finding another just like it. In his manners, 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."

Catlin finished his portraits, and left at about the time that Osceola was taken ill. Dr. Weedon wrote an account of the death scene to Catlin, and it was later published by him.

Osceola regarded Dr. Weedon as his best friend among the white people, and gave him several of his possessions when he died. Osceola's small brass pipe, with its engraved design of palm leaves, and an ornament made of a silver dollar beaten thin and punched with decorative holes (illustrated in this number) are in the possession of Mrs. Keen. Dr. Frederick R. Weedon has several other relics, including two important letters.

Our grandfather, whose name was William Weedon, remembered very well, when he was a child, seeing the head of

Osceola, and talked to his family about the circumstances involved in the strange story. When Osceola died Dr. Weedon published the following statement in the *Charleston Courier*. It was republished in the *Apalachicola Gazette*, Feb. 26, 1838.

“Death of Osceola - As no doubt a curiosity exists in the public mind to know the causes which led to the death of Osceola the distinguished Seminole Chief, and as many reports may be circulated on the subject, I have deemed it advisable to give publicity to a statement of the circumstances attending his last illness. I am compelled, moreover, to do this from another motive - the sense of duty which I owe to myself and those entrusted with his safe-keeping - being conscious that nothing has been omitted in the discharge of that trust, which could, in any way, have contributed to the health and comfort of the deceased.

“On the 26 of January, ultimo, he was attacked in the night with a violent quinsy, of which I was informed very soon after, and hastened to his room. He was then laboring under considerable difficulty of deglutation and respiration, accompanied with pain and inflammation of the tonsils. To prevent suffocation it was necessary to support him in nearly an erect position. His pulse was full, quick and hard. Blood was instantly drawn and an emetic and blister prescribed. At this moment an Indian entered the room, who, as I afterward understood, was in high esteem as a Prophet and Doctor. From the moment of his entrance there was a refusal to take anything. Finding myself debarred from the administration of suitable remedies, and feeling the responsibility devolving upon me, I requested Prof. B. B. Strobel, to visit the patient with me, He attended and used his best exertions to prevail on the patient to submit to treatment, such as scarification, leeching, etc. - but he pertinaciously refused; not but what he would

have been disposed to acquiesce, had he not been overruled by the influence of his family.

(signed) - F. WEEDON, Assistant Surgeon"
"Fort Moultrie, Sullivan's Island, Feb. 5,"

This was followed by a statement from Dr. Strobel:

"At the request of Dr. Weedon, I visited Osceola at Sullivan's Island. I saw him in the evening by candle-light, - he was lying on his blanket before the fire, his head propped up, and two Indian women (one on each side of him) employed bathing his neck with warm water in which some herbs had been steeped. He was breathing with much difficulty, his brow contracted, and his countenance indicating great bodily pain. His pulse was full and quick, his skin hot and dry.

"I requested his permission, through the interpreter, to examine his throat, to which he assented I discovered that the tonsils were so much enlarged as greatly to impede respiration, and that the mucuous membrane of the Pharynx was in a high state of inflammation. As there was some danger of suffocation unless the disease was arrested I proposed to scarify the tonsils. The patient referred us to his conjurer, who was sitting on the floor, covered up in his blanket, with all the air and dignity of a great man. He said, 'No!' I next proposed to apply leeches to the throat and back of the ears - The conjurer said 'No!' I proposed lastly some medicine and a stimulating wash to be applied internally - which he also refused - saying that if the patient were not better in the morning he would give him up to us - I urged, entreated, and persuaded him to do something, for although I did not doubt his ability to cure, in the woods where he could have access to his roots and herbs - yet here he was placed under different circumstances and as he had no means within his reach, begged him to yield up the patient to us. All was in vain, and we were finally compelled to abandon Osceola to his fate.

"In conclusion, I have no hesitation in declaring that I entirely coincided with the views and prescriptions of Dr. Weedon, and believe that had he been permitted to put them in practice, the patient would have recovered."

"(signed) B. B. STROBEL, M. D.

Prof. of Anatomy, Medical College, S. C.
Charleston, 5th. Feb. 1838"

- - - -

Soon after Osceola's death Dr. Weedon wrote this report of it to George Catlin:

"About half an hour before he died, he seemed to be sensible that he was dying; and although he could not speak he signified by signs that he wished me to send for the chiefs and for the officers of the post, whom I called in. He made signs to his wives (of whom he had two, and also two fine little children by his side) to go and bring his full dress, which he wore in time of war; which, having been brought in, he rose up in his bed, which was on the floor, and put on his shirt, his leggings and his moccasins - girded on his war belt - his bullet pouch and powder-horn, and laid his knife by the side of him on the floor. He then called for his red paint, and his looking-glass, which was held before him, when he deliberately painted one-half of his face, his neck and throat, - his wrists - the backs of his hands, and the handle of his knife, red with vermillion; a custom practiced when the irrevocable oath of war and destruction is taken. His knife he then placed in its sheath, under his belt and he carefully arranged his turban on his head and his three ostrich plumes that he was accustomed to wearing in it. Being thus prepared in full dress, he laid down a few minutes to recover strength sufficient, when he rose up as before, and with most benignant and pleasing smiles, extended his hand to me and to all the officers and chiefs that were around him; and shook hands with us all in dead silence; and also with his wives and little

children; he made a signal for them to lower him down upon his bed, which was done, and he then slowly drew from his war-belt his scalping knife, which he firmly grasped in his right hand, laying it across the other on his breast, and a moment later smiled away his last breath, without a struggle or a groan."

- - - -

Osceola's Head

This is the true story of the disappearance of Osceola's head, as given to us by our grandfather. After the death of the Seminole chief, Dr. Weedon was able to be alone with the body. During this time he cut off the head, but left it in the coffin with the scarf that Osceola habitually wore tied as usual around the neck. Not long before the funeral Dr. Weedon removed the head and closed the coffin. Thus, the body was not dug up after burial and the head taken by unknown vandals, as various accounts have stated. Osceola was buried without his head.

Dr. Weedon took the head back to St. Augustine with him, and kept it in his home on Bridge Street, where he also had his office, preserved by an embalming method that he had worked out himself.

Why did he do this? It is hard to know his motives, for we are so far removed by time from the events and the way of thinking of those days. However, doctors then thought nothing of collecting heads of savage tribesmen. Medical museums had collections of heads brought in by sailors from South America, Africa and the South Seas. Phrenology was considered important, for the shape of the skull was thought by scientists to show intelligence as well as talents and aptitudes. Dr. Weedon was an unusual man, and his methods of child training would not find favor today, for he used to hang the head of Osceola on the bedstead where his three little boys

slept, and leave it there all night as punishment for misbehavior.

His daughter Henrietta married a physician, Dr. Daniel Whitehurst, of New York. Dr. Weedon gave the head to his son-in-law five years after the death of Osceola, and Dr. Whitehurst presented it, in 1843, to the most distinguished surgeon of his day, Dr. Valentine Mott. Dr. Mott had been the teacher of Dr. Whitehurst, and was one of the founders of New York University Medical School, as well as of the New York Academy of Medicine.

The following two letters are in the possession of Dr. Frederick Weedon, of Jamestown:

St. Augustine, Fla.,
Oct. 2, 1843

Dr. Valentine Mott,
New York.

My Dear Sir:

Accompanying this, you will be handed the head of the celebrated Seminole Chief, Osceola, a man who in recent years filled a large space in the eye of the American public, if indeed not the civilized world. The strong sentiment which is manifested in the fate of the aborigines of this country and the policy of the government in consolidating them westward are as creditable to the feelings of humanity, as calculated to elicit apprehension at a result, which may ultimately prove a check to the adventurous enterprize of our countrymen. This territory, as you are aware, is but just relieved from scenes of a sanguinary character - too long protracted for its happiness, but growing out of a policy of the removal of the Red Man. Among those distinguished for [illegible], in an eminent degree was Osceola: Brave and active in war, - he was equally docile in peace and from once having been a firm friend of the white man, he became his bitterest foe. He it was who killed General Thompson, the Indian Agent at Fort King, and

by this act, buried the calumet of peace, and lit up the flame, which for six years, burned with such desolating waste over this unhappy land. In obtaining the head of such a man, I am aware that the sentiments of the ultra philanthropist would be shocked at what would be [illegible] desecration of the grave, and much sympathy would be expended that a child of the forest with qualities commanding admiration and regard should be conveyed to the tomb, a headless corpse. But with the scientific and intelligent, such influences are of little worth, and in the preservation of the dead we do no violence to the feelings of humanity or even the stronger attachments of love. I am aware that the classic lands of Greece and Rome, the isles of the sea, many a well fought field of Europe, have alike given up their evidences of life, and in your cabinet of heads, we travel into the distant past, and hold communion with those of times that were. In looking around me, where to place it, for preservation and [illegible] I know of none more than yourself who would [illegible] these intentions, and among the gifted and eminent of our own land, none to whom with more propriety I could make a tender of it. Be pleased to accept the [illegible] of respect with which I am,

Your very obedient servant,

D. W. WHITEHURST, M. D.

Dr. Mott's acceptance of the head follows:

My Dear Sir:

I delayed returning you my thanks for the Head of Osceola, until Dr. Peck should do me this favor of la [illegible] to you, I promised him a letter and had it - but unfortunately out when he [illegible]

No one can realize such a [illegible] than I do, and I esteem it as a particular favor that you have presented it to me. It will be deposited in the collection and preserved in my library at home, for I fear almost to place it in my museum at the Uni-

versity. - temptation will be so strong for someone to take it. Your letter will be attached to the head, and I shall place as labels upon it - the name of the Donor.

I send you at this time our circular for the next academic year, which has just come from the press. You will be gratified to hear of the success of your Alma Mater.

Yours very truly,

VALENTINE MOTT

What happened to the head of Osceola? Dr. Mott eventually placed it, with public identification of the source of the gift, with his head collection in his museum of pathological specimens. A catalogue now in the library of The New York Academy of Medicine, and published in 1858, has the following listing, under:

“Miscellaneous - No. 1132 Head of Osceola, the great Seminole chief (undoubted). Presented by Dr. Whitehurst of St. Augustine.”

This was the catalogue of the Surgical and Pathological Museum of Valentine Mott, M.D.L.L.D., Emeritus Professor of Surgery in the University of the City of New York.

In 1866 Dr. Mott's Surgical and Pathological Museum caught fire, and part of his collection was thus destroyed. So far as we can determine Osceola's head was lost in this fire. Our grandfather also said so. This is the true story behind the mystery, as it is known to the descendants of the man who took the head.