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UNFORGOTTEN THREAT: FLORIDA SEMINOLES IN THE CIVIL WAR

by ROBERT A. TAYLOR

CONFEDERATE Florida, far removed from the clash of massed armies to its north, remained in many respects on the periphery of Civil War fighting. The state by no means, however, escaped the war's impact as violence and the potential for violence served to its residents almost daily reminders of the national struggle. One dimension of Florida's Civil War experience, a factor which threatened the escalation of violence throughout the conflict, previously has been neglected by students of the state's history. That factor was the potential for Indian war.

In 1861 the few remaining Florida Indians, remnants of the once powerful Seminole, Tallahassee, and Mikasuki tribes, were living in the swamps and hammocks of south Florida. Their numbers had been reduced as a result of a series of nineteenth-century Indian wars, the last of which had ended only in May 1858. Those struggles had engendered deep animosities between the Indians and the white newcomers, and the intensity of those feelings had abated little during the following three years. The potential of a renewed outbreak of violence remained an ever-present reality. Unlike their cousins in the trans-Mississippi Indian territory, however, Florida's natives chose not to take the field. The possibility that they might take advantage of unsettled conditions to seek retribution was a continuing consideration to white Floridians, though. Had the Indians done so, they could have played a key role in the Civil War history of the state.

Despite the 1858 termination of the Third Seminole or "Billy Bowlegs" War, the Indians never moved far from the forefront of white settlers' minds. The fear of renewed violence far outweighed the actual threat posed by the Seminole population. One newspaper estimated that only thirty-eight warriors and

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their families remained behind after the last of the forced migrations. A lighthouse keeper on Cape Florida (the Biscayne Bay area) reported seeing as many as eighty natives and their leader Tiger Tail near the Miami River late in 1858. Residents of the peninsula feared that if the Indians commanded the southeastern coast of Florida they "[were] likely to become a set of pirates, should a vessel be stranded on the coast away from the assistance of whites."¹

The nation, referred to generally as Seminoles by white Floridians, did depend on shipwrecks for needed goods. Chief Sam Jones's band worked the wreck of a slave ship near Jupiter Inlet in 1859, acquiring all sorts of items from its cargo. Reports that the slaver carried both liquor and ammunition naturally were disturbing to the state's residents. Even positive reports, such as one from a Mr. Fletcher, dated Miami, Florida, did little to calm fears. Fletcher personally met and talked with Tiger Tail and his followers, and came away convinced of their peaceful intentions.² "They wish to settle themselves," he wrote, "and live in peace— to be governed by the laws and protected by the laws." These fugitives kept to themselves and worked at clearing land in the eastern part of the Everglades for the cultivation of arrowroot.³

The events at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, in April 1861 shattered the peace of the nation, and reverberations were felt even by the Seminoles. Florida's war governor, John Milton, concerned himself with the security of his state and labored long hours to gather arms and men for its defense. He promised the state legislature in Tallahassee that Florida would be far more secure than states on the western borders of the Confederacy. The state also would be safe, he asserted, from "Indians, Mexicans, and abolitionists."⁴ Significantly, the governor ranked Indians ahead of the dreaded abolitionists as potential threats. Milton and his fellow citizens believed that those natives still at large in the interior posed a frighteningly real danger.

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1. James W. Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War, 1855-1858: The Final Stand of the Seminoles Against the Whites* (Chuluota, FL, 1982), 80; *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 15 and November 13, 1858.
 2. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, March 5, 1859; *Charleston Daily Courier*, October 14, 1858.
 3. Augusta, GA, *Southern Cultivator* 18 (September 1860), 270.
 4. *Florida House Journal* (1861), 221.

Since the Confederate Bureau of Indian Affairs concentrated its efforts on the Oklahoma Seminoles, Florida was left to its own devices in the matter of Indian relations. In 1861 the legislature declared all Indian trade conducted by private individuals to be both legal and proper. Such intercourse was encouraged except for whiskey and ammunition, both of which were on a list of prohibited goods. The Seminoles' isolation kept them apart from the rush to arms in that year, and the flow of events forced them to a lower position on the government's agenda. Too many other pressing problems, including the arrival of Union land and naval forces, occupied the time of Florida's leaders.⁵

The legislature did request in 1861 that the governor appoint an agent to confer with the remaining Seminoles as to their wants and grievances. Milton did not make an appointment, however, until March 1862, when he picked John (or Joab) Griffin for a mission to south Florida to confer with the natives. Griffin, an Ohioan by birth, had settled at Charlotte Harbor and worked in the Indian trade during the 1840s. In 1852 he had accompanied Chief Billy Bowlegs to Washington to sign an agreement with President Fillmore. By the 1860s Griffin held a prominent place in south Florida society and enlisted in the Confederate army after the outbreak of the war. His loyalty to the cause certain, the governor deemed him well qualified for his assignment.⁶

Griffin's directions were to travel deep into the countryside, seek out chiefs Sam Jones and Tiger Tail, and assure them of the friendship of the state and the Confederate States. He was authorized to offer the state's protection and aid in the form of a system of trade providing needed staples. The agent also was to inform the Indians that Governor Milton himself, at some point in the future, would make the journey from Tallahassee to meet with them, possibly at Lake City.⁷

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5. John E. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1963; reprint ed., Macclenny, 1989), 98; Harry A. Kersey, Jr., *Pelts, Plumes, and Hides: White Traders Among the Seminole Indians, 1870-1930* (Gainesville, 1975), 7.
 6. *Florida House Journal* (1860), 165-66; Janet Snyder Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay, 1528-1885* (Tulsa, OK, 1983), 133.
 7. John Milton to John Griffin, March 25, 1862, John Milton Papers, Florida Historical Society Library, University of South Florida, Tampa (hereinafter cited as Milton Papers).

Nothing is known about the final outcome of the Griffin mission, but its timing is significant. St. Augustine fell to Union forces that same month, March 1862, and with the passage of the Confederate Conscription Act of 1862, the south Florida bush country soon became the refuge for draft evaders and Union sympathizers. Perhaps Florida's political and military leaders feared that an increase in the numbers of whites in the area might lead to an incident resulting in a fourth Seminole war. Besides threatening a large area in south Florida, such an uprising could interrupt the cattle trade upon which the Confederate military was dependent.

The fall of 1862 saw Floridians unnerved by rumors of just such an incident. Tales circulated that Sam Jones's group had been persuaded by Union forces to attack white settlers on the Peace River southeast of Tampa Bay. Four families were rumored to have been slaughtered without warning. One newspaper editor believed that "the chief object of the dollar loving semi-infidelic Yankees is to get the savages down in that portion of the State to murder as many as possible, and run off the balance of the citizers, so as to be able to get the cattle they need."⁸ Many Floridians believed that troops should be used to remove the remainder of the Seminole tribe from the state by force if necessary.

Agent Griffin investigated the rumors of a Seminole war party on the loose and found them "to be without the shadow of a foundation."⁹ He received fresh information from another Indian contact by Jacob Summerlin, a leading cattleman in the area. Sam Jones had requested a meeting via a messenger he sent to Tampa. In a "great excitement" Summerlin and a companion had traveled to the Indian's remote haven, talked with the natives, and reported all quiet in their camps. The Seminole chief feared whites were preparing to attack his people based on the false stories of an uprising. He also expressed concern at their not being able to purchase supplies from nearby settlements. At the meeting the Civil War was explained to the natives, along with the great difficulty Southerners were experiencing in procuring necessary items due to the Union blockade. Satisfied, Seminole leaders dictated a letter to the Confed-

8. *Mobile Register and Advertiser*, October 30, 1862.

9. Thomas Griffin to Milton, October 5, 1862, Milton Papers.

erate military command offering to become allies of the Confederacy. Summerlin's report and Griffin's statements did much to calm fears among the white population and decreased tensions on the frontier.¹⁰

Griffin, who arrived in Tampa on October 6, 1862, met with Hamlin V. Snell who also was concerned with matters involving the Seminoles. A veteran of the earlier Seminole wars, Snell was a state politician of prominence. He recommended to Griffin that a more permanent Indian agency be established in south Florida as soon as possible. Declining the post himself, Snell suggested James McKay of Tampa for the position of head agent. An immigrant from Scotland, McKay the previous year had been captured running the blockade with a large cargo of arms for the Confederacy. He had convinced skeptical Union officials of his devotion to the Union, however, and in April 1862 he was released. McKay also already employed an interpreter who had long experience among the Seminoles.¹¹

In a dispatch from Tallahassee, Governor Milton reviewed relations between the Seminoles and the Confederate government for Confederate Secretary of War George W. Randolph. The governor advocated the establishment of a Confederate Bureau of Indian Affairs office in south Florida in order "to supply the wants of the Indians in the State and keep them in proper control."¹² The governor also informed Randolph of the Seminoles' willingness to enlist in the Confederate military and gave his own personal endorsement of Snell's recommendation of McKay. The War Department, however, failed to act on the request due to more pressing matters.¹³

When the Confederate government took no action on Milton's recommendation, the Florida House of Representatives established a Committee on Indian Affairs that took up the question of policy and relations between the state and the natives. Chaired by Cyprian T. Jenkins of Hernando County, the committee deliberated on a bill to reorganize the Indian trade.

10. *Macon Daily Telegraph*, November 8, 1862; *Charleston Daily Courier*, November 7, 1862.

11. Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness*; 235; Hamlin V. Snell to Milton, October 1, 1862, Milton Papers; Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizza, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, OK, 1983), 48.

12. Milton to George W. Randolph, October 16, 1862, Milton Papers.

13. E. B. Long, *The Civil War Day By Day: An Almanac, 1861-1865* (Garden City, NY, 1971), 287.

Members realized that the tribe had been denied access to goods they needed and that efforts to provide them with essential items had failed. The Indians wanted farm tools and implements, arms, ammunition, cloth, and other articles. These items could be obtained, read a committee report, "in one of two ways— either from the state of Florida or from the abolitionists."¹⁴

Chairman Jenkins and other committee members also knew from south Florida sources that the Seminoles were continuing to express a friendly disposition toward the Confederate cause, but that this amity might fade if their trade needs were not quickly met. Shortages, they felt, might force the Indians either to seek Union help or to begin raiding white settlements. "They might be induced to take part against us," concluded the committee report, "and add to the horrors of the present war by raids upon our unprotected frontier." The committee recommended that the pending bill on trade with the Seminoles be passed with all speed to avert these threatened evils.¹⁵

The house of representatives took up the question near the end of November 1862. Surprisingly the act was defeated on its first attempt at passage thirteen to twenty-two; approval came on December 3, however, with a thirty-one to ten favorable vote. The final version did not contain an earlier clause, perhaps deleted to ensure passage, authorizing the enlistment of Seminoles in the Confederate military. The legislators also provided funds to conduct trading operations and \$500 to hire an interpreter for service in the field. The house bill further advised that a new agent be selected and sent into Seminole country to meet with the natives. This representative was to see to their "wishes, wants, and necessities" and send reports back to Tallahassee. Governor Milton, with the legislature's support, appointed Henry Prosens to the post.¹⁶

Prosens did not begin his mission until the spring of 1863. April traditionally was the beginning of the cattle driving season in south Florida, and drovers worked far into the remote

14. "Report of the Committee on Indian Affairs," House Committee Reports, 1862, record group 915, ser. 887, box 10, folder 3, Florida State Archives, Tallahassee.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Florida House Journal* (1862), 89,103, 127; Clerk of the House of Representatives to John Milton, December 12, 1862, record group 101, ser. 557, box 1, folder 4, Florida State Archives.

swamps and prairies gathering beeves for the drives northward. The cattle flow was under constant threat from Union troops, their sympathizers, Confederate deserters, and perhaps hungry Seminoles. Agent Prosens realized that he must contact the Indians quickly to be certain that they did not impede cattle operations. Tension arose between cattlemen and the Seminoles when the latter sometimes rustled a lone cow or two for food. Incidents that might escalate into fighting on the trails had to be avoided at all costs.¹⁷

Prosens first had to secure an interpreter, not an easy task as events unfolded. He initially engaged Captain John Montes De Oca, a translator of some reputation in south Florida, to speak for him. Montes De Oca, former captain of the steamer *Grey Cloud*, suddenly became ill, forcing Prosens to delay leaving for the Seminole camps for three days.¹⁸ Upon recovery, Montes De Oca grew sullen and refused to begin the journey. Prosens disgustedly sought another interpreter to replace him. He then complained in a letter to Governor Milton that Montes De Oca had balked on account of pressure from persons unknown who were dissatisfied with the current boundaries of the Seminole reservation and wanted Prosens's mission to fail. Even worse, Captain Montes De Oca still expected to be paid for services not rendered.¹⁹

Prosens did not actually meet with the Seminoles until sometime in August 1863. His biggest problem was finding the elusive bands. "Indian country" in 1863 embraced a 250-mile section of the Florida coastline, touching also the shores of Lake Okechobee and the navigable part of the Caloosahatchee River. Prosens and his assistant Phillip Burmudas (or Phillipi Bermudez) struck deep into the wilderness. Burmudas understood the Seminole language as well as Montes De Oca, but English was not his first language. Prosens feared he might not be able to communicate with his own interpreter in the midst of negotiations.²⁰ A rumor placed some Indians on or near the Miami

17. Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa*, 52.

18. The *Grey Cloud* was the ship that carried Billy Bowlegs into exile in 1858. *Charleston Daily Courier*, May 15, 1858, Snell to Milton, October 1, 1862, Milton Papers.

19. Henry Prosens to Milton, April 14, 1863, Milton Papers.

20. Prosens to Milton, April 13, 1863, Letterbooks, 1836-1909, record group 101, ser. 32, vol. 6, folder 5, Florida State Archives; Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness*, 129.

River, supposedly trading with parties of woodcutters coming by boat from Federal-held Key West. Such meetings with Union forces held ominous connotations for Confederate efforts to keep the Seminoles loyal or at least neutral.²¹

Prosens finally met and parlayed with Chief Sam Jones. He described Jones's camp as numbering about seventy, with very few males young enough to be potential fighters in evidence. Prosens, through Burmudas, discovered that Jones and the others were surprisingly well informed about the state of the war outside their wetland homes. Nothing the agent saw in the native encampment convinced him that they had any plans to join in the fighting. The growing Federal presence in the region helped them make the choice of neutrality. This might explain Prosens's lack of success in negotiating any formal relationship between Florida and Sam Jones's Seminoles. "I don't think," Prosens reported, "they would respect an agent sent to negotiate a Treaty with them, while the war lasts and they are surrounded by Yankees."²²

Union pressure on south Florida was a continuing threat. Major Pleasant W. White, the chief commissary agent for Florida, considered the southern half of the peninsula vital to his efforts to provide rations for Confederate forces in Georgia and South Carolina. Communications with the south, administratively reorganized as the fifth commissary district, were poor. For example, twenty days were required for a letter from White at his Quincy headquarters to reach Tampa and district commander James McKay. White decided that since the bulk of the available cattle supply grazed in south Florida, he should travel there in person and evaluate conditions for himself. Arriving in Tampa late in September, White met with McKay and toured the surrounding area. While on this inspection trip, Major White chanced to meet some Seminoles.²³

The Indians White saw were a ragged band in desperate need of proper clothing and ammunition for hunting game. He reasoned that these destitute people had to be loyal since they had not tried to seize what they needed from isolated white

21. Prosens to Milton, August 29, 1863, Milton Papers.

22. *Ibid.*

23. James McKay to Pleasant W. White, September 30, 1863, Letterbook 1, box 2, Pleasant W. White Papers, Florida Historical Society Library, University of South Florida, Tampa (hereinafter cited as White Papers).

settlers. Nothing, in White's view, pointed up their partisanship better than the Union's failure to convince the Indians to engage the Confederates in combat. The state program for supplying the Indians with badly needed supplies clearly was not working. Northern trade goods could, in theory, swing the natives over to the Federal side and back onto the warpath. As it happened, White and other Florida leaders probably overestimated the military potential of the Florida Seminoles. Having already fought three wars with the United States, they were not ready to go into battle again.²⁴

Any ideas of Seminole willingness to become active participants on the Confederate side of the war conflicted with the train of relations between Indian and white Floridians since the 1840s. Florida civil and military officials had acted far worse against the Indians than any body of United States forces operating in the region. Offers to let the few remaining young warriors join the Confederate army simply may have been intended to calm fears among the Indians and stave off any state plans for a punitive expedition into the Everglades. While the repercussions of an alliance between the Seminoles and the Union may have been negligible, many Floridians believed that such a relationship posed a menace to the state.²⁵

Major White suggested that yet another Indian agent be sent south in order to maintain the status quo and attempt once again to mediate the elusive treaty. He recommended General James A. Peden of Lake City for the assignment. Peden, age forty-seven, had led an adventurous life as a Texas Ranger, diplomat in Brazil, and a political leader in his adopted state of Florida. Despite his commission as a brigadier general in the state militia, Peden's poor health had prevented him from taking the field during the Civil War. Whether Peden in fact traveled southward to treat with the Seminoles is not known, but the appointment of someone of his stature shows how much importance the government placed on the issue.²⁶

Conditions in Florida were only one of a myriad of problems besetting the battered Confederacy by early 1864. The state's

24. White to Lucius B. Northrop, October 6, 1863, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers.

25. Ibid; Kenneth W. Porter, "Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco) in the Civil War (Part II)," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 45 (April 1967), 25.

26. White to Northrop, October 6, 1863, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, October 1894.

experience serves as a microcosm of the difficulties existing behind the Confederate lines on the home front. Government impressment of supplies and the hardships caused thereby increased the number of desertions from units defending Florida and her sister states. Men tended to cluster together in small groups after deserting, living off the land or taking what they needed from settlers at gunpoint. The Federals knew of the dangerous situation and hoped to capitalize on it. Union Brigadier General Daniel P. Woodbury reported as many as 800 deserters or conscription evaders were hiding in the wild country between Charlotte Harbor and Lake Okeechobee. Woodbury sought permission to establish a base on the shores of Charlotte Harbor in an effort to enlist as many of these ex-rebels as possible in the Union army.²⁷

The conscription acts led increasing numbers of resisters, often with families in tow, to the bush country from Fort Myers to Tampa Bay. Supplied with weapons by the Federals, they often struck at passing cattle herds. Union forces operating from their base at Fort Myers pushed into the interior searching for cattle and other booty. These raids brought United States troops ever closer to the wandering Seminoles. Each new report of contact between the two was noted with trepidation by Confederates. One such rumor came from the Miami River area and told of natives once again trading with northern woodcutters. An informant saw quantities of deer skins and wood being loaded on transports for the voyage back to Key West. The hides no doubt were exchanged for commodities desired by the Seminoles.²⁸

Confederate concerns prompted Captain McKay once more to seek out the Seminole bands. He ordered a quantity of gunpowder and lead shot in hopes of weaning them from their fondness for northern traders by providing badly-needed ammunition. Most of the Seminole hunters carried small-bore Kentucky rifles, a weapon known for its economy in terms of powder and projectiles. They preferred these to more modern weapons due to uncertainties in the supply of ammunition. Natives in the

27. United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC, 1880-1901), series 1, XXVI, part 1, 855-56.

28. James McKay to White, December 9, 1863, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers.

region did not care to be more dependent upon whites than they already were. A railroad delay held up McKay's shipment, which in turn postponed a planned visit and accompanying talks. McKay's superior, Major White, continued nonetheless to stress how vital it was "to gain their favor especially since the enemy is threatening the cattle business and may seek to enlist the Indians against US."²⁹

White sought stronger military protection for south Florida. In a series of letters to General P. G. T. Beauregard, his departmental commander, he detailed the situation and the danger it posed to a major Confederate supply area. Union troops had advanced inland from Fort Myers and occupied Fort Thompson, an abandoned Seminole War-era post in the heart of beef country. The Federals easily could establish a relationship with the Seminoles from there with the intention to subvert them. Access to cattle, numbered in the tens of thousands grazing south of Gainesville, hung in the balance. General Beauregard sympathized, but in the end could spare no additional troops.³⁰

Trade goods ultimately reached Tampa, and McKay organized a meeting with the Indians to be held at Fort Meade in April 1864. One of his agents earlier had met with thirteen native leaders near Lake Okeechobee. At that time the Indians, although wretchedly dressed due to lack of cloth for clothing, appeared very friendly despite their rumored dealings with the Federals. One hundred fifty natives were reported in the area, of whom only forty-five could be classified as warriors. The agent was told by one leader how his small band had avoided a Federal patrol near former Fort Dallas on the Miami River. Other tribal elders expressed a desire to stay out of the way of Federal troops in the area as well. This is exactly what McKay and his associates wanted to hear. McKay's agent related his surprise, though, that the Indians had not paid a visit to Fort Myers regardless of their stated wish to shun the Federal forces.³¹

29. Clay MacCauley, "The Seminole Indians of Florida," in J. W. Powell, *Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1883-1884* (Washington, DC, 1887), 512; White to Joseph P. Baldwin, January 10, 1864, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers.

30. White to Northrop, February 28, 1864, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers.

31. McKay to White, March 25, 1864, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers.

McKay's rendezvous with the natives at Fort Meade does not appear to have occurred as planned. On April 7 Union forces raiding from Fort Myers seized the Confederate stores warehoused near Fort Meade and destroyed them. After an additional attack there in mid-May at least one group of Indians— a seven-member delegation of Mikasukis— ventured into the Union lines at Fort Myers. They told Federal officers there that they had been deceived and badly treated by the Confederates, and they expressed their desire to be friends. A tour of the fort pleased them, especially the sight of black soldiers of the garrison. Ironically the biracial mixture of Florida's native population made them far more comfortable with the black soldiers than were the majority of southern and northern whites. The Indians accepted a few small presents and promised to return for another visit in twenty days. They then moved back into the wilds.³²

The summer of 1864 witnessed another incident involving south Florida Seminoles. On July 25 Secretary of War James A. Seddon received a communication from Charleston that a Carolina native, one A. McBride, had raised a company of Seminole Indians for service in the Confederate army. McBride, age fifty-six, claimed a knowledge of Florida, "having seen service in the Indian Wars in the time of President Jackson." He offered to vouch personally for the character of the sixty-five natives listed on the muster roll he had submitted to the War Department along with his report. These "volunteers," according to McBride, were mainly civilized and would give good service, and they already had elected him as their captain. If a captaincy was not deemed appropriate by authorities, McBride indicated a first or second lieutenantcy would do.³³

McBride also requested "an order immediately to muster the Company and report them to some Confederate post in south Florida, or wherever you may see fit."³⁴ McBride also

32. Henry A. Crane to James D. Green, April 2, 1864, Crane to H. W. Bowers, April 15, 1864, and Jonathan W. Childs to Bowers, May 27, 1864, Letters Received, Department and District of Key West, 1861-1865, record group 393, National Archives, Washington, DC (microfilm available at P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville).

33. A. McBride to James A. Seddon, July 25, 1864, United States War Department, Miscellaneous Confederate Rolls, vol. 37, record group 109, National Archives (hereinafter cited as Misc. Rolls) (also available at Florida State Archives).

34. Hodges Company, Misc. Rolls.

asked Secretary Seddon to authorize his return to the Everglades where his men, known as Hodges's Company for reasons unknown, waited. Seddon's response to this amazing offer and what happened to this "unit" remains a mystery. One wonders who A. McBride could have been to convince the sixty-five Seminoles listed to take arms against the United States. How could he know so many Seminoles, natives who had tried to avoid contacts with whites whenever possible? Did the company exist at all or was it an enterprising ruse by McBride to secure an army commission for himself?

Seminole relations continued as an important issue to Florida leaders. In November 1864 James McKay again received instructions to "conciliate the Indians to protect the country against the enemy."³⁵ McKay still feared a general Seminole defection to the hated Yankees, and used Colonel Charles J. Munnerlyn's battalion of cattle drovers to maintain contact with the scattered groups and hopefully to gather information about enemy activities. This irregular cavalry battalion, known as the Cow Cavalry, kept trade relations intact right up to its surrender to Union forces in June 1865. Their presence balanced the forces of deserters and Unionists who filled the countryside and worked against the Confederate cause. They also served to block efforts of Federal troops to disrupt Confederate plans.³⁶

Even as the Confederate government sped toward disintegration, its officials continued working to procure the supplies necessary to keep soldiers in the field and the dream of southern independence alive. Seminoles still rated a high priority despite the impending collapse of the war effort. James McKay received \$8,000 from the government for the purpose of buying presents and supplies for the natives. Four kegs of gunpowder and 200 pounds of lead and percussion caps waited at the depot in Gainesville for delivery in February 1865. However, an Indian request for needles and thread could not be met due to their scarcity in the wartime South. McKay claimed the powder and other stores for exchange with the needy Seminoles in March.³⁷

35. White to McKay, November 19, 1864, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers.

36. Joe A. Akerman, Jr., *Florida Cowman, A History of Florida Cattle Raising* (Kissimmee, FL, 1976), 95; Rodney Dillon, "The Civil War in South Florida" (master's thesis, University of Florida, 1980), 290.

37. White to McKay, February 10, 1865, White to W. K. Beard, March 17, 1865, Letterbook 2, box 2, White Papers.

The trade continued until word of the surrender at Appomattox arrived in the area. In May Tampa was occupied by Union troops. Confederate resistance ended along with the perceived Seminole threat to wartime Florida.

The Seminoles were content to remain in their swampland retreats as the guns fell silent across the state and the nation. More than a year passed before an official filed a report on these unique Floridians and their activities. In January 1867 Colonel John T. Sprague of the Seventh United States Infantry came to the Key Biscayne area in hopes of seeing tribal members. Landing at Fort Dallas he learned that eighty or ninety Seminoles lived in the vicinity, although few were ever seen by white residents. Locals told Colonel Sprague that until recently the natives had paid visits to Fort Dallas on a regular basis for friendly rounds of bartering. Then, without warning, "they discontinued their visits and became distrustful and cautious."³⁸ Chief Sam Jones's death, Sprague learned, deprived the tribe of needed leadership, but the colonel believed that the remaining Seminoles in south Florida had resources enough to begin another war with the United States if they chose. He recommended their transportation to Arkansas to join their relatives west of the Mississippi as quickly as possible.³⁹

Not until the 1880s however, did the federal government admit it still had Indian wards in Florida and was willing to show them any interest. An expedition sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution made contact and brought back the first detailed study of the tribe since before the Civil War. Only 208 Seminoles were enumerated in a rough census, confirming wartime estimates. Expedition members concluded that the Seminoles still had the capacity to cause trouble, confirming Colonel Sprague's evaluation of the group's military strength. "If we anger him," noted the expedition's final statement, "he can still do much harm before we can conquer him."⁴⁰

These post-Civil War notices of the state's Indian population support the idea that they may well have had the means of taking the field against Confederate Floridians if they had cho-

38. John T. Sprague to George S. Hartstuff, January 19, 1867, Letters Sent, Department of Florida, April 1861-January 1869, record group 393, National Archives (microfilm also available at P. K. Yonge Library).

39. *Ibid.*

40. MacCauley, "Seminole Indians of Florida," 480, 531.

sen to do so. While the course they followed tended toward cautious neutrality, they skillfully maintained ties to both sides in the struggle in an effort to survive the white man's war. Confederates from Governor Milton to privates in the Cow Cavalry, on the other hand, believed that if steps were not taken they might rise again and attack their old enemies. Uncertainty as to their true intentions and their future actions served as the most effective weapon in the arsenal of the south Florida Seminoles during the Civil War. They were indeed a factor despite their small numbers. Their presence must be taken into account in any effort to explain the Civil War in Florida.