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WEST FLORIDA'S CREEK INDIAN CRISIS OF 1837

by BRIAN R. RUCKER

ALTHOUGH Andrew Jackson's forays into Spanish West Florida in 1814 and 1818 dispersed several hostile bands of Creek Indians, scattered parties remained in isolated forests and swamps. When Florida was transferred to the United States in 1821, settlers moving into the new territory soon were confronted with the presence of these natives. The majority were located in the central portion of the territory, but sizable bands lived in northwest Florida. The Treaty of Moultrie Creek, signed in 1823, provided for the settlement of approximately 800 friendly Creeks on reservation lands along the Apalachicola River. Smaller bands also lived along the shores of St. Andrew's, Choctawhatchee, Blackwater, and Escambia bays. Indians and half-bloods often visited Pensacola. They came into the area to hunt and fish, to find pasture for their cattle, and to obtain supplies in the town.¹

Many white residents of West Florida were suspicious of these Indians, regarding them as cattle and horse thieves, drunks, and "rascals."² Even George Catlin, the celebrated painter of native Americans, saw them in a less than favorable light. While visiting Pensacola in 1835, he painted a family catching and drying redfish on Santa Rosa Island. "Like all others that are half civilised . . .," Catlin observed, "they are to be pitied."³

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1. The Creeks along the Apalachicola River also were known as the Apalachicolas. Lucius F. Ellsworth and Jane E. Dysart, "West Florida's Forgotten People: The Creek Indians From 1830 Until 1970," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 59 (April 1981), 422-23.
2. Jane E. Dysart, "Another Road to Disappearance: Assimilation of Creek Indians in Pensacola, Florida, During the Nineteenth Century," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 61 (July 1982), 37-42.
3. *Ibid.*, 40-41; George Catlin, *North American Indians, Being Letters and Notes on Their Manners, Customs, and Conditions, Written During Eight Years' Travel*

Friction and mistrust grew between whites and the remaining Indians throughout the 1820s and the early 1830s. The natives were considered a threat, especially by slaveholders who believed they helped slaves to escape and also harbored runaways. Such presumptions were reinforced when runaway slaves actually were found in local camps.⁴ For example, Henry M. Brackenridge, caretaker of the government-owned Naval Live Oak Plantation on Santa Rosa peninsula, was concerned merely because a "few poor Indian families" had made the peninsula their hunting ground. He felt such activities increased the chances of destructive fires among the live oak stands. "The straggling Indians must be driven off," Brackenridge urged the secretary of the navy. "[T]his has been their hunting ground, and, unless they be ordered away, the fires will be continually breaking out from their camps."⁵

Roaming bands of Indians also inhibited development of the region's resources. Pensacolian Juan de la Rua had problems building a waterpowered sawmill on Pond Creek in present-day Santa Rosa County. Indians reportedly frightened away de la Rua's laborers, and by 1828 he had sold the site and left others to worry about dependable labor.⁶ Cattlemen in the area were alarmed as well. Small bands of natives frequently raided American cattle holdings and made use of the beeves for their own purposes.⁷ In 1829 a number of irate settlers from the Pensacola area, concerned about the cattle raids, petitioned the government to take decisive action against the Indians.⁸

West Floridians increasingly wanted to rid Florida of the disquieting presence of the remaining Indians, and plans for their removal were suggested as early as 1821. As also was the

Amongst the Wildest Tribes of Indians in North America, 1832-1839, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1926), II, 36-40.

4. Dysart, "Another Road to Disappearance," 42; Leora M. Sutton, *Pensacola Personalities, 1781-1881: Volume 4* (Pensacola, 1981), 35.
5. *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC, 1860), III, 924-25.
6. Martin Luther King, *History of Santa Rosa County: A King's Country* (privately published, 1972), 28; C. H. Overman, "After 111 Years, Bagdad Reaches the End," *Southern Lumber Journal and Building Materials Dealer* 43 (March 1939), 16.
7. *A. Gaylor v. J. Gaylor*, tile 1830-2686, Circuit Court Records, Escambia County Judicial Building, Pensacola; *Pensacola Floridian*, December 20, 1823; *Pensacola Gazette*, April 29, 1826, and March 10, 1829.
8. *Pensacola Gazette*, March 10, 1829.

case with other southeastern tribes, the relocation of Florida Indians to lands west of the Mississippi River was proposed. The Indians, it was argued, held valuable land coveted by white settlers for farms and settlements; the Indians also posed a threat to the security of the frontier.⁹ Florida Governor William P. DuVal insisted that relocation would save the “drunken, lazy and worthless” natives from the “certain fate of total extinction.”¹⁰

Steps were taken in the early 1830s to assure removal. By 1835, however, it was becoming obvious that removal would require the use of force, and growing Indian unrest, resistance, and violence culminated in that year in the outbreak of the Second Seminole War. Though far removed from the more volatile areas of central and southern Florida, northwest Florida also witnessed violence between Indians and whites.¹¹

The first report of violence in the northwest Florida area occurred in July 1834 on the Pea River in south Alabama, thirty-five miles north of Alaqua, a settlement in Walton County. An eighteen-year-old white settler was killed at an Indian encampment, presumably because he had caught the natives stealing livestock. A party of whites quickly was organized to pursue the murderers. They soon discovered a camp of nine Indians, but the inhabitants “fled to the swamps with guns and yells.” One Indian was killed, and two others were wounded. Benjamin Drake Wright, editor of the *Pensacola Gazette*, praised the retaliatory action and expressed hope that the incident would “inspire the Indians with a wholesome terror.”¹²

The Pea River incident was reported widely, and the *Baltimore American* took the *Gazette* to task for treating the account in such a “cold-blooded” manner. Wright defended his views, arguing that the northern paper had no concept of the frontier situation or of the true nature of the Indians. He asserted, as well, that bringing the Indians in legally would have been extremely difficult.¹³ Continuing his response, Wright provided valuable insight

9. Ellsworth and Dysart, “Forgotten People,” 423.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 152-68.

12. The white man killed was identified as a Mr. Spears. Horance G. Davis, Jr., “Pensacola Newspapers, 1821-1900,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 37 (January-April 1959), 424-25; *Pensacola Gazette*, August 2, 9, September 20, 1834.

13. *Pensacola Gazette*, September 20, 1834.

into how the local whites viewed the remaining Indians of the region:

It is impossible for persons who judge of the Indian character from what they read and hear, to form an idea of the state of utter degradation to which the savages of the south have degenerated. In his native woods, undebased by intercourse with the whites, joying in his wild freedom from all restraints, which even the contiguity of the white man imposes, the Indian is a subject of admiration, and sometimes even of respect; but the Indians who now roam among the vast and unpeopled regions of southern Alabama and Florida, are either the scattered fragments of broken tribes or outlaws among their own people. They have no sense of character, principle, religion, or responsibility of any kind. When, in connection with all this it is remembered, that they are, even in this land of indolence and ease, lazy even to a proverb, it is unnecessary to say, that their whole life is a series of thieving and depredation.¹⁴

Such views— often combining “noble savage” idealism with a “dam’ Injun” bias— were typical of the region at the time. Adding to his defense, Wright noted that there had been no further disturbances and cited the fact as evidence that vigilantism was effective, justified, and sometimes necessary.¹⁵

Despite Wright’s assertion, Indian unrest continued to impact on the area during the following year. Newspapers reported disturbances in southwest Georgia and southern Alabama by Creek Indians who were resisting efforts to relocate them.¹⁶ Northwest Florida residents also were affected by provocative actions by Seminoles in East Florida. In November 1835, for instance, an artillery company from Pensacola’s Fort Pickens was ordered to Tampa Bay.¹⁷ Several weeks later sugar plantations throughout central and south Florida were destroyed by the natives, and Major Francis L. Dade and 105 American troops

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., February 28 and August 29, 1835; Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians* (Norman, OK, 1953), 140-51.

17. *Pensacola Gazette*, November 28, 1835.

were massacred in Sumter County. The Second Seminole War officially had begun.¹⁸

The outbreak of war prompted Pensacola-based troops to prepare for action. The navy organized a force for use against the Seminoles, composed chiefly of men from the *Vandalia* under the command of Lieutenant Louis M. Goldsborough.¹⁹ Governor Richard Keith Call also ordered the formation of militia regiments in Escambia and Walton counties, asking the counties to furnish sixty and twenty volunteers, respectively, for a term of six months' service. The troops were to form as soon as possible at San Pedro, Madison County. These developments caught the inhabitants of northwest Florida by surprise, and the regiment was not organized for quite some time.²⁰

In the spring of 1836 settlers living in the Panhandle area received additional incentives to organize militias. Alabama volunteer companies, stopping at Pensacola on their way to the "Indian Wars," no doubt inspired many residents to join the crusade. More importantly, newspaper accounts detailed the violent Creek resistance that had erupted near Columbus, Georgia, and in south Alabama. Panic began to spread from Columbus to Apalachicola. White settlers feared that the "renegade" Creeks, fleeing removal, would travel south to join forces with the Florida Seminoles. Such fears, accentuated by the outbreaks of violence, intensified concerns of Panhandle residents about the Indian presence.²¹

Volunteer companies finally were raised and organized in Escambia County in June 1836. Jackson Morton, who owned a large brickyard on Blackwater River and recently had been elected to Florida's legislative council, was designated colonel of the First Regiment, Florida militia.²² Fifty-seven volunteers appeared at the battalion muster on the west side of the Escambia River, and over thirty volunteers gathered at the Black Water

18. Tebeau, *History of Florida*, 158-62.

19. *Pensacola Gazette*, January 2, 1836; Edward W. Callahan, ed., *List of Officers of the Navy of the United States and the Marine Corps from 1775 to 1900* (New York, 1901), 222.

20. *Ibid.*, January 23, June 18, 1836.

21. *Ibid.*, March 5, May 28, 1836; Dysart, "Road to Disappearance," 43; Ellsworth and Dysart, "Forgotten People," 424; Foreman, *Indian Removal*, 140-51.

22. *Pensacola Gazette*, June 18, 25, 1836; Brian R. Rucker, *Jackson Morton: West Florida's Soldier, Senator, and Secessionist* (Milton, 1990), 3-5.

settlement (the present-day Milton area).²³ Local inhabitants enthusiastically supported the volunteers. Addressing the militia, Colonel Morton noted that “even the ‘lasses of the woods’ had caught the contagion of patriotic feeling— that even their bosoms glowed with enthusiasm in the cause of our suffering fellow-citizens of the east.” Morton was referring to some thirty women from the Black Water settlement who were raising funds to equip their “gallant sons, brothers and sweethearts” for the upcoming struggle against the hostiles.²⁴

The Escambia volunteers boarded the cutter Washington destined for St. Marks on July 9 and were encamped near Tallahassee a few weeks later. By September they were on duty near the Suwannee River, where they were divided into three detachments— one stationed at Charles’ Ferry on the Suwannee, one at a plantation in the neighborhood, and a third about six miles from the San Pedro settlement.²⁵ Coincidentally, Escambia County officials received orders for more volunteers, and, by October, thirty new militiamen had departed for Tallahassee.²⁶ By then, the war was beginning to impact significantly upon the inhabitants of northwest Florida. The *Gazette’s* editor reflected that the people of Escambia County were too remote to have experienced the more unfortunate aspects of the war, but he also recognized the pressure the war had exerted upon the county, pointing out that, of less than 300 Escambia men eligible for military duty, close to one-third already were in the field.²⁷

The difficulty of bringing the war to a speedy and decisive conclusion led to further fears and concerns among West Floridians, and, in January 1837, the legislative council called for more militia troops from the area.²⁸ Events soon transpired which brought the reality of the war directly to the white inhabitants of the Panhandle.

For nearly a year, a large number of Creeks along the Alabama and Georgia sides of the Chattahoochee River had been opposing removal. Friction in the southeast between Red Stick Creeks and Creeks friendly to the United States had

23. *Pensacola Gazette*, June 25, 1836.

24. *Ibid.*, June 25, July 2, 1836.

25. *Ibid.*, July 9, 30, September 3, 1836.

26. *Ibid.*, October 1, 8, 15, 1836.

27. *Ibid.*, October 29, 1836.

28. *Ibid.*, January 14, 1837.

existed for decades. The rivalry earlier had resulted in the Creek War, and recent federal removal efforts had precipitated a new round of violence. Beset by economic and social woes, usually caused by unscrupulous whites and an unsympathetic federal government, the fragile "Creek Nation" fell prey to the old factionalism. Renegade Creeks who opposed removal attacked isolated farmhouses, steamboats, frontier settlements, and travelers in the area from Columbus, Georgia, to Eufaula, Alabama. These marauding Indians began moving westwardly to the upper reaches of the Pea River where they were defeated by militiamen in February and March of 1837. Following these losses, the renegade Creeks broke up into smaller bands and moved southwesterly along the courses of the Choctawhatchee River into Walton County, Florida, murdering and pillaging as they traveled.²⁹

Archibald Smith, United States agent to the Apalachicola Indians, learned in late February 1837 that renegade Creeks were moving south down the Choctawhatchee River, stealing canoes and plundering as they went. On February 28, the members of the Alberson family, living on the Alabama-Florida border, were murdered, and several other families were reported as missing, presumably murdered. Smith heard reports that the Creek women were killing their own children to facilitate their flight and were fighting as savagely as the men. He also was informed that 125 to 400 renegade Creeks had entered Florida and were traveling toward Yellow River and the Pensacola area. He believed they were seeking a haven in the unpopulated forests that stretched from Pensacola to the Apalachicola River and they would likely prey off the outlying farms for subsistence. Smith also received disquieting news that the renegades were heading for a settlement of friendly Indians at Escribano

29. The Creeks were defeated near Hobdy's Bridge and along the Pea River by militiamen under the command of Brigadier General William Wellborn. Wellborn, commanding the Barbour Rangers, wanted to pursue the Indians into Florida as far as Blackwater Bay and the camp of the Escribano Indians who were supposedly aiding the fugitives. Elba Wilson Carswell, *Holmesteading: The History of Holmes County, Florida* (Tallahassee, 1986), 31; Foreman, *Indian Removal*, 140-51, 179-81; Anne Kendrick Walker, *Backtracking in Barbour County: A Narrative of the Last Alabama Frontier* (Richmond, 1941), 38-58. For a comprehensive account of the political factionalism within the Creek Nation and its impact on removal, see Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln, NE, 1982).

Point on Blackwater Bay. According to reports the Creeks had been obtaining supplies and ammunition from the Escribano Indians and were intent on reaching their camp. Realizing the urgency of the situation, Smith set out hurriedly in an effort to warn settlers and to reach the Escribano Indians before the renegades did. He also managed to send a letter to Pensacola requesting the suspension of the sale of powder and lead to Indians and to white men suspected of selling to the Indians.³⁰ Smith's report to the commissioner of Indian affairs details his frantic overland journey to Blackwater Bay and his encounter with the Escribano Indians:

I was told that . . . it would probably cost me my life to make the trip but having then travelled two days I did not wish to return, wishing to see the black Water if possible before the arrival of the Runaway Creeks. . . . We pushed in bringing the sad news to every settlement on our way untill we arrived at the head of black Water bay. . . . [The Escribano Indians] are 41 in number, besides two very old Spaniards who are intermarried with them. They informed me that their fathers emigrated to that spot about the time of the Revolutionary War, . . . that they came from the old Tuckabatchie Town, near where the Town of Montgomery in Alabama now stands. . . . There are 9 or 10 men and all have families. Some have children & others have not. . . . They speak english tolerable well most of them and make a support by catching Fish & oysters for the Pensacola market, which I was told is 20 miles distant. They have [diverse] little sail boats, and travel wherever they please. I was much pleased with their conduct and told them I was sent there by the Government to inform them that the Creek Indians had broke away . . . committed several murders, & were then I thought not far from them. . . . They then told me that one of their women was out in the woods some few miles back perhaps the day before

30. Carswell, *Holmesteading*, 31-32; *Niles' Weekly Register*, March 18, 1837, 33; *Pensacola Gazette*, March 11, 1837; Archibald Smith to C. A. Harris, March 12, 1837, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-80, Florida Superintendency Emigration, 1828-1838, microfilm publication no. 234, roll 290 (mf. 752), National Archives (available at John C. Pace Library, University of West Florida, Pensacola).

and saw two Indian boys who informed her they belonged to 4 Camps of Coweta Indians who were a few miles back, that they were resolved to die rather than emigrate to Arkansas, that a great many more would come down shortly and endeavor to live on the Coast from there to the mouth of Choctawhatchie. From what I have seen I am fearful that distress will pervade the most part of West Florida for some time. . . . I told the Indians on Black Water that their future happiness now depended on their own Conduct. . . . They assured me they should Keep a vigilant watch, that should [the Creeks] attempt to come near them they should remove their families to Pensacola, and assist the whites in subduing them. In this I greatly encouraged them, and took my leave.³¹

Northwest Floridians immediately took action. A meeting of Pensacola citizens was called to raise a militia force to defend the frontier settlers. Commodore Alexander J. Dallas of the Pensacola Navy Yard agreed to send men and boats to guard the provisions depots that would be established. Colonel Jackson Morton took control of the volunteer company, and on March 8 a mounted company was sent to the Black Water settlement where they were joined by local volunteers. Joseph Bonifay, a local citizen familiar with the area, traveled east as a scout to obtain information on Indian activities.³² A military supply depot named Camp Dallas quickly was established at the head of the East Bay, and a United States military force, comprised of thirty-six mounted men, made its way up Yellow River, then eastward to Shoal River, and finally back to Camp Dallas. Wet weather and inhospitable swamps hampered their progress, and the forces returned having found only an abandoned camp.³³

Military spies and agents soon made contact with a band of thirty-five Indians who agreed to come in peacefully. In Pensacola, Army Major Henry Wilson waited to conduct them to Mobile Point, Alabama, where nearly 3,000 Creeks were being assembled for their western relocation. Excitement in the Pensacola area gradually subsided as it appeared that the majority of the renegades had dissolved into the wilderness north of

31. Smith to Harris, March 12, 1837.

32. *Pensacola Gazette*, March 11, 1837

33. *Ibid.*, March 18, 1837.

Choctawhatchee Bay. The *Gazette* began to downplay the danger by noting that the Indians would do no injury to whites except perhaps stealing their cattle for food.³⁴

Optimism proved premature. The renegade Creeks soon appeared in the area, and settlers in Walton and Escambia counties again were alarmed. Several bands appeared at Mallett's Landing on the northern shore of Choctawhatchee Bay. One settler attempted to employ them as laborers on his farm as a ruse to entrap them, and another settler actually captured four Indians. The Mallett's Landing settlers were eager for troops to be sent to their community, but they expressed no fear of being murdered by the Indians. To them, the natives sought only concealment. Nevertheless, the whites were concerned with the Indians killing their cattle.³⁵

The situation deteriorated rapidly. On April 15, a party of eight to ten fugitive Creeks arrived in Lumberton (present-day Milton) on Blackwater River to purchase supplies, but after they finished trading a number of whites attempted to detain them. The Indians fled, but not before the whites shot one in the leg. The wounded Indian drew a knife, cut his own throat, and then, reportedly, threw the knife to his son and ordered him to do the same. The youth, about ten years of age, began to do so, but the whites wrested the knife from him. The locals then took the father, tied a rope around his neck, and dragged him under a raft of lumber lying in the river until he was dead. An Indian woman and a boy (likely the son of the slain Indian) also were seized at this time but were not harmed.³⁶

Editor Wright of the *Gazette* condemned the actions at Black Water. Commodore Dallas also was alarmed at the incident and

34. Mobile Point was at the tip of the eastern peninsula located at the mouth of Mobile Bay (the site of present-day Fort Morgan). *Ibid.*, March 25, April 8, 1837; J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, ed., *The Papers of William Alexander Graham*, 7 vols. (Raleigh, 1957), IV, 151-52.

35. *Pensacola Gazette*, March 18, April 8, 15, 1837. Mallett's Landing, on Lafayette Bayou, was located either at the present-day Valparaiso-Niceville area of Okaloosa County or the modern Freeport area of Walton County. See *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, IV, 222; John Love McKinnon, *History of Walton County* (Atlanta, 1911; reprint ed., Gainesville, 1968), 8, 44: "A Man of the Western Part of Florida" in John Lee Williams, *A View of West Florida* (Philadelphia, 1827; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1976), end piece; John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837; facsimile ed., Gainesville, 1962), 127.

36. *Pensacola Gazette*, April 22, 1837.

feared the Indians would retaliate by raiding frontier settlements in the area. The commodore sent a party of men under the command of Lieutenant Neil M. Howison to protect the Black Water community. Howison used an Indian woman captured at Black Water, along with two friendly natives, to communicate with the camp of fugitive Creeks. The two friendly Indians returned the next day and reported that the Creeks threatened to shoot them and would not let the woman return. They also stated that the renegades had been informed of the Black Water incident and were "very much exasperated."³⁷

Dallas was correct when he predicted retaliation; on April 23 the renegades struck. A party of seven Walton County men, who had been traveling along the upper Shoal River searching for their cattle, suddenly were attacked in their camp at dawn. Five members of the party were shot and clubbed to death, but two who were apart from the others managed to hide in the thick cover of the nearby swamp. These two eventually made their way back to some of the Walton County settlements, and word of the attack soon spread. Settlers appealed for help, and plans were made for constructing a community fort. The inhabitants feared for their lives as well as their crops and livestock. Captain Arch Justice organized thirty-five men and set out in pursuit of the raiders. Two Creeks were killed near Shoal River. Though the whites had retaliated, sparsely populated Walton County was unable to raise a force sufficient to defend the widely dispersed settlements.³⁸

The editor of the Pensacola paper reacted to the Indian attack with considerable insight. While recognizing the plight of Walton County settlers, he also observed that the incident probably was sparked by the earlier savage conduct of the whites toward the Indian party at Black Water. In a stance uncharac-

37. *Ibid.*, April 22, 29, 1837.

38. The whites killed by the Indians near Gum Creek reportedly were scalped. Accounts differ as to how many whites were involved in the incident. According to available information, "Big" John Anderson, Michael Elliot, Joseph Nelson, William Nelson, John Porter, and Michael Vaughan were killed, and Bill Caswell and Thomas Broxton survived. The white retaliatory expedition attacked the Indians on a small creek which emptied into Shoal River. The creek later was named "Battle Creek" because of this engagement. *Ibid.*, April 29, May 13, 1837; McKinnon, *History of Walton County*, 109-17.

teristic of a newspaper in an area being threatened by Indians, Wright voiced this view:

These misguided savages were seeking concealment. They were not disposed to shed blood of the white man, but the outrage committed at Black Water, has exasperated them to the last degree, and we may now look for a savage war with all its attendant horrors. The Indians are incapable of discriminating. They imagine that the outrage . . . shews the disposition of the white man, generally, toward them, and the unhappy consequence, that before they can be driven from their present hiding places, many valuable lives will be sacrificed. On whose head rests the blood of these victims?³⁹

This editorial opinion is considerably more favorable to the Indians than earlier ones in the paper. Quite different in tone, it reflects the moral ambiguity that the Indian problem often presented to the thoughtful and conscientious segments of the white population.⁴⁰

The Black Water incident and the outbreak of violence in Walton County hampered efforts to induce the fugitive Creeks to come in peacefully. Major Wilson and Marine Lieutenant John G. Reynolds were sent to Escribano Point and along the shores of Blackwater Bay in attempts to persuade the Indians to join the emigrating Creeks at Mobile Point. Using friendly natives as interpreters, Reynolds established communications with several Indian groups, and by the end of May, despite the heightened tensions, seventy Indians had come in, including the Escribano Indians. Reynolds arranged for them to be fed and protected, and they were then transported by boat to Mobile Point.⁴¹

39. *Pensacola Gazette*, April 29, 1837.

40. Wright was editor of the *Pensacola Gazette* from 1834 to 1845. He owned the paper and wrote most of the editorials.

41. The Escribano Indians presumably were relocated along with the other Indian groups on reservation lands beyond the Mississippi River. *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 7 vols. (Washington, DC, 1832-1860), VII, 838; *Pensacola Gazette*, April 29, June 3, 1837. Lieutenant Reynolds earlier had been an agent to the Creeks living in southern Alabama and Georgia. Foreman, *Indian Removal*, 180; John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War 1835-1842* (Gainesville, 1967), 251; Walker, *Backtracking in Barbour County*, 57.

In May, Indians attacked and killed at least twelve Walton County settlers, and Governor Call urged an immediate organization of the county's militia. Because of the violent conflict then underway in the rest of the territory, federal troops in the South could not be diverted for service in West Florida. Walton County citizens constructed a blockhouse in the central portion of the country, and Colonel John L. McKinnon organized a company of militiamen. To protect the frontier settlements east of Pensacola, Colonel Morton was authorized to raise new militia forces in Escambia County. Morton was ill and unable to lead any forces at that time, however, and the local militia consequently remained in "total want of organization." The governor accordingly dispatched Jackson County volunteers westward to aid in the removal of the renegade Creeks, and their commander, Colonel Leavin Brown, was placed in charge of the campaign. Morton, who soon recovered his health, also raised a company at Black Water, and by June 1 troops were scouring the countryside from Yellow River to the Choctawhatchee River. But despite the presence of militiamen, Walton County settlers were in a state of panic.⁴²

Pensacola residents were kept informed of the latest activities from the "seat of the war" in Walton County, and among the news items they received were accounts of several atrocities. The first incident occurred in early May at Mallett's Landing on Choctawhatchee Bay. A friendly Indian named Jim, who had served as a guide and interpreter for the whites, was murdered by a group of drunken whites. Wright once more became indignant at the treatment of the Indians and railed against the white attackers:

These *heroes* are supposed to have been drunk when they perpetrated this outrage— they are the very last persons to go out with their neighbors against the hostile Indians, and expend their heroism upon those who are inoffensive and friendly! It is high time that these unprincipled

42. Washington County and Franklin County volunteers later joined the militiamen operating in Walton County. Carswell, *Holmsteading*, 32-33, 35; McKinnon, *History of Walton County*, 110, 116, 118-20; *Pensacola Gazette*, May 13, 20, 27, June 3, 1837; Margaret H. Wooten, ed., *Henderson Chips* (privately printed, 1983), 3 (copy in John C. Pace Library).

wretches should be made to pay with their lives, the penalty of thus violating the laws of the land, and shedding human blood. The Indian, when friendly and peaceable, is as us much entitled to the protection of our laws, as the best man in the community.⁴³

A more sordid incident occurred shortly thereafter near Alaqua. Colonel Brown's Jackson County militiamen, while searching the Alaqua Creek area, killed twelve Indians. No whites were injured. Reportedly, though, the murdered Indians had been prisoners, one man and the rest women and children. Various accounts of this "massacre" began to spread.⁴⁴ Brown's own report was as damning as the rumors. He stated that only nine women and children were killed, along with a male prisoner. The male prisoner had been recruited as a guide by Captain Stephen Daniel, a company commander, with the promise that he would be killed if he misled the troops on their way to an Indian camp. Brown's report reveals the outcome:

We followed him for some distance through swamps, hammocks and lakes until daylight when, finding he had no idea of conducting us to the camp, I ordered the command to turn back to where we had left the other prisoners. We returned to the [Alaqua Creek] about one hour after sunrise, Capt. Daniel's company having charge of the prisoners in the rear, when Capt. Daniel and nearly all his companions fired on the Indian prisoner who had led us through so many difficulties during the night.

The women and children, taking fright at this, started to run, when they were all shot down and left on the ground. I then crossed the river and found . . . that one of the [other] Indian prisoners had poisoned himself and died. I then marched to this place [Lagrange] with the remainder of the prisoners to obtain supplies.⁴⁵

43. *Pensacola Gazette*, May 13, 1837.

44. *Ibid.*, May 27, June 3, 1837.

45. Carswell, *Homesteading*, 33-35. Captain Stephen Daniel, the militia officer connected with the Alaqua massacre, also was alleged to have been the leader of a Washington County militia company that killed twenty-two Indians in another "massacre" in late 1842. Elba Wilson Carswell, *Tempestuous Triangle: Historical Notes on Washington County, Florida* (Chipley, 1974), 60-64.

Lieutenant John G. Reynolds's report of the incident differed from Brown's. Shortly after the massacre Reynolds had traveled along the north shore of Choctawhatchee Bay on his way to visit some Indians reported to be at Escribano Point. On the way the lieutenant stopped at the massacre site and inspected it. What he found appalled him:

The spot was not more than fifteen feet in diameter. I minutely examined the place, and am firmly of the opinion, that the poor devils were penned up and slaughtered like cattle and such was the opinion of the friendly Indians in company. The shrieks of the poor children were distinctly heard at a house distant, I should think a quarter of a mile. Several were scalped, and all who had earrings, had their ears slit with knives, in order to possess themselves of the silver. I do think this one of the most outrageous acts civilized men could be guilty of.⁴⁶

Though condemned strongly at the time, the Alaqua incident soon was forgotten by the *Gazette*. Brown's report of the affair apparently was accepted and never investigated, and Reynolds's subsequent efforts at rounding up the fugitives were hampered by the incident. The lieutenant reported that the Indians "are so frightened by the worse than savage cruelty and treachery which they have met with from the whites, that they will be sure either to fight or fly, whenever they are approached by the whites in numbers." Public attention meanwhile was focused on the continuing attempts to defeat and remove the renegade Creeks from northwest Florida. Colonel Brown's hard-driving and successful campaign against the natives soon won him local respect.⁴⁷

Indians still were seen during the summer of 1837 as far west as the shores of Blackwater Bay. John Hunt, who operated a brickyard on the eastern shore of the bay, reported that the renegades were in the area and that his slaves saw them and conversed with them frequently. There were threats of Indians

46. *Pensacola Gazette*, June 10, 1837.

47. There were unsubstantiated rumors of whites intent on murdering Reynolds and his party, perhaps because he was exposing the massacre. *Ibid.*, June 10, July 1, 1837; Carswell, *Holmestead*, 33-35.

near the white settlements along Yellow River, and reports were received of parties of six to twenty Indians in the countryside between Blackwater River and Yellow River. Finding the natives in the area's swamps and forests, however, proved to be next to impossible. Morton's volunteer force at Black Water scoured the Yellow River and Blackwater River areas for a week in June without sighting any Indians.⁴⁸

Colonel Brown requested the transfer of Morton's volunteers for service in Walton County, but the request was rejected because the men were needed to protect Escambia's eastern frontier settlements. Instead, volunteers from St. Joseph and Apalachicola arrived at Pensacola and were sent to Black Water in order to form a sizable force. Brown intended for this force to move eastward while his own men pushed westward from Alaqua, thus catching the Indians in a pincer movement.⁴⁹

By early July Escambia County citizens had organized a new Escambia militia regiment. The *Gazette* encouraged this move and noted that an efficiently organized militia was imperative at the present state of crisis. The editor observed that not only was the threat of the renegade Creeks to the east a problem, but the disquieting presence of 3,000 Creeks assembled for deportation at Mobile Point, only a short distance west of Pensacola, also had to be considered.⁵⁰

News from Colonel Brown at Lagrange shortly thereafter served to fuel the fears of Panhandle residents—the largest engagements to date were being fought in Walton County. On May 19 a band of Walton County militiamen had cornered a party of Creeks near the “Cow Pens,” west of the Choc-tawhatchee River (near present-day Bruce). The natives retreated into a thick swamp, but the whites followed them, and a sharp skirmish ensued. A number of Indians and whites were killed or wounded.⁵¹

Subsequently, on July 4, Colonel Brown's troops had a heated engagement with approximately 100 Indians on Shoal River. The natives were routed, and they fled across the river.

48. *Pensacola Gazette*, June 17, 1837.

49. *Ibid.*, June 17, 24, July 1, 1837.

50. *Ibid.*, July 1, 8, 1837.

51. This action took place near the community of Antioch, and the swamp where the skirmish occurred still is known as “Battle Bay.” *Ibid.*, May 27, 1837; McKinnon, *History of Walton County*, 118-19.

Three militiamen were wounded; approximately eight to ten Indians were killed and several were wounded. The exact number of Indians killed was in question since the Creeks "immediately bore them off and threw many of them into the river as soon as they fell." In their retreat, the Creeks threw off many of their packs. The militiamen discovered a gold watch and \$263 among the Indians' belongings, perhaps plunder from previous raids.⁵²

Brown's forces attacked the Creeks again on July 19 on Alaqua Creek in Walton County. After a brisk fight of twenty minutes, the Indians fell back. Five Creeks were killed; one militiaman was killed, and five others were wounded. The steamboat Marion was sent to Lagrange, and a number of wounded and sick militiamen were brought to Pensacola for medical treatment.⁵³

Brown's persistent attacks on the Creeks proved successful. By August the Indians were becoming dispirited, and many were surrendering on their own accord. Major Henry Wilson, using friendly Indians, succeeded in persuading a number of the Indian bands to give themselves up, and it was anticipated that his efforts soon would net the entire Indian population without any further loss of life.⁵⁴ Cosapinia, one of the principal chiefs, surrendered at Lagrange on August 28 and was persuaded to bring in other Creeks. The chief set out with several runners westward along the north shore of Choctawhatchee Bay, and he was requested to talk with as many fugitives as possible and induce them to come in at Escribano Point.⁵⁵

The panic slowly subsided in the Panhandle as individual Indians and bands of renegade Creeks surrendered. One detriment to a speedy resolution was the incessant pursuit of the Creeks by the whites over the course of the summer. The militia movements, skirmishes, and accounts of the Alaqua massacre dispersed many Creeks into smaller parties which fled into the

52. A battalion under Colonel Wood of St. Joseph at the time was encamped on Santa Rosa Sound near present-day Fort Walton Beach. It was dispatched northward in pursuit of the retreating Indians. *Pensacola Gazette*, July 15, 1837.

53. *Ibid.*, July 22, 29, August 5, 1837.

54. The Creeks had been removed to Pass Christian, Mississippi, by August. Lieutenant Reynolds was later in charge of removing these Creeks to the West. *Ibid.*, July 22, August 26, 30, 1837.

55. *Ibid.*, September 2, 6, 9, 1837.

more remote sections of the countryside. Major Wilson's attempts at peaceful inducement, therefore, were regarded suspiciously by the Indians. Colonel Brown temporarily suspended hostilities in late summer in order to facilitate a more peaceful atmosphere for Wilson's efforts. Forces were stationed along East Bay to take in any fugitives who appeared there, and by September militia patrols could locate no Indians in the immediate vicinity of Pensacola.⁵⁶

By October 1837 the Indian threat to northwest Florida appeared to be over. Though not comparable to the more serious conflicts in central and south Florida, the events of the previous six months nevertheless had left a mark upon the Panhandle region. Numerous white settlers and Indians had been killed in the various raids and skirmishes throughout northwest Florida. Walton County was the hardest hit of all the area's counties. The United States Superior Court failed to hold its regular session in the county because of the disturbances, and the economy was seriously disrupted. The severe hardships of settlers in Walton and Washington counties led Governor Call in October to order rations to be supplied to those inhabitants most in need.⁵⁷

The main body of the renegade Creeks had moved eastwardly. In late December approximately eighty fugitives were brought in near the Choctawhatchee River, and several weeks later ninety more were captured west of the Apalachicola River. Military and governmental authorities estimated that 100 more still were free and making their way toward the Seminoles in East Florida.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, a number of fugitive Creeks remained in the more western portion of the Panhandle. John Hunt on Blackwater Bay complained that a sizable number of his cows, oxen, and hogs had been stolen, evidence of an Indian presence.⁵⁹ In January 1838 a barge on Choctawhatchee River was robbed by Creeks, and in March Governor Call visited La-Grange in an attempt to bring in Indians still frequenting the area.⁶⁰

56. *Ibid.*, August 26, September 2, 1837; Hamilton, *Papers of William Alexander Graham*, IV, 151-52.

57. *Pensacola Gazette*, October 21, 1837; Carswell, *Holmesteading*, 35.

58. *Pensacola Gazette*, December 2, 30, 1837, January 20, 1838; *Niles' National Register*, January 27, 1838, 338.

59. *Pensacola Gazette*, November 25, 1837.

60. *Ibid.*, January 27, March 24, 1838.

The Indian threat had disappeared almost completely by the summer of 1838. The Apalachicola Indians finally were removed that October, and— at least on the official record— north-west Florida was devoid of Indians.⁶¹ In actuality, though, small scattered bands had managed to find refuge in the largely unpopulated wilderness from Pensacola Bay to the Apalachicola River. Some attempted to isolate themselves completely from the white presence, while others continued to prey on remote frontier settlements. Violence persisted in West Florida throughout the remainder of the antebellum period. Between 1840 and 1847 some whites were attacked and killed along the Apalachicola River, in Washington County, and on St. Andrew's Bay, Choctawhatchee Bay, and East Bay. The military expeditions sent in response rarely discovered any Indians.⁶² As late as the 1850s the natives continued to be a problem for many Washington County settlers. The roaming Creeks had raided so many corn crops in the area that in 1854 the legislature was forced to make a special appropriation for the relief of the county's farmers.⁶³

The majority of the Creeks remaining in West Florida gradually assimilated into either white or black society. To avoid removal, isolated Indian families and individuals began concealing their identity and abandoning much of their culture. Fear of removal and predominant racial attitudes led to a transformation of the few remaining Indians. They slowly took on the lifestyles of rural southern farmers, including dress, housing styles, diet, and religious beliefs. Often they would intermarry with whites (or blacks, depending on their skin color), further diluting their Indian heritage. By 1900 most Creeks and half-

61. *Ibid.*, November 3, 1838; James W. Covington, "Federal Relations with the Apalachicola Indians: 1823-1838," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 42 (October 1963), 140-41.

62. *Pensacola Gazette*, February 8, September 19, October 24, 1840, January 13, February 24, November 30, 1844, February 14, 21, 1846, November 27, 1847; Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *Territorial Papers of the United States*, 28 vols. (Washington, DC, 1934-1975), *Florida Territory*, XXVI, 898; Ellsworth and Dysart, "Forgotten People," 424-26; Ira A. Hutchison, *Some Who Passed This Way* (Panama City, FL, 1972), 20-21; McKinnon, *History of Walton County*, 122-28; *New American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, 13 vols. (Wilmington, DE, 1972), XI, 443-53; *Niles' National Register*, May 30, 1840, 200; *Tallahassee Floridian*, February 28, 1846.

63. Elba Wilson Carswell, *Holmes Valley, A West Florida Cradle of Christianity* (Bonifay, 1969; revised ed., Chipley, 1983), 6.

bloods remaining in the region essentially had forgotten their Indian ancestry.⁶⁴

West Florida's Creek Indian crisis of 1837 is a relatively forgotten chapter in the history of Florida's Indian wars. The roots of the conflict can be traced to the decades-old factionalism within the Creek nation. The Florida Panhandle eventually became something of a highway for those Creeks trying to escape removal by joining the Seminoles to the south. The turmoil and violence that ensued in Walton County and adjacent areas reflects the often repeated frontier conflict—the struggle between white settlers and the Indians, a struggle that involved land, independence, racial bigotry, and the inability to compromise. For the white frontiersmen it was a tragic episode—families brutally murdered, property destroyed and stolen, and settlements terrorized with fear. For the Indians it was a more lasting tragedy—many were killed, hundreds were deported to the West, and the remaining natives were condemned to poverty and the loss of their heritage and culture. Atrocities were committed on both sides, and both white and red savages were to be found. But there were voices of reason as well. Editor Wright offered at times enlightened and sympathetic views of the Indians. Major Wilson and Lieutenant Reynolds attempted to conduct a peaceful removal of the natives. And Archibald Smith risked his life to warn settlers and to defuse an explosive situation. There also were friendly Indians who served as guides, interpreters, messengers, and peacekeepers. They often risked their lives, yet eventually were deported themselves. Few persons of Indian blood reside in West Florida today, the consequence of a violent and irreconcilable contest that occurred during the early decades of the nineteenth century.

64. During the latter part of the nineteenth century Creeks from south Alabama and south Georgia migrated into West Florida, adding to the small Indian population already present there. Dysart, "Road to Disappearance," 37-48; Ellsworth and Dysart, "Forgotten People," 422-39.