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**A FORGOTTEN SACRIFICE:  
RICHARD GENTRY, MISSOURI VOLUNTEERS,  
AND THE BATTLE OF OKEECHOBEE**

by PHILLIP THOMAS TUCKER

**T**HE Christmas Day 1837 battle at Lake Okeechobee was a crucial turning point of the Second Seminole War. Almost 30 percent of the American casualties in that engagement were volunteers from Missouri, forty men out of an effective volunteer force of 132. Among the dead was the volunteers' commanding officer, Colonel Richard Gentry. While the battle's American commander, Colonel Zachary Taylor, claimed a great victory, the clash was a disaster for the Missourians and, at that, was only the last in a series of difficult trials faced by the luckless regiment.<sup>1</sup>

The Missourians long trek had begun in the autumn of 1837. A tentative effort to effect a settlement of the war, already in its second year, had collapsed on June 2 when perhaps 700 Indians awaiting emigration had escaped from a holding camp near Tampa Bay.<sup>2</sup> Cries for decisive action had fallen upon General Thomas S. Jesup, army commander in Florida. Particularly, United States Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri criticized the drain of troops and resources. Benton boasted to President Martin Van Buren that western frontiersmen could reverse the Seminole tide, and Van Buren agreed to test the senator's theory.<sup>3</sup>

Subsequent to Benton's conversation with Van Buren, the secretary of war directed Colonel Gentry of the Missouri Militia to organize a cavalry regiment for Florida service. The call offered the citizen-soldiers their first opportunity to fight outside the state, and, as a result, the middle-Missouri countryside was swept with patriotic fervor. Spurred by the tireless efforts of Gentry, a former state legislator, eager yeoman farmers left their

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1. John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842* (Gainesville, 1967), 228.
2. *Ibid.*, 204.
3. William R. Gentry, *Full Justice: The Story of Richard Gentry and his Missouri Volunteers in the Seminole War* (St. Louis, 1937), 4-5.

plows in the fields lining the Missouri, Mississippi, Crooked, Auxvasse, and Chariton river bottoms of Boone, Callaway, Ray, Chariton, Jackson, and Howard counties. Even the Upper Mississippi River region around Marion County in the northeastern portion of the state supplied a volunteer company, under Captain John H. Curd.<sup>4</sup>

As the volunteers— eventually 600— were assembled, the nation was tight in the grip of an economic depression. Accordingly, the \$8.00 per month each soldier was to receive was a substantial incentive. Many of the men could not afford horses, and, for a time, Gentry's dream of leading a cavalry regiment was threatened. Since the government offered an added inducement of forty cents per day for each volunteer's horse, however, Gentry responded by endorsing personal notes to cover the price of mounts. The colonel also mortgaged his estate to outfit the regiment, a risky gesture for a man about to leave a wife and thirteen children for military duty in Florida.<sup>5</sup>

Despite its undisciplined composition, the regiment was composed of woodsmen who could hit white-tailed deer on the run, track game for miles, and otherwise survive off the land. Likely they were better marksmen than regular army soldiers. Some had served in hard-riding Ranger units that had protected frontier settlements against Osage war parties, and many had mobilized for the Black Hawk War in 1832. Colonel Gentry's credentials particularly were distinguished. He had served as an officer of a Kentucky regiment during the War of 1812 and as major general of Missouri Militia during the Black Hawk conflict.<sup>6</sup>

The ladies of Columbia— Gentry's home— especially were excited about the grand adventure. Mrs. Gentry boasted that she "would rather be a brave man's widow than a coward's wife."<sup>7</sup> Columbia Female Academy students stitched a giant silk flag with large white lettering:

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4. *Ibid.*, 6; Return I. Holcombe, *The History of Marion County, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1884), 210-11.

5. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 7-8.

6. Thomas Benton Gentry, *General Richard Gentry* (Kansas City, MO, 1899), 2-4, 7 (pamphlet in North Todd Gentry Papers, collection 49, folder 174, State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia).

7. William Richard Gentry, Jr., "Ann Hawkins Gentry," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 17 (October 1960), 64.

First Regiment of Missouri Volunteers  
 Gird, Gird For the Conflict,  
 Our Banner Wave High!  
 For Our Country We Live,  
 For Our Country We'll Die.<sup>8</sup>

Preparations for the volunteers' departure for Florida quickly were completed. At Columbia on October 15, 1837, they gathered for a farewell in front of Gentry's Tavern and Hotel. The entire community turned out, and stirring speeches, toasts, and bursts of cheering accentuated the ceremonies. With ranks assembled along dusty Broadway, the colonel directed a bachelor officer to accept formally the regimental colors from several local girls. But the duty proved too great for the shy officer, and he could say only, "Ladies and Gentlemen." Of all those present, perhaps the most amused were Osage, Shawnee, and Delaware warriors who had signed up as scouts.

Amidst cheering, Gentry finally motioned for the lengthy column to move out. Before leaving, though, he lifted his seven-year-old son behind him for the ride out of town. The colonel parted with the boy only when the horsemen stopped to water their mounts at a creek one mile east of the city. At the time a close friend of Gentry's told him: "Good-bye, Dick. I fear this will be our last interview; I know you are a brave man, but there is also an element of rashness in you. If you are ever in battle you will lead the charge and be killed!" Gentry responded to the prophetic words with a laugh and a firm handshake. The colonel's departure left as his only visual legacy in Columbia a portrait in civilian dress recently completed by George Caleb Bingham.<sup>9</sup>

The trek eastward to St. Louis was 125 miles long and proved as eventful for the 600 volunteers as the Columbia send-off. Captain William Henry Russell's men, for example, enjoyed passing through their hometown of Fulton. Only a few days before, local "daughters of freedom" had presented the Callaway County company an eagle-adorned banner. The flag, Captain Russell

8. *The History of Boone County, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1882), 208-09; William R. Gentry, Jr., *An Old Printing Press, An Old Flag, A Six Year Old Boy And A Pioneer Soldier* (St. Louis, 1948), 3 (pamphlet in Richard Gentry Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis).

9. Gentry, *Old Printing Press*, 2-5; Richard Gentry, *The Gentry Family in America* (New York, 1909), 100-01.



An 1849 engraving representing the Battle of Okeechobee. Reproduced from Charles J. Peterson, *The Military Heroes of the War With Mexico: With A Narrative of the War*.

enthusiastically had predicted, “[will] animate us on to duty . . . in the hour of peril and fight.”<sup>10</sup>

The regiment encamped at Jefferson Barracks, a United States military base south of St. Louis, on October 20. Local newspapers praised the Missourians. One correspondent particularly bragged how the soldiers from the Boone’s Lick region would be “sufficient, we think, in a fair fight, to capture all the Indians in Florida.”<sup>11</sup> The same publication, though, disclosed that many of the volunteers had been “humbled” into believing “they were to be the owners of all the fugitive slaves they may capture.”<sup>12</sup> Economic motivations clearly rivaled patriotism during one of the nation’s worst depressions.

10. *The History of Callaway County, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1884), 269-70; St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, October 21, 1837.

11. St. Louis *Missouri Republican*, October 14, 1837.

12. *Ibid.*, October 14, 18, 1837.

The volunteers' Indian allies raised a great deal of interest among St. Louis's residents. One editor praised their involvement while advocating "all Christendom and Savagedom against the Seminoles and their negroes."<sup>13</sup> The Indian force, commanded by Captain Joseph G. Parks, was composed of 200 Delaware, Osage, and Shawnee. They were said to be "the best men" the tribes could offer and were promised \$45.00 each per month. As with many promises made to the Indians, this one was broken. They received only \$11.00 monthly, an amount still greater than that paid to white soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

The troops embarked upon Mississippi River steamboats on October 25, and fortune began to turn against them. Upon arrival at New Orleans, they discovered that the city was suffering from a yellow-fever outbreak. Conditions of the voyage, coupled with fear of disease, prompted more than 150 volunteers to desert.<sup>15</sup> Gentry's zeal had not diminished, though. Writing his wife from Jackson Barracks on November 2, he noted: "[T]he Missouri regiment of Volunteers attracts the attention and notice of all the officers of the army, wherever we go . . . and I pledge myself to my friends and country that . . . ever they [will] have a good account of them."<sup>16</sup>

Gentry's enthusiasm quickly turned to bitter frustration during the Gulf passage. While ships carrying his men arrived at Tampa Bay five days after departure from New Orleans, those conveying the unit's horses were beset by a hurricane one day out of the city. The overloaded boats were tossed like toys during the storm. Because huge waves were crashing into the ships, the hatches were closed. As a result, nearly 200 horses suffocated during the five-day ordeal. Many other injured animals were shot and tossed overboard. When only a few remaining horses disembarked in Florida after their three-week journey, the regiment's status as cavalry effectively had been lost.<sup>17</sup>

The loss of their horses dealt a severe blow to the morale of the cavalier-minded Missouri men. Even the usually optimistic Gentry acknowledged that fact to his wife in late November.

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13. *Ibid.*, October 27, 1837.

14. *Ibid.*, October 19, 1837.

15. Willard Steele, *The Battle of Okeechobee* (Miami, 1987), 6; Gentry, *Full Justice*, 11.

16. Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 98-99.

17. *Ibid.*, 99-100; Gentry, *Full Justice*, 11.

“[D]issatisfaction prevails in the regiment in consequence of the loss of our horses,” he wrote from Fort Brooke in Tampa, “the men being compelled to walk or return home.” Gentry’s observation proved correct, and, evidently, many of the men chose to return to Missouri and were discharged accordingly.<sup>18</sup> Of the regiment’s eight companies, only four remained with the colonel. Soon, however, the situation deteriorated further.<sup>19</sup>

The regiment’s first orders for active campaigning in hostile country were issued on November 20. They resulted from General Jesup’s plans for assembling all available troops for a push from the Gulf coast into the center of Florida Indian country. Seven military columns had been organized to find the hostiles and force them into a pitched battle, an operation designed to negate the Indians’ stealth and guerrilla-like tactics. Ultimately, almost 9,000 Americans— the largest force ever collected in Florida during the war— invaded the Seminole homeland.<sup>20</sup>

Colonel Zachary Taylor, newly arrived in Florida, was given command of the area between the Peace and Kissimmee rivers, located in the heart of the peninsula east of Tampa Bay. Taylor was directed initially to establish a supply depot for his 1,400-man force— which was to include the remaining Missouri volunteers— on the Peace River. Because military officials were “as ignorant [of the Florida interior] as of the interior of China,” friendly Indians were to lead Taylor’s thrust.<sup>21</sup>

Advance elements of Taylor’s force under Lieutenant Colonel William S. Foster advanced to Peace River in mid-November and established the depot, named Fort Fraser, just north of present-day Bartow. The Missourians were ordered to guard eighty wagonloads of supplies intended for the new outpost, but before they could leave Fort Brooke another tragedy occurred.<sup>22</sup> While preparing for the expedition, the colonel’s son, Sergeant Richard Harrison Gentry, accidentally discharged his pistol while helping Captain John Ellis to saddle the officer’s horse. The ball

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18. Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 100.

19. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 12.

20. Mahon, *Second Seminole War*, 219-22.

21. *Ibid.*, 219; Francis Paul Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier* (Bloomington, 1969), 269-75.

22. Fort Fraser was named for Captain Upton S. Fraser, a victim of the December 1835 Dade Massacre. Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida’s Peace River Frontier* (Orlando, 1991), 50.

struck and killed Private John Davis, who was standing nearby. Davis's death— as had desertions, resignations, and the deaths of their horses— seemed to portend continued bad luck for the volunteers.<sup>23</sup> It was not long in coming.

Hardly had the march begun from Tampa Bay when a large part of Gentry's command refused to go on. Slogging through swamps did not fit into the soldiers' concepts of winning laurels. Gentry gloomily reported: "A portion of the 1st Battalion refused to accompany me on any further march in consequence of their loss of horses and demanded their discharge!" Because the men were "unwilling to make the campaign on foot" they were released, and 200 more volunteers left en masse for home.<sup>24</sup> A sympathetic regular-army officer reported, "[Gentry] was very much mortified at their defection, which was most dastardly on their part."<sup>25</sup> By the time Taylor's 800-man force reached the Kissimmee River, barely 150 Missourians remained to labor through the area's cypress swamps and hammocks.<sup>26</sup>

As if Gentry did not already have enough problems, Zachary Taylor held volunteers in contempt— and Gentry's were the only ones in Taylor's force. Expressing his opinion of them, Taylor often ordered the Missouri men forward when natural obstacles were encountered, while he allowed his regulars to remain behind. The future president's prejudice caused one officer to assert that "[Taylor] used the Missouri Volunteers more like negroes than anything else I can mention."<sup>27</sup> Thus, bad blood existed by December between Gentry's cavalymen and Taylor's regular-army men.

Wading through swamps was a particularly unpleasant chore that Taylor assigned to the Missourians. As Captain Cornelius Gilliam later explained, whenever the column faced a "swamp to penetrate, the volunteers had to dismount, leave their horses and charge through the water and mud often waist deep," assign-

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23. Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 99.

24. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 12.

25. Frank F. White, Jr., ed., "A Journal of Lieutenant R. C. Buchanan During the Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 29 (October 1950), 136.

26. St. Louis *Missouri Argus*, March 1, 1838.

27. "Journal of the Committee on the Florida Campaign; the Senate and the House of Representatives (of Missouri) to investigate the battle fought December 1823 [sic] in Florida by the Regular Army and the Missouri Volunteers," 13, Missouri Historical Society (hereafter, "Journal").



ments that sapped their strength and raised their tempers. Perhaps worst of all for the men's morale was the ocean of jagged-edged saw grass that covered miles of the flat terrain just north of Lake Okeechobee. The plants' teeth-like leaves cut uniforms to shreds and lacerated hands and legs.<sup>28</sup>

Until December 18 Taylor planned to move his troops against a suspected Indian and black concentration along the lower reaches of Peace River.<sup>29</sup> Missouri scouts, however, captured a Seminole warrior who had been surprised while guarding horses and cattle. The Indian carried a fine rifle, a full powder horn, and a pouch loaded with 100 lead musket balls.<sup>30</sup> Under threat of hanging, he reported in English that "there were near two thousand Indians and negroes with guns in their hands, and that they were prepared and would fight" in a hammock near Lake Okeechobee's northern tip.<sup>31</sup> Missouri and friendly Indian scouts were ordered to reconnoiter the wetlands toward the lake and soon had confirmed the Seminole's story.

As events soon proved, the Indians had prepared a masterful defense. Quartermaster Sergeant Thomas M. Bryan recalled that the Missourians eventually deployed "on the North side of a marsh about half a mile from the Indians, who were on the other side of the marsh in a dense hammock; the marsh was covered with prairie [saw] grass, generally about five feet high; the ground . . . very wet and marshy."<sup>32</sup> One regular-army officer assessed the Indian position as "the strongest . . . that I have ever seen."<sup>33</sup> Captain Gilliam, despite little military experience, quickly grasped that, if the Americans attacked across the swamp, "it [would be] like murder."<sup>34</sup>

The hostiles laboriously had cleared a wide field of fire in front of their hammock—an island of hardwoods rising out of a saw grass sea. Much care and time had been expended to cut down natural cover. Even the five-foot-high grass had been hacked short, leaving nothing but an expanse of mud and brack-

28. Ibid., 6.

29. Brown, *Florida's Peace River Frontier*, 51.

30. Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 102; Woodburne Potter, *The War in Florida* (Baltimore, 1836), 147.

31. "Journal," 7; Kenneth W. Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War, 1835-1842," *Journal of Negro History* 28 (April 1943), 412.

32. "Journal," 10.

33. White, "Journal of Lieutenant R. C. Buchanan," 146.

34. "Journal," 8.

ish water. Additionally, the heavily wooded hammock, standing on high ground, dominated a slight ridge skirting Lake Okeechobee's north bank. Blanketed with dense stands of pine, cypress, and palmetto, the nearly mile-long hammock loomed before the soldiers as a natural fortress. The sandy ridge and dark woodlands overflowed with perhaps 2,000 blacks and Indians who were determined to defend their way of life and very existence. Nearly 400 warriors lay well concealed, waiting patiently for the white soldiers to charge across the open ground.<sup>35</sup>

Taylor, desirous of striking a decisive blow, believed he had caught the hostiles with their backs to Lake Okeechobee and consequently was determined to launch a frontal attack. A disbelieving Gentry, noted for frontier common sense, questioned the wisdom of the plan and proposed alternatively a flanking strategy. Taylor shouted him down and committed his force to a Christmas Day assault.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, with the sounds of drums and bugles echoing over the lake, Seminoles and blacks rested their firearms in notches cut in trees fronting the hammock. Unlike their opponents, they were more than ready for the shooting to begin.

The ranking Indian leader, the Mikasuki chief Sam Jones or Arpeika, had organized a brilliant defense. He, his top lieutenant Otulke Thlocco (the Prophet), and 180 warriors were poised on the hammock's right, a position from which the Missourians' colors could be seen. The Prophet chanted and sang to inspire victory, and the effort sounded eerily across the hammock. Invisibly high in moss-covered treetops and holding the center of the area's natural rise were 120 or more Seminoles under Alligator Wildcat (Coacoochee), a capable guerrilla warfare tactician who had emerged as one of the Seminole's most feared leaders, and his eighty followers anchored the left. Commanding the hostile blacks was the respected chief John Cavallo or Horse.<sup>37</sup>

Pursuant to Taylor's orders, Gentry undertook final arrangements for a charge. His available manpower, already reduced to less than one-quarter of his original 600-man force, was

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35. *Ibid.*, 10, 14, 38, 61-62; Steele, *Battle of Okechobee*, 11; John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1848; reprint ed., Gainesville, 1964), 214.

36. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 22-23.

37. Sprague, *Florida War*, 213-14; Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Seminole War," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (November 1964), 441-43.

further depleted when each seventh trooper was designated to hold the unit's horses. In all, only 132 Missourians stood in formation under a noon sky to face their baptismal fire.

Colonel A. G. Morgan's battalion of forty-three "spies" and Indian scouts formed on the line's right. Aligning one-half mile from the hammock, the regiment's remainder split into two battalions before advancing to within 200 yards of the hostiles. Lieutenant Colonel John W. Price commanded the center with the First Battalion, consisting of Captain Congreve Jackson and his Howard County horsesoldiers. Ray County troops under Captain William C. Pollard and Jackson County men under Captain James B. Chiles completed the alignment. On the left was Major Harrison H. Hughes's Second Battalion. Mud-splattered troopers of Captain Russell's largely Fulton County unit and Captain Curd's Palmyra men took position on the left flank. The Missourians assembled in neat lines as if back on Columbia's main street. Based upon their frontier instincts, though, many were wary of the upcoming fight.<sup>38</sup>

Gentry, standing near the line's center and the regimental banner that proclaimed "For Our Country We'll Die," made last-minute preparations. Taylor had ordered the Missourians to lead the assault and had placed his regulars from fifty to 200 yards behind the volunteers. Gentry believed the charge "a bad movement" but felt he had to "obey orders; we had come to fight and we have to do it." Preparing himself for what likely would be a suicidal attack, the colonel removed his frock coat and rolled up the sleeves to his shirt.<sup>39</sup> He must have felt an odd mixture of pride and bitterness as he glanced down the formations stretching 150 yards on either side. His Indian adversaries, from their treetop perches, spied Gentry's white shirt in the bright sunlight, making him an ideal target.<sup>40</sup>

At about 12:30 p.m., with colorful flags fluttering nearby, Gentry drew his saber and roared, "Come on, my boys."<sup>41</sup> The

38. St. Louis *Missouri Argus*, March 1, 1838; *The History of Jackson County, Missouri* (St. Louis, 1881), 307, 317.

39. "Journal," 19, 51; Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 80-81; St. Louis *Missouri Argus*, March 1, 1838.

40. Joshua R. Giddings, *The Exiles of Florida: Or, the Crimes Committed by Our Government Against the Maroons, Who Fled from South Carolina and Other Slave States, Seeking Protection Under Spanish Law* (Columbus, OH, 1858; reprint ed., Gainesville, 1964), 176.

41. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 20; "Journal," 51.

Missouri formations rolled forward at his signal. While hundreds of regulars stood idle and silent, the volunteers splashed forward through swamp water with accouterments clanging and officers barking directives. All the while Gentry continued waving his sword and yelling, "Come on!"<sup>42</sup> His men waded "into this marsh . . . that struck us between the waist and shoulder."<sup>43</sup> Half-submerged in black water, troopers struggled onward, holding their muskets and powder flasks high while trying to keep their balance. The enemy hidden in the hammock had not yet been seen.<sup>44</sup>

At least once during the advance, a water-soaked Gentry halted his soldiers to realign the force. When they had approached within less than 100 yards of the hammock, the hidden Indians and blacks unleashed a scorching volley. Horseless cavalymen fell as bullets pierced their bodies. Some volunteers had to lift their wounded comrades from the water to keep them from drowning. Only at this juncture did some troopers catch glimpses of their antagonists who, Captain Gilliam remembered, would "raise from the palmettoes and fire, doing considerable execution." The sight of the Indians' black allies firing with deadly accuracy from the underbrush must have seemed unbelievable to Missourians accustomed to the institution of slavery and racial deference.<sup>45</sup>

The volunteers dropped steadily from the withering fire, sharpshooters shooting from the trees wreaking the most damage. These snipers concentrated their fire on the officers who stood as targets on the open ground. Attempting to lead their men through the barrage, Acting-Major John Sconce, Captain Chiles, Lieutenant Charles B. Rogers, and two other officers were wounded in the first minute. Their charge to glory had turned into a slaughter. The enemy fire exceeded in intensity anything they or the regulars had experienced. Contributing to that fact was the Indians' ingenuity at simplifying loading procedures, resulting in their ability to fire twice as quickly as their opponents.<sup>46</sup>

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42. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 20.

43. Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 102.

44. Mahon, *Second Seminole War*, 120; Holcombe, *History of Marion County*, 212; Giddings, *Exiles of Florida*, 175.

45. "Journal," 9; *Army and Navy Chronicle*, December 30, 1837.

46. "The Battle of Okee chobee," *United States Magazine* (March 1857), 181; Sprague, *Florida War*, 214; Potter, *War in Florida*, 152.

Recognizing his predicament, Gentry quickly ordered his men to squat in the grass. As bullets whistled through the air, the survivors crouched in the morass. In sectors with standing water, the situation was worse. One veteran recalled how they “sometimes stuck [their] heads beneath the water to prevent being a good target for an Indian bullet.”<sup>47</sup> The regiment’s left especially had been decimated, and Gentry and his staff rushed there to steady the wavering Second Battalion. Swinging his sword in the air and roaring, “Come on, boys! We’re almost there; charge on into the hammock!” the colonel got the attack moving again and many volunteers swarmed forward behind the regimental colors.<sup>48</sup>

Despite Gentry’s efforts, however, much of the regiment had been scattered. At least seven officers were wounded, and some volunteers, not able to stand the murderous fire, had bolted rearward. The majority, though, stood their ground or advanced. Some assisted wounded comrades to the field hospital one-half mile distant. Gentry seems to have realized by then that his only hope for success was to gain the protection of the natural fortress of the hammock “[so] we would have an equal chance with them.”<sup>49</sup> As the assault began to dissolve into a series of hot skirmishes, he and a small contingent attacked into the woods. At the hammock’s edge, as the colonel charged through the brush, he was hit at point-blank range. He tumbled backward as the ball passed through his stomach. His son, the sergeant-major, at the same time was struck in the wrist, according to some accounts by the same bullet.<sup>50</sup>

Gentry’s example had not been in vain, as it proved inspirational to volunteers who then charged the hammock. Elements of Curd’s and Russell’s units advanced and gathered protectively around their fallen commander, in the process driving away a party of Seminoles intent upon scalping him. Other soldiers charged as well. One young man, not realizing that his comrades had halted, was killed and scalped on the firm ground of the hammock. Gentry, fearing the effect his fall would have on the

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47. “Journal,” 51; Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 102.

48. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 20; “Journal,” 12.

49. “Journal,” 51.

50. *Ibid.*; Gentry, *Full Justice*, 20; North Todd Gentry, “Col. Richard Gentry” (address to the Boone County Historical Society, Columbia, MO, 1935), transcript in folder 174, North Todd Gentry Papers.

troops, directed those nearby to lift him to his feet. Despite considerable pain, the colonel soon stood and implored his men onward screaming, “[Flight on . . . till the foe retreats!”<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, regular-army units came up behind the volunteers. The regulars realigned and poured fire in the direction of the hammock, an action that placed the volunteers under fire from two sides. Thereafter, the attack splintered badly, and only isolated groups of whites struck the hammock in uncoordinated thrusts. Three enlisted men, for example, entered the hammock and hid behind a giant cypress only twenty feet from their adversaries. They soon discovered they were alone, and the Indians, realizing as much, slipped closer to the trio and seconds later shot one of the whites. Private James Smith promptly responded by killing the Seminole, who had crept within a few feet. Some twenty Indians, who either shifted position or rallied after retreating, then appeared suddenly in the midst of the volunteers and took shelter behind trees standing between the three cavalymen and their company. Two of the soldiers reloaded flintlocks, while the wounded man drew two dragoon revolvers. The three, forced to desperate action, thereupon charged straight into the Indian party. The ruse worked. With the volunteers yelling wildly and bellowing, “Come on boys!” the hostiles thought “there was a whole company with us.” In the face of the three privates’ rear attack, “[T]he Indians scattered right and left to let us pass,” as one survivor marveled. The trio reached their comrades who, themselves, still were receiving fire from front and rear, the Missourians laid low to escape the deadly lead balls while maintaining their ground before the hammock.<sup>52</sup>

Another party of Missourians entered the hammock at about the same time as the three privates. Lieutenant William Henry Winlock and a part of his Marion County company charged into the wooded island after driving out its defenders. Finding himself stranded and without support, Winlock led his squad through the hammock in search of the remainder of the company. They found nothing but retreating Indians who continued to fire on them. Responding with more bravado than wisdom,

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51. “Journal,” 14; Gentry, *Full Justice*, 21; J. Floyd Monk, “Christmas Day in Florida, 1837,” *Tequesta* 38 (1978), 21.

52. Steele, *Battle of Okeechobee*, 12-13; “Journal,” 14, 38-40.

the volunteers charged through the palmetto and cypress in pursuit. Fortunate not to stumble into an ambush, they soon rejoined the command in front of the hammock.

As Winlock's experience illustrates, some portions of the Indian defensive line disintegrated under the attack. A few hostile groups headed rearward; others—the largest portion—stood and held their positions. Defenders met attackers within the hammock and fought with knives and tomahawks. One man later recalled, “[The] Indians were adamant; they wouldn't run, but stood their ground and fought with savage vigor.”<sup>53</sup> Some of Gentry's soldiers were equally tenacious. They swung musket butts and fired pistols in hand-to-hand combat. Reportedly one of them, at some point during the fracas, killed at least one black warrior.<sup>54</sup>

The Missourians certainly were not alone in their gallantry. Their Indian allies and scouts also fought bravely. One scout officer on the right noted how the friendly Indians “rushed on bravely under the fire of the enemy; many were falling but they were undaunted, gained the timber, drove the savages, took their [notched] trees, and almost silenced their yells as well as fire, pursuing the Indians almost 70 or 80 yards in the timber.” Still, the struggle within the hammock ebbed and flowed with antagonists firing at sound and movement in the lush tropical vegetation.<sup>55</sup>

No man among the hostiles proved more tenacious than Alligator, who rallied panicked warriors and urged them back into the fray. The re-entry of these warriors on the right was remembered by Captain Gilliam. “The Seminole manner of fighting,” he testified, “was advantageous to themselves. . . . [W]hen closely pressed on [they] ran; these would hide and fire again [before advancing to their former positions].” As it was, numerous bloody skirmishes erupted simultaneously throughout the smoke-filled strip of forest, flaring up and evaporating as suddenly as they had begun.

With men still falling around him, one of Gentry's officers on the right discovered that “in the edge of the timber firing was hottest, when we were so closely engaged with the enemy

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53. “Journal,” 14, 38-40; Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 102.

54. Sprague, *Florida War*, 213.

55. “Journal,” 48.

that the powder from our guns almost burnt each other.” As did many other Missourians, this young commander longingly “looked in vain for the promised support” from Colonel Taylor and the regulars. For the time being, however, there was no help, and they continued to die in the swamp.<sup>56</sup>

Taylor had ordered Gentry to retire if he encountered difficulty, but seemingly the Missouri officer and his men believed they had much to prove that Christmas Day. Instead of falling back, they had swarmed onward in an attempt to win the day on their own. When regular forces finally arrived after extended delay, many Missourians— their ranks already decimated— took heart and fell in beside the long formations of regular troops. The combined force soon charged forward in the day’s most powerful attack.<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the struggle, parties of volunteers continued to cling to enclaves at the hammock’s edge and to hold their opponents at bay with dragoon pistols. One of Gentry’s men later described how, during the contest, “we pumped lead into the Indians fast after we got within short range of them.”<sup>58</sup> After the hostiles returned in force and regained their former positions, however, most whites were pushed out of the hammock. Once again, the forested rise had to be taken.<sup>59</sup>

After standing for nearly an hour encouraging his troops, the wounded Gentry finally collapsed. The second assault wave of Missourians and regulars surged past the dying colonel as he was carried rearward in a blanket. His severely wounded son remained by the father’s side during the ordeal.<sup>60</sup>

Taylor’s units finally overran the hammock after three hours of hard fighting. Confusion reigned, though, as Seminole defenders yelled that they were “Delaware! Delaware!” as cheering whites swarmed into the woods. A hostile volley soon betrayed the ruse, however.<sup>61</sup> Almost a full day’s battle had been fought before a combined force of regulars and volunteers finally stormed the enemy’s hammock. The strategy probably should have been used from the beginning.

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56. *Ibid.*, 49.

57. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 19; “Journal,” 7.

58. Gentry, *Gentry Family*, 102-03.

59. Sprague, *Florida War*, 213.

60. Gentry, “Col. Richard Gentry,” 17; “Journal,” 12.

61. Monk, “Christmas Day in Florida,” 34.



Wild Cat and Alligator signaled a retreat only when they found "the troops pressing them so closely as to prevent their loading, and that large numbers had retired." Hostile Indians and blacks raced down Lake Okeechobee's beach to safety. They had inflicted the highest losses on any American force during the Second Seminole War and one of the highest in the annals of Indian warfare.<sup>62</sup>

With the close of the Christmas Day battle, Taylor had proved that an American army could strike deep into Indian territory and best the Seminoles and their black confederates on their own terms. Instead of a decisive victory, though, the Lake Okeechobee action had been a costly, hollow success. Taylor suffered nearly 150 casualties, and the lives forfeited largely had been lost in vain. The war, after all, lingered for another five years.

Despite the victory that was to bring him promotion to a brigadier generalship, Taylor had only harsh words for the Missouri volunteers. He reported that Gentry's troops had been completely demoralized and had fled in panic at the first fire. But, the Missouri dead and wounded—many lying within the hammock—told a different story, as also did the fate of Colonel Gentry. That gallant officer was taken to a field infirmary where surgeons "cleansed" the colonel's abdominal wound by pulling a handkerchief through the bullet hole with a ramrod. The treatment likely hastened his death, which occurred at the hospital, where Gentry was surrounded by his son and former neighbors who had followed him more than 1,000 miles to Florida.<sup>63</sup>

The night before Richard Gentry's death his close physician-friend, secure at home among the snowy hills of middle Missouri, dreamed of the colonel's demise. A sad fate also awaited the officer's family. Gentry's entire estate and fortune soon was lost when banks collected the unpaid notes he had signed for his volunteers.<sup>64</sup> Such was this man's reward. At least his sacrifice stands as example for others, and its memory will not be forgotten.

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62. Sprague, *Florida War*, 213-14.

63. Gentry, *An Old Printing Press*, 29-30.

64. Gentry, *Full Justice*, 7-8.