

THE ORIGIN OF THE SEMINOLE INDIANS¹

From the desolation and ruin of three wars in the international struggle for the lands of the Creek Confederacy sprang the Seminole Indians in the first half of the eighteenth century. The Oconee formed the nucleus of this tribe whose early history was a flight for refuge and peace in a region despoiled by war.

The efforts of Spain to control the border lands north of Florida and of the English to expand southward from Virginia were intensified and complicated by the French penetration toward the north and east from Mobile. By the close of the seventeenth century the Spaniards had fortified a chain of Apalachee Indian towns in the neighborhood of the present-day cities of Tallahassee and Pensacola. Missionaries were sent to Sabacola; Spanish raiders sought to capture English traders; and the Chattahooche river was fortified. Thus was English infiltration frustrated and the route of the Carolina traders to the tribes farther blocked. Many Lower Creeks migrated from the Chattahooche to the Ocmulgee river.²

When Queen Anne's War resulted in colonial hostilities the stage long had been set there for the struggle. In 1702 Governor Moore led the Carolina forces in an assault on San Augustin, and although his land forces captured the town with little difficulty the shallow harbor prevented the effective use of his ships. So the Spaniards remained safely in control of the fortress. The strength of the fort was such, that Moore believed that the royal English navy would have been needed to capture it had the stronghold been manned by French troops.³ The strength of the Spanish

¹The writer wishes to thank Dr. Alfred B. Thomas of the University of Oklahoma for suggestions in the preparation of this paper.

²Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Arredondo's Historical Proof to Spain's Title to Georgia*, Berkeley, 1925. (Hereafter, *Arredondo*.)

³Minutes of the Council of Jamaica, Dec. 4, 1702; J. A. Moore to Thomas Handasyd, Sept. 16, 1702; in *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, America and West Indies, 1702-1703*, 28, 29, London, 1913. (Hereafter, *Calendar*.)

fort, however, did not prevent Governor Moore from losing his post because of his failure to displace the forces.

As a private citizen, Moore remained an enemy of the Spaniards and their allies, the Apalachees, among whom the Castilians had built forts and missions. For sixty years the Apalachee tribe had been submissively constructing the Spanish fort at San Augustin, a tribute that had been exacted after a futile revolt of the Indians in 1640.⁴ Now 900 of these allies were led by Spanish officers on a raid to destroy the Lower Creeks of Apalachicola and any English who might be found in that neighborhood. Coincidentally an Anglo-Creek force was moving south to assault the Apalachee villages. They met on the Flint river where the Anglo-Creek warriors built fires, around which they arranged their blankets to resemble their own sleeping forms. They then concealed themselves and awaited an attack. The result was the destruction of the Spanish-Apalachee war party.⁵ Thus the Apalachee villages were being depopulated, in an endeavor of the Spaniards and French to prevent the expansion of English power and influence.⁶ At Charlestown, Moore, the former governor of Carolina, recalled his downfall at San Augustin and became the leader of another attacking party.

Moore directed fifty English soldiers and one thousand Indians against the Apalachees. Enemies of the English were cleared from the path to Pensacola and Mobile. Indian missions three-fourths of a century old were doomed. The padres and the insufficient Spanish garrisons marshalled an heroic defense; but those who survived the fighting paid for their bravery at the stake. One Apalachee town purchased its immunity, with the ornaments of its church and ten pack-horse loads of provisions; but thirteen In-

⁴George R. Fairbanks, *History of Florida from its Discovery by Ponce De Leon in 1512, to the Close of the Florida War, 1842*, 175, Philadelphia, 1871.

⁵John R. Swanton, "The Early History of the Creek Indians and Their Neighbors," Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 73, 120, 121, Washington, 1922.

⁶Verner W. Crane, *The Southern Frontier*, 73, Durham, N. C., 1928.

dian villages were destroyed entirely.⁷ Moore returned to Charlestown with 1,400 Indian prisoners, a part of whom became slaves, many of them, however, were settled on the Savannah river as a buffer against Spanish retaliation.⁸

A large area, naturally attractive to the natives, had been depopulated in less than four years. It had become a battle ground where no quarter was given and no mercy known. Those natives who had not been killed had been forced into slavery or transplanted to provide protection for the destroyers of their homes and families. A slow migration from the Lower Creek towns of the Chattahoochee soon began gradually to repopulate the district.⁹ Moore believed that he had left the region so reduced and feeble that it could no longer support San Augustin with provisions nor "endamage" (sic) or frighten the English and their allies.¹⁰ Apalachees who were not removed by Moore had fled to the Mobile river for safety.¹¹

The first great impulse to migrate, however, came after the Yamasee war, which was an Indian uprising in 1715.¹² The Yamasee had been allies of the English, at times going far into Florida to capture the allies of the Spaniards who were then enslaved by the British.¹³ But they had endured much mistreatment by the English, and when they suspected that they also might be enslaved, the Yamasee perpetrated a fierce attack on the Carolina settlers. Fifteen thousand Indian men were believed to be in the league to exterminate the English.¹⁴ Several hundreds of English were butchered and Governor Spotswood of Virginia wanted to

⁷Bolton, *Spanish Resistance to the Carolina Traders in Southern Georgia, 1860-1704*, *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, June, 1925, 127, Savannah. (Hereafter, "Resistance.")

⁸Bolton, *Arredondo*, 60-62.

⁹Swanton, *op. cit.*, 398.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹Peter Joseph Hamilton, *The Colonization of the South*, 214, Philadelphia, 1904.

¹²Swanton, *op. cit.*, 398.

¹³*Ibid.*, see map of 1715.

¹⁴Crawley before the Council of Trade and Plantations, July 26, 1715, in Commissioners of Trade and Plantations, *Journal*, March, 1714-1715—Oct. 1718, 62, London, 1924. (Hereafter, *Journal*.)

stop the "flame before it reach'd hither."¹⁵ The Creeks, Choctaws, and Catawabas had agreed to assist in exterminating the English, but they remained quiet, causing the Yamasee to be defeated. Then the Yamasee returned to Florida and became allies of the Spaniards,¹⁶ and other tribes moved also to gain security.

The uprising was significant in the development of the Seminoles for it caused the Creeks of the Cavita district to divide into English and Spanish factions. The Spanish-favoring faction was led by Chief Chipacasi, who was better known as Seepy Coffee.¹⁷ Several small and weak tribes migrated to put the safety of distance between themselves and the English, whom they expected to retaliate. Among these tribes were the Ocone who were first recorded at about the site of the present town of Milledgeville, Georgia, in 1695.¹⁸ The area once occupied by the Apalachee gradually was being repopulated. The Talapoosas moved as far as Mobile, but the French feared they were English allies and prevented them from settling.¹⁹ The principal chief of the Cavita division of the Creeks learned that he could increase his prosperity by joining neither the English nor the French, thus remaining in a position to exact desirable gifts from both.²⁰

The Yamasee deserted their Spanish alliance for the English in 1734, about fifteen years after their war against the Carolinas when they had fled to Florida. The Spaniards had tried to enslave the Yamasee, while the English had presented them with clothing and guns.²¹ The next year a party of English Indians attacked the fort at Saint Francis de Pupo, only sixteen miles from San Augustin on the San Juan river.²² This was only one of sev-

¹⁵Governor Spotswood to Council of Trade and Plantations, July 15, 1715, *Calendar*, 1714-1715, 232-233, London, 1928.

¹⁶Swanton, *op. cit.*, 100-101.

¹⁷Bolton, "Resistance," 129-130.

¹⁸Swanton, *op. cit.*, 180.

¹⁹Dunbar Rowland and A. G. Sanders, eds., *Mississippi Provincial Archives*, 1729-1740, I, 203, Bienville's Report on Indians, Jackson, 1927. (Hereafter, *Archives*.)

²⁰Swanton, *op. cit.*, 225-226.

²¹*Ibid.*, 96.

²²James G. Johnson, "The Colonial Southeast, 1732-1763, an International Contest for Territorial and Economic Control," *University of Colorado Studies*, XIX, No. 3, 197, Boulder, 1932.

eral similar incidents that preceded the War of Jenkins' Ear in 1739. The French, Spaniards, and English encouraged their Indian allies to fight and the general battle ground included the section that Moore had rifled and burned early in the century.

The Chattahoochee Creeks had divided, some of them remaining friends of the English, others joining the Spaniards in Florida. The English established Augusta as a trading post and fort, thus thrusting their control inland. They came south and fortified Saint Simon's island, steadily encroaching on the natives of the region. Spurred by the English a party of Creek assailed the Spaniards as far east as San Augustin.²³ Six hundred troops were sent to Georgia and a colony of Scots was established at Darien, the most exposed point on the frontier—often called New Inverness.²⁴ Purysburgh, Ebenezer, Mount Pleasant, New Winsor, and Silver Bluff were more Georgia frontier colonies, not only holding the territory for the English but pressing the Indians away. The small tribes could not move west because of the powerful Creek Confederacy. The Cherokees prevented them from finding satisfactory vacant land in the north. War parties swept the debated district of northern Florida, but they did not prevent furtive occupation of the area by the small and weak bands.

Spain advanced her claim at London to the land as far north as thirty-three degrees and thirty minutes. Oglethorpe argued that his grant extended to the Saint John's river. The Spanish forces in the Apalachee district, however, were most limited. At the Apalachee presidio were forty-three infantrymen with three pieces of artillery and at San Juan were nine foot and eight horse soldiers and one piece of artillery. The chief Spanish forces were at San Augustin. In 1736 Governor Sanchez of Florida and Charles Dempsey, diplomatic representative of Georgia, signed a treaty of friendship, leaving the lands between the Altamaha and the San Juan rivers as a neutral zone and agreeing that the exact boundary

²³Bienville to Maurepas, Feb. 10, 1736, in Rowland, *Archives*, I, 292.

²⁴Johnson, *loc. cit.*, 177, 199.

between the English and Spanish territories should be settled by the home governments. Neither country was satisfied and neither intended to abide by the agreement.²⁵ For a time, however, this treaty tended to permit peaceful Indian settlement of the area, although permanent residences were not established. Two years after the neutral zone had been established, Oglethorpe prevented the Creeks from attacking the Spanish Indians.²⁶ That year, 1738, Oglethorpe cemented an English alliance with the Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws at a conference at Cavita,²⁷ and in Florida the report was current that Georgia was offering fifty dollars bounty for each Spanish scalp.²⁸

The War of Jenkins' Ear was begun in 1739, and while the results were indecisive the English flirted for a decade with the "neutral ground" plan—a period that permitted more fugitive Indian tribes and individuals to occupy the area.²⁹ Oglethorpe gained the support of the Creeks in this war by promising that the English traders would deal honestly and that his countrymen would not encroach on the lands reserved for the Creeks. The Creeks acknowledged Oglethorpe's title to territory south of the San Juan river.³⁰

The first step in the development of the Seminole Indians was the devastation of the northern Florida area by Moore. The Oconee tribe moved west from the Oconee river and joined the Creek Confederacy soon after the Yamassee war. They were not a Muscogee stock, however, for their language was Hitchiti. About 1750 they migrated again, this time to the south into the "neutral zone," and became the center of the Seminole organization. They were led by Chief Secoffee, (who may have been also Cowkeeper) who was an enemy of the Spaniards. Many of the Oconee were thought to have remained among the Creeks on the Chattahooche, but they

²⁵*Ibid.*, 198-199.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 203.

²⁷E. Merton Coulter, *A Short History of Georgia*, 39, Chapel Hill, N. C., 1933.

²⁸*Colonial Records of Georgia*, XXII, Part 1, 278, in Johnson, *loc. cit.*, 202.

²⁹Bolton, *Arredondo*, 5.

³⁰Johnson, *loc. cit.*, 193.

were gone by 1832. Their want of permanence and frequent changes of their names makes the history of the Seminoles difficult to follow. The name is translated to mean "Runaway," and the original Oconee group soon was outnumbered by the refugees that came from the strife-torn Muscogee tribes; but the Seminoles were not entirely outlaws from the Creek Confederacy. An actual count of the group in 1823 produced a total of 4,883 Seminoles, none of whom were negroes. In 1812, because of forays on Georgia towns, Colonel Newman, inspector of Florida, led an attack on the Seminole town, Alachua, and in 1814 the Alachuans were destroyed. This caused the Seminoles to move farther south to the vicinity of Lake Harris. Later the remnants of the group moved farther south to the Everglades.³²

The Seminole Indians originated in a period of half a century when three wars decimated a strategic region in an international conflict. The tribe appeared to develop as an aggregation of groups and individuals seeking peace and refuge in an area that three contestants coveted but none could take and hold. This origin helps to explain their later history.

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³²*ibid.*, 181, 344, 398-399, 414, 440.