

# **Examining Miami Area Incidences and Impacts of Settler and Native American Conflict during the Second Seminole War**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the overlooked history of conflicts during the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) in Southeastern Florida, focusing on the Miami area between 1836 and 1849. It delves into specific incidents, such as the Attack on the Cape Florida Lighthouse and various encounters involving Colonel William S. Harney and the 2nd Dragoons. The narrative details the establishment of Fort Dallas in response to the hostilities and its subsequent role as a pivotal center for the development of Miami. The author argues that the violent skirmishes between white settlers and Seminoles created a pervasive culture of fear, adversely affecting the growth of the Miami area. Additionally, the article examines the long-term impact of these conflicts on the population decline in the region, as reflected in census data, and underscores the complex interplay between settler-native relations during this critical period in Florida's history.

## **Introduction**

In the early nineteenth century, Southeastern Florida had a small but growing Seminole and white settler population at the onset of the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). History rarely mentions the armed conflicts and their influences that took place around Miami, Florida in the mid-nineteenth century. This article will remedy some of that missing history by examining violent incidences inflicted by both Whites and Seminoles between the years 1836 and 1849. It will argue that a handful of vindictive and deadly skirmishes by both of these groups led to a culture of fear that stunted the development of the Miami area for both groups in the ensuing years.

## **Miami-Area Incidences of Conflict During the Second Seminole War**

### **The Colley Massacre: January 1836**

The first documented hostility of the Second Seminole War in South Florida occurred shortly after its onset. On January 5, 1836, a band of Seminoles massacred William Colley's wife, and

three children, one of whom was an infant, and the children's tutor, Afterwards, the Seminoles burned down Colley's house that sat along the New River in what is today Ft. Lauderdale.[1] The New River settlers, who heard of the massacre, immediately took refuge south at the Cape Florida Lighthouse on Key Biscayne where they were joined by Miami River settlers.[2] However, "they had scarcely been settled here when the Indians made their appearance,"[3] in the Miami area and all the settlers fled to the Florida Keys for long-term refuge.[4]

### **The Attack on the Cape Florida Lighthouse: July 1836**

The settler's precaution proved valuable as on July 23, 1836, a band of over 50 Native Americans attacked the Cape Florida Lighthouse.[5] One person was killed, and the lighthouse was set on fire and rendered inoperable. The sole survivor, John W. B. Thompson, recounted how he endured a harrowing ten-hour siege in which he suffered severe burns and gunshot wounds while trapped at the top of the lighthouse.[6] Little else is known as to the leadership of the Seminole band or of their motives as the Miami River area was effectively cleared of settlers at the time of the attack.

### **Fort Dallas: "purpose of harassing the enemy": 1837**

In 1836, the U.S. Navy established patrols on Biscayne Bay partly in response to the aforementioned local incidents, but primarily to "prevent any commerce between the Indians and traders from Cuba or the West Indies." [7] By 1837, The U.S. Army built a permanent fort, named after Navy Commodore Alexander J. Dallas, at the former Richard Fitzpatrick and William English plantation along the north bank of the Miami River.[8] Fort Dallas, built "for the purpose of harassing the enemy"[9] was relatively modest and initially consisted of tent barracks and one small framed wooden structure.[10] Fort Dallas not only provided the nervous Miami River settlers with a sense of security during their conflict with the Seminoles but soldiers from the fort contributed to the development of the area.[11] These mid-nineteenth-century

infrastructure expansions included a hospital, a road from Miami to Fort Lauderdale, and a trading post. The fort, which would later come to form the epicenter of the city of Miami, “remained the center of the pioneer community throughout most of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”[12]

### **Col. William S. Harney vs. Sam Jones: April 1838**

Two relatively minor “harassment” incidents during the Seminole War are documented but are noteworthy because they involve William S. Harney, a U.S. Army officer who eventually played a key role in future Miami area conflicts, and was stationed at Fort Dallas. The first incident, briefly recounted by General Thomas Jesup, chronicled how Harney attacked Sam Jones southwest of Key Biscayne in April of 1838 but had to pull back from further pursuit upon recall orders.[13]

### **The Mad Tiger Incident: July 1839**

The second incident occurred on July 29, 1839, as Captain Mayo, who was stationed at Fort Dalles, “entertained” Chief Mad Tiger on his ship in Biscayne Bay. During the event, another Army ship came alongside. Which prompted Mad Tiger and his party to jump overboard and into their canoes for reasons that were not explained. Captain Mayo engaged in pursuit, eventually capturing nine men and six women that he turned over to his supervisor, Colonel Harney at Fort Dallas.[14] No rationale is provided on the nature of the entertainment, nor why Mad Tiger felt the need to flee.

### **Col. William S. Harney vs. Chakaika: August 1839**

Another incident that also directly involved Col. Harney occurred beginning on August 21, 1839.[15] Harney had gone to Caloosahatchee in Southwest Florida to establish a trading post with a party of 25 soldiers and a handful of civilians. A large group of Seminoles settled near their camp and commenced friendly trade. At 4:00 a.m. on August 23, it was reported that about

160 Native Americans, under the leadership of Chakaika, attacked Harney's party leaving sixteen dead soldiers and capturing six. Harney escaped in spite of him being a specific target of the Seminole chieftain, Billy Bowlegs.[16] Although this event occurred in what is known today as the Ft. Myers area, it set the stage for the next series of events in the Southeastern area of the state.

### **The Indian Key Massacre: August 1840**

On August 7, 1840, Chakaika led "seventeen canoeloads [sic] of Spanish Indians (variously estimated at from 50 to 136 individuals)" on an attack on the white settlement at Indian Key.[17] Seven settlers were killed and most of the settlement's buildings were destroyed by fire. The cause of Chakaika's attack is unknown, however, a member of Colonel Harney's command who later captured one of Chakaika's sisters wrote that "there were three Spaniards in the Everglades, who supplied the Indians with salt and ammunition; one of them, Domingo, advised them to attack Indian Key, and assured their success." [18]

### **Col. William S. Harney & the 2nd Dragoons: December 1840**

In response, a few months later in December of 1840, Colonel Harney was given orders to seek out and attack Seminoles in the Miami area. Possibly due to his defeat at the hands of Chakaika in Fort Meyers, "In carrying out his assignment, Harney displayed great vindictiveness and cruelty towards the Indians" and "promised his superior office that he 'would return with the scalp of that piratical savage'." [19]

### **Irregular Tactics**

Col. Harney's 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons left Fort Dallas on December 4, 1840, with ninety men and sixteen canoes in search of Chakaika's island.[20] Upon reaching the first bit of dry land in the Everglades, Col. Harney employed an irregular tactic: "having first painted and dressed himself

and men so much like Indians, that they could scarcely themselves detect the imposition.”[21] Four days into their sortie they came upon a small group of Seminoles, two of whom they killed and left hanging from trees and the other they captured[22].

Two days later, the female died of the wounds the soldiers accidentally inflicted upon her during her capture.[23]

### **Col. William S. Harney vs. Chakaika: December 10, 1840**

On sunrise of the 10<sup>th</sup>, while dressed in Seminole garb, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons attacked Chakaika’s camp. Chakaika’s “hour had come and gone”; he was killed and his scalp was taken by the Dragoons just as Col. Harney had promised.[24]

Five soldiers were wounded and one was killed in the shootout. Twenty-five Seminoles were either killed or captured.[25] Just as significantly, this incident had demonstrated to both the Seminoles and U.S. Army that “We have now crossed the long fabled and unknown Everglades, at least as far as we can go in boats in this direction.”[26]

### **Col. William S. Harney vs. Sam Jones: January 1841**

Following his success against Chakaika, on January 1, 1841, Col. Harney continued to lead his 140 troops into the Everglades, but this time in search of Sam Jones’ camp.[27] The two-week expedition eventually reached Prophet’s Landing, located approximately 50 miles due west of what today is known as the city of Davie, but then was known as Fort Shackelford.[28] The expedition failed to find Sam Jones, but in the course of their travels noticed “many recently abandoned camps and fields, saw only 13 Indians, of whom four were killed and three were captured.”[29] One of the captured Indians informed the expedition that Sam Jones, upon hearing of the Chakaika Island attack accumulated supplies and ammunition and headed north toward Lake Okeechobee.[30]

## **Impact of Settler and Native American Conflict**

### **1842 Florida Armed Occupation Act**

Life on the Florida frontier was not only harsh for settlers but it was also accompanied by “the omnipresent fear of an Indian uprising”[31] The 1842 Florida Armed Occupation Act was passed in an effort to help mitigate these concerns and populate Florida’s interior.[32] One hundred and forty-four permits were granted in the areas of southeast Florida, of which 29 were within the current boundaries of Miami-Dade County. It was assumed that “390 people settled in that area under the terms of the Armed Occupation Act.”[33]

### **Post-Conflict Tension & Panic**

Although the Second Seminole War saw most of its hostilities die down by 1842, tensions between the Seminoles and white settlers were still high. In July 1849, an attack on the Indian River resulted in the death of a settler, and the impact stoked panic among southeastern Florida’s settlers.[34] On July 22, 1849, Miami settler William English contacted Lt. Conch, the Army commander at Key West, “requesting protection against a possible Indian attack.” On the same day, Miami settler George W. Ferguson sent a letter to Secretary of War, George Crawford, in regards to the Indian River slaying. He stated that although he had been a productive arrowroot manufacturer for five years, “the terror created by this report will, I fear, prevent all possibility of pursuing our business.” Again, on July 22, Secretary Crawford received a letter from the Collector of Customs at Key West, Stephen Mallory, in regards to the settlers of southeastern Florida that stated: “The people along the coast have all received the news, and have abandoned their fields ... all planting operations in the settlements must be suspended until the disposition of the Indians can be ascertained.”[35]

The settler panic pressured the Army command in Key West to send troops to investigate reports of Indian campfires near the Miami and New Rivers.[36] Lt. Conch, in his July 31, 1849 report wrote: "I learned nothing tangible, yet sufficient to convince me that their fears of an outbreak among Indians were far more imaginary than real." [37] Nevertheless, according to Knetsch and George, the Miami River frontier was virtually abandoned of settlers for a generation.[38]

### **Tangible Results: Fort Dallas**

The Second Seminole War and local conflicts led to the establishment of Fort Dallas. Fort Dallas provided the Miami area with a sense of security and a base of operations for the military to push the Seminole further into the interior. The fort also served as a proto-city center for the growing settlement. Having a military fort in southeastern Florida led to the establishment of critical infrastructure such as roads, a hospital, and a trading post.

### **Conclusion**

Colonel Harney's sorties from Fort Dallas into the Everglades had directly impacted the Seminoles in three ways. First, they demonstrated to the Seminoles "that the soldiers could now reach any part of the Everglades in canoes." [39] One of the primary tactical advantages the Seminoles enjoyed was effectively over. Secondly, any chance of peaceful relations (e.g. trade) between Seminoles and settlers was also effectively over for the time being. In April of 1841, chieftain Billy Bowlegs hosted a Green Corn Dance in which "A law was passed, that should any Indian, male or female, be found in communication with a white man, they should be put to death." [40] Finally, Harney's expeditions forced the Miami-area Indians outside the territory and further northwest into the Big Cypress.

In 1840, the Dade County Census listed 43 people living in the territory,[41] however, by 1860 the Census counted 28 people residing within the Fort Dallas Settlement area.[42] This data strongly argues for a general decline in population in the Miami area during the peak period of the settler and Seminole conflict. Reactions to Native American conflict such as the establishment of Fort Dallas and the implementation of the Armed Occupation Act helped to grow Miami, but fears of a Native American uprising, later proven to be exaggerated (e.g. the Indian River scare), stunted the development of the Miami area for decades.



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## Endnotes

[1] Woodburne Potter, *The War in Florida: Being an Exposition of Its Causes, and an Accurate History of the Campaigns of the Generals Clinch, Gaines and Scott*, (Baltimore: Lewis and Coleman, 1836) 116.

[2] Nathan D. Shappee, "Fort Dallas and the Naval Depot on Key Biscayne, 1836 -1926," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 21 (1961): 17-18

[3] Potter, *The War in Florida*, 117.

[4] Shappee, "Fort Dallas and the Naval Depot," 17-18.

[5] Charles M. Brookfield, "Cape Florida Light," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 9 (1949): 7.

[6] *Ibid.*, 8-9.

[7] Nathan D. Shappee, "Fort Dallas and the Naval Depot on Key Biscayne, 1836 -1926," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 21 (1961): 13.

[8] Christopher R. Eck, "South Florida's Prelude to War: Army Correspondence Concerning Miami, Fort Dallas, and the Everglades Prior to the Outbreak of the Third Seminole War, 1850-1855," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 62 (2002): 69.

[9] John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War; To Which Appended A Record of Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, Musicians, and Privates of the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, Who Were Killed in Battle or Died of Disease. And Also the Names of Officers Who Were Distinguished by Brevets, and the Names of Others Recommended. Together with the Orders for Collecting the Remains of the Dead in Florida, and the Ceremony of Internment at St. Augustine, East Florida, on the Fourteenth Day of August, 1842*, (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1847) 224.

[10] Shappee, "Fort Dallas and the Naval Depot," 19.

[11] James C. Staubach, "Miami During the Civil War: 1861-65," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 53 (1993): 33.

[12] *Ibid.*, 33-34.

[13] Jesup, Thomas S. Letter to Hon. J. R. Poinsett, Secretary of War, July 6, 1838, in Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 196.

[14] Shappee, "Fort Dallas and the Naval Depot," 22.

[15] William C. Sturtevant, "Chakaika and the "Spanish Indians": Documentary Sources Compared with Seminole Tradition," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 13 (1953): 46.

[16] *Ibid.*, 46-47.

[17] Ibid., 48.

[18] "Notes on the Passage Across the Everglades: The News - St. Augustine: January 8, 1841," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 20 (1960): 63.

[19] Sturtevant, "Chakaika and the "Spanish Indians," 50-51.

[20] "Notes on the Passage Across the Everglades," 57. The editor places Chakaika's island "just south of the Tamiami Trail on the western edge of the Everglades near the Dade-Monroe County line."

[21] Ibid., 59.

[22] Ibid., 60.

[23] Ibid., 61.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 62.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Sturtevant, "Chakaika and the "Spanish Indians," 54-55.

[28] Duncan Upshaw Fletcher, *Everglades of Florida: Acts, Reports, and Other Papers, State and National, Relating to the Everglades of the State of Florida and Their Reclamation*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1911): 72.

[29] Sturtevant, "Chakaika and the "Spanish Indians," 55.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Joe Knetsch and Paul S. George, "A Problematical Law: The Armed Occupation Act of 1842 and Its Impact on Southeast Florida," *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida* 1, no. 53 (1993): 70.

[32] Evan Bennett, "The History of Florida," (Florida Atlantic University, Fall 2014).

[33] Knetsch and George, "A Problematical Law," 64

[34] Ibid., 70.

[35] Ibid., 71-72.

[36] Ibid., 71.

[37] Ibid., 72.

[38] Ibid., 70.

[39] Sturtevant, "Chakaika and the "Spanish Indians," 56.

[40] Ibid., 55.

[41] "1840 Federal Census, Dade County, Florida," accessed November 12, 2014.  
<http://files.usgwarchives.net/fl/dade/census/1840.txt>.

[42] "Dade, FL 1860 Federal Census." Accessed November 12, 2014.  
<http://files.usgwarchives.net/fl/dade/census/1860/pg00237.txt>. Seven large families occupied Indian Key and Key Vaca settlements, which added an additional 53 people to the 1860 Dade County Census total.

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