

# FLORIDA'S SEMINOLES: THE UNCONQUERED PEOPLE

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As a people, few have prevailed over more trying circumstances than the Seminole Indians of Florida. Over the course of almost two centuries, Florida's Seminoles endured three wars with the U.S. government, resisted numerous efforts to relocate them to federal reservations in the West, and ultimately made their home in one of the world's most inhospitable environments, the Florida Everglades. That they have not only survived, but thrived — all while maintaining their fierce independence and rich culture — is a tribute to their courage and perseverance. This is their story.

Long before European explorers ever visited the area now known as Florida, native peoples had been living here for thousands of years. In fact, as many as 100,000 members of four Indian nations — the Apalachee, the Tequesta, the Timucua and the Calusa — were living in highly organized settlements throughout the peninsula when the Spanish first arrived in 1513.

The native peoples' lack of resistance to smallpox, yellow fever and other "European" diseases, as well as later slaving raids from the English colonies of Georgia and South Carolina, eventually decimated their numbers. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian nations of Florida had ceased to exist.

In their place, groups of Indians from a confederation of tribes collectively referred to as the Lower Creeks began moving into Florida from Alabama and Georgia. They had been pushed out of their former homes by the encroachment of white settlers, as well as by conflicts with other tribes. It was around this time that the name "Seminoles" first appeared; there are several possible explanations as to its origins.

When the first English speakers began arriving in Florida in 1763, they found many Creeks living as *yat'siminoli*, or "free people," across the northern part of the Florida peninsula. ("Yat'siminoli" was a term used in the Mikisúki, or Miccosukee, language, which still is spoken today.) The settlers may have simply ignored the Indians' separate tribal affiliations and called them all Seminolies, or Seminoles.

Others believe that the Seminole name comes from the Spanish word *cimarron*, meaning "wild men" or "unconquered." The Indians may have been given this name because they had escaped from slavery in the English-controlled colonies to the north.

With the end of the American Revolutionary War in 1784, English-

speaking settlers began moving southward in ever greater numbers, buying or seizing land from the native inhabitants. By 1813, some of the Creek tribes in Alabama rose up against the white settlers and the Indian tribes that supported them. This conflict, known as the Creek War of 1813-14, proved disastrous to all of the tribes. U.S. troops led by Gen. Andrew Jackson crushed the uprising and forced a treaty on the Creeks that took more than 2 million acres of land from them. Several thousand Creek warriors and their families migrated south into Spanish Florida, where they and the Seminoles increased their resistance to white settlement.

In 1814, such conflicts escalated into the first of three Seminole wars. Over the next four years, Jackson illegally entered Spanish Florida numerous times to burn Seminole villages and kill resistance leaders.

With the end of the First Seminole War in 1818, many Indians moved further into Florida. By 1820, the year before Spanish Florida became a U.S. territory, there were at least 5,000 Seminoles, Creeks and Mikisúki people living here. However, a series of federal treaties failed to protect their rights and, in 1835, war broke out again.

The Second Seminole War (1835-42) proved to be the longest, most costly, and the last of the U.S. wars of Indian removal fought east of the

Mississippi River. It also would be the first guerilla-style war faced by U.S. troops. Led by the fierce warrior Osceola, the Seminoles were aided by runaway slaves, who received protection from their allies in return for a portion of the agricultural staples that they grew. These so-called "Black Seminoles" also had a reputation as fierce fighters, and were equally determined to preserve their freedom.

The fighting ended in a stalemate in 1842, and an uneasy peace lasted for 14 years. In 1856, however, Seminole leader Billy Bowlegs and his followers were provoked by U.S. soldiers. They retaliated, and the ensuing series of skirmishes became known as the Third Seminole War (1856-58).

When U.S. troops once more withdrew — again with no treaty or victory — the Seminole Wars finally ended. All told, more than 3,000 Seminoles had been forcibly removed from Florida to the Western territories of Arkansas and Oklahoma. As few as 300 remained in Florida, and they took refuge within the dense swamps of the Everglades. However, their place in history was assured as the only American Indian tribe never to have signed a peace treaty with the U.S. government.

From the 1920s onward, as the development boom exploded in South Florida, the Seminoles lost more and more of their hunting lands to tourists and settlers. They became agricultural workers in the vegetable fields of South Florida, and also ran tourist attractions, wearing their colorful patchwork clothing, producing souvenirs and wrestling alligators.

On Aug. 21, 1957, the Seminole Tribe of Florida was established through a majority vote of Florida's Seminole Indians. This vote gave the Seminoles federal recognition as a self-governing tribe with a constitutional form of government. The Seminole Tribe of Florida now has almost 3,000 members living on five reservations across the peninsula at Hollywood, Big Cypress, Brighton, Immokalee and Tampa.

The Seminoles work hard to be economically independent. Tourism and gaming profits pay for infrastructure and schools on their reservations, while citrus groves, cattle agriculture, aircraft production, tobacco sales, land leases and aquaculture are other significant sources of revenue.

Having persevered through two centuries of adversity, the Seminole Indians of Florida have earned the right to call themselves "the unconquered people." Their indomitable spirit is one that Florida State University proudly seeks to emulate in all of its endeavors.

## The Symbol: Seminoles

Florida State would play two games in 1947 before students demanded the school acquire a symbol. While details conflict, most believe the account of a poll of the student body is accurate. The Florida Flambeau reported that Seminoles had won by 110 votes over Statesmen. The rest of the top contenders (in order) were Rebels, Tarpons, Fighting Warriors and Crackers.

In the 1950s, a pair of students dressed in Native American costumes and joined the cheerleaders on the field which eventually evolved into the majestic symbol of Osceola and Renegade that FSU now enjoys. Today, the Seminole Indian Tribe participates in many campus activities.

Florida State University is proud of its longstanding cooperative relationship with the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The Seminole people have suffered many hardships and injustices, but they have remained brave, dignified and proud. The Seminoles are unconquered. They symbolize what we hope will be the traits of all of our graduates, including our student-athletes.