

LESSONS FROM THE WILDERNESS:

FACTORS THAT AFFECTED THE UNITED STATES ARMY'S CAMPAIGN IN FLORIDA DURING THE SECOND SEMINOLE WAR

by BRIAN L. POLK

The United States government discovered as early as 1824 that the task of removing the Seminole Indians from Florida would not be easily accomplished. Even the previous September's Treaty of Moultrie Creek, designed to concentrate the Indians on a 4,032,940 acre reservation in the center of the peninsula, was proving unenforceable.¹ As a result, the War Department sent four infantry companies to Tampa Bay in July to establish

Fort Brooke and oversee the relocation of the Seminoles to the reservation. These troops, like the thousands who would follow over the next two decades, learned first hand the harsh and inhospitable conditions which existed in a land which, a century later, would be praised for its physical attractions and amenities.

In the early nineteenth century, roads were virtually non-existent in Florida, except for a few in the northern reaches of

the 58,664 square mile territory. Almost the entire peninsula was dense wilderness and had never been adequately mapped. Coastal features were generally well documented, but maps of the interior usually gave only vague and often fanciful descriptions, or were simply left blank.²

Indian hostilities against the territory's sparse white population increased through the 1820s and into the 1830s, with little direct response from the federal government. The small military forces sent to Florida were ineffective, and Indians continued to leave the reservation, stealing cattle and slaves from outlying settlements.

Petitions from the settlers for removal of the Indians flooded Washington. The treaties of Payne's Landing in 1832 and Fort Gibson in 1833 set forth the policy of removing the Seminoles to the Arkansas Territory, but were bitterly opposed by a majority of the Indians, thereby increasing tension on the frontier. In the meantime, Congress appropriated money for food for the Indians but depended on the Seminoles' cooperation to follow the terms of the treaties.³

By 1835, the population of Florida

Difficult terrain and climate, vast distances, a largely uncharted wilderness, quarrelsome commanders, disease, and an enemy who refused to conform to notions of "civilized" warfare all faced the United States armed forces in Florida during the Second Seminole War.

As have soldiers throughout America's history, Seminole War troops adapted as best they could to the discouraging situation they confronted. As Brian Polk's article details, their efforts helped develop improved methods of warfare and logistics, and, perhaps more importantly, provided a storehouse of information about the land which had been regarded previously as a mysterious and unpenetrable wasteland. These accomplishments provided some of the few advantages gained from a tragic and unpopular war.

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Osceola

consisted of approximately 18,000 whites, 15,500 slaves, 1,000 free blacks, and 3,000 to 5,000 Seminoles. In December of that year, the army's total strength in Florida was 536 men, scattered from St. Augustine to Key West. Florida's territorial governor, John Eaton, requested that a large force of regular troops be sent to Florida to overcome Indian resistance and protect the settlers. Although other prominent Floridians favored assembling a volunteer force, Eaton felt that militia troops were undisciplined and would commit atrocities against the Indians, increasing hostilities.

Nevertheless, when his request for regular troops was not granted, he called out 500 militia dragoons, with a four week enlistment and initially no appropriations from Congress. This token show of force was too little and too late. When several chiefs decided to emigrate, Osceola and his followers went on a rampage, killing Charlie Amathla, a chief who had been cooperating with the army and was preparing to leave for the Arkansas Territory. They then burned sixteen plantations near the St. Johns River in east Florida, causing \$2,000,000 damage.⁴

The army, ignorant of its foes' capabilities, sent Major Francis Dade and his command of 107 men from Fort Brooke to reinforce Fort King, inside the reservation at the present-day site of Ocala. On December 28, 1835, the column was attacked by the Indians, and all but a few men were killed. Known as "Dade's Massacre," this battle was actually a striking

GEOGRAPHICAL, STATISTICAL, AND HISTORICAL MAP OF FLORIDA.



Drayton's 1824 map of Florida shows the lack of knowledge of south Florida's interior in the years before the Second Seminole War.

example of the Seminoles using superior tactics against the army.⁵

The Indians quickly learned that even well disciplined regulars were vulnerable when on the march. Employing small parties of ten to fifty warriors, they would ambush the advance or rear guard as it passed through wooded areas or crossed rivers. These small attack parties would not commit themselves to a general engagement, instead preferring to fight from a defensive position. They would strike quickly, then retreat, taking their dead and wounded from the field.⁶

This type of fighting was not familiar to the army, which was trained according to the manual *Infantry Tactics*, written in 1835 by General Winfield Scott, who took

command of troops in Florida in January 1836. Based on the French style of combat, Scott's work advocated the use of line formations, a method of fighting also known as close order tactics. These tactics were designed to be used against an enemy who was also arrayed in the same formation, standing shoulder to shoulder. Understandably, close order tactics did not work in Florida. The soldiers were easy targets and could not maintain their formations while advancing in two parallel lines, through thick vegetation and water.⁷

In the early months of the war, commanders refused to abandon these traditional methods, even though the need to change tactics became very obvious to the

soldiers in the ranks. In his diary, John Bemrose, a hospital steward with the Second Artillery, criticized the line formations and bayonet charges, stating that an extended order, where the troops were separated and could find cover, would have saved many lives. Gradually, during the spring of 1836, General Scott adopted these more practical tactics, although large, cumbersome columns of men and equipment continued to be used throughout the war.⁹

Even with this change in tactics, the mobile and clever Seminoles continued to have the advantage over the army. Small groups of six to ten warriors served as spies and followed the columns, reporting back to the main body later. During battles, the warriors would fire and drop to their left side to load. The object of this maneuver was to move away from the point of the muzzle flash. When the troops camped, the Indians often set fire to the brush or climbed trees and fired into the breastworks or pickets. Further confusion was sometimes caused by the Seminoles dressing in army jackets, trousers,

and forage caps.⁹

As the war continued and the army became accustomed to fighting in Florida, further adjustments were made to improve tactics. Even Robert Raymond Reid, who became Governor of the Florida Territory in 1839, stated in a message to the legislative council that the army must adopt the tactics of the Indians to drive them out. At the time Reid spoke, the troops were already stepping up their use of guerilla or "Indian style" tactics. For example, patrols sent to locate Indian villages and camps soon discovered that the Indians did not post camp guards at night. This oversight was exploited, and night attacks began. Detachments of fifty to 100 men with only food and muskets would march during the night, surround the Indians, and attack at dawn. This strategy was not without disadvantages. Difficulties in differentiating combatants from non-combatants resulted in women and children occasionally being killed.¹⁰

Other experiments were less successful. To assist the army in locating and capturing Indians, the Florida Legisla-

ture, in 1839, authorized Colonel Richard Fitzpatrick, one of south Florida's leading citizens, to purchase thirty bloodhounds from Cuba for \$151.72 each. The use of dogs to track the Seminoles outraged many in the northern cities, and cries of brutal and inhumane treatment of the Indians echoed across the country. As a result, the use of tracking dogs was soon banned by the federal government.¹¹

In the later phases of the war, the navy assisted greatly in supporting the army's search and destroy missions. As early as 1836, naval personnel had operated small boats on the Withlacoochee and Peace rivers, pursuing the Indians and destroying their villages. In October of that year, naval expeditions entered Snake Creek and New River, exploring the fringes of the Everglades. As the main body of Indians was gradually pushed down the peninsula in succeeding years, army and navy canoe expeditions regularly penetrated the Everglades. These commands would sometimes split up into groups as small as five men to follow trails and capture Seminoles.¹² Offshore, the navy's West India

PLATE II.

Fig. 1.

When in open column of sections, left in front.

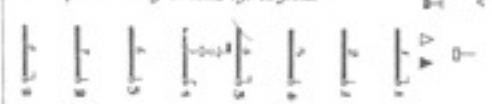


Fig. 2.

When in open column of sections, left in front.



Fig. 3.

Manoeuvre No. 1.



TO FORM COMPANY WHEN RETIRING FROM THE RIGHT OF SUB-DIVISIONS.

MANOEUVRE 19th. To the front form—Double quick time—March.

The leading files being in a line, will halt and come to the left-about; and the remainder half face to the right, and move past the line, and form as in Manoeuvre 12th.



Diagram and text from an 1821 military training manual in the Historical Commission collection, and (above) a soldier's sketch in the same book, indicating the common soldier's typical opinion of such methods of warfare.



This political cartoon, criticizing the use of bloodhounds by the army during the Seminole War, appeared during Zachary Taylor's 1848 presidential campaign.

Squadron blocked trading between the Seminoles and Cuban fishermen, who supplied the Indians with arms and ammunition. With 1,350 miles of coastline in Florida, the navy had a difficult task.¹³

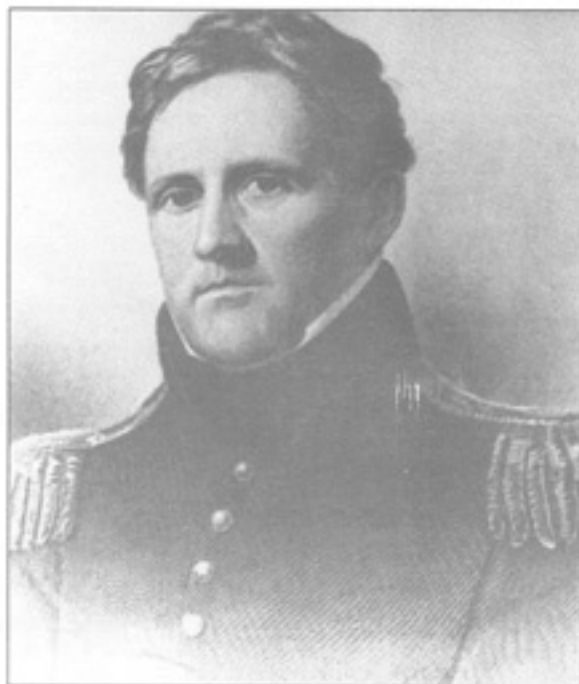
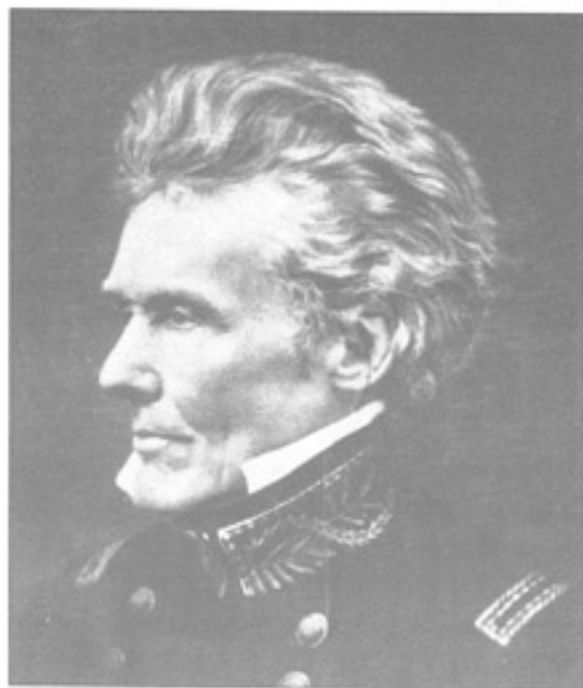
The difficulties encountered by the military in overcoming their wily opponents were often compounded by the commanders' egos. Since the Eastern and Western departments of the army overlapped in the area where hostilities were centered at the outset of the war, both department commanders, General Edmund P. Gaines and General Winfield Scott, felt

that they had jurisdiction over the conflict. In March 1836, General Gaines, the Western Department commander, led 1,000 men inland from Fort Brooke in an attempt to locate the Seminoles. General Scott, upon hearing this news, advised General Duncan L. Clinch at Fort King to withhold supplies from Gaines. Gaines fought the Indians at the Battle of Camp Izard, along the Withlacoochee River, then proceeded to Tallahassee to boast of ending the war. The quartermaster in New Orleans, hearing of an end to the hostilities, stopped a shipment of supplies just

as Scott began his own campaign against the Seminole stronghold in the Cove of the Withlacoochee.¹⁴

Scott's campaign was a failure, and later in the year he faced a court of inquiry ordered by President Andrew Jackson. Scott defended himself by citing several reasons, all beyond his control, for his lack of success. He felt that enlistment periods for the militia were too short; transportation was inadequate; the climate and disease had taken their toll on the troops; forage and grazing for the livestock was insufficient; there was no auxiliary force of friendly Indians; and guides were not available. Scott was exonerated because of the severe conditions in Florida, but the lack of communication and cooperation between the commanders had also had a severe impact on the army's effectiveness in the first major campaigns of the war.¹⁵

Low morale among the troops also limited the army's ability, particularly during the first few years of the war. At Fort Foster, between Tampa Bay and the Withlacoochee, Major Richard A. Zantinger reported in March 1837 that 125 of 305 men assigned to the fort were on furlough or absent without leave. The troops in Florida were in an unfamiliar land, hacking their way through dense vegetation and wading through swamps, often to discover that Indians were spotted in the same area they had patrolled the day before. Such conditions doubtless led to frustration and demoralization.¹⁶



Generals Edmund Pendleton Gaines (left, courtesy of Massachusetts Commandery Military Order of the Loyal Legion and U.S. Army Military History Institute) and Winfield Scott (right, courtesy of U. S. Army).

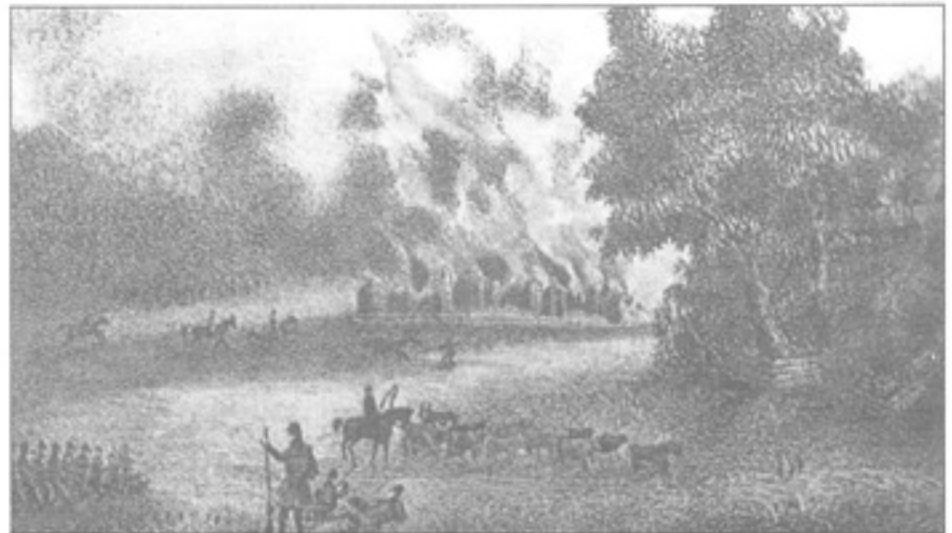
Another source of bitterness among the troops was the almost constant shortage of supplies. The men invariably blamed the army for negligence, but the situation was, in reality, much more complex. Commanders were forced to contend with Congress not appropriating funds, with the quartermaster not delivering supplies on schedule, and with equipment failure, poor maps, rain, and the terrain. An extreme example of the plight of a commander ruined by supply problems over which he had no control was that of Colonel John F. Lane, commander of a battalion of friendly Creek Indians. According to one contemporary account, Lane became so distraught over his inability to provide his men with food during the fall 1836 campaign, that he committed suicide with his sword.¹⁷

Militia troops, recruited from Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama, often supplied their own horses, arms, equipment, and food for their thirty-day enlistment. Volunteer committees from their home states provided assistance by procuring food and shipping it to St. Augustine or Fort Brooke. Such measures were often necessary. One request from a general to the ordnance master for 500 muskets for volunteers resulted in the delivery of only about one quarter of that number, with no equipment or cartridges.¹⁸

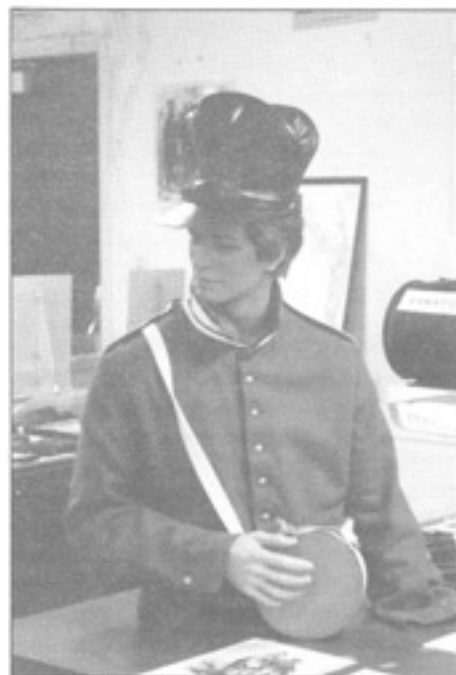
The delivery time for those provisions and equipment that were sent to Florida was frequently excessively long. Ten wagons ordered in January 1836 were finally delivered in May. Major General Thomas S. Jesup, who took over command in Florida in December 1836, encountered similar problems obtaining rations for his men. Livestock also suffered, since corn was not delivered until the troops were fed. Horses were often ridden until they would go no further, then turned loose.¹⁹

The terrain impeded the shipping of supplies as well as restricting troop movement. If supply wagons traveled on established roads during the dry season, they could average fifteen miles a day. If a new road was being constructed, progress would slow to four miles per day. In some areas, the undergrowth of palmettos, grapevines, and scrub oaks could only be penetrated with axes or the officers' swords.

Visibility was sometimes limited to ten feet or less. If rain fell, the roads became impassable, fatiguing men and animals. The exertion of pulling the loaded wagons under such conditions sometimes killed the horses and oxen.²⁰ When crossing swamps and rivers, the men and animals suffered lacerations from rocks and



Lithographs showing difficult conditions encountered by the army in Florida.



The heavy woolen uniform jacket and leather cap worn by most Second Seminole War soldiers in Florida are seen here in a Historical Commission display.

stumps. If a river was too deep to be forded, the troops constructed bridges, but the Indians usually burned them soon after the soldiers departed.²¹

As a result of these difficulties encountered by the military, the Indians' movement was virtually unrestricted. This situation continued until the late 1830s, when the army established bases of operation for storing supplies and improved roads connecting them. For those men fortunate enough to be near the coast or a navigable river, supplies were usually more accessible. Steamboats traveled the St. Johns, Suwannee, and New Rivers, delivering supplies and transporting the sick and wounded. Even these vessels, however, were not always dependable. At Fort Lauderdale in 1839 and 1840, soldiers frequently bet on the arrival of the steamboat *Santee*.²²

As the war continued, many of the transportation problems the army faced decreased with the construction of new roads and outposts and the increased utilization of natural waterways. The climate, however, remained a continuous hardship and topic of complaints throughout the conflict. Soldiers' diaries frequently included entries such as "a real scorcher," "warmest day I'd ever felt," and "rains everyday." Conditions were exacerbated by the troops being issued wool uniforms. Linen uniforms were approved for summer, but they were not always available.²³

Directly related to the climate was the high incidence of disease. The summer was known as the "sickly season," and usually caused the army to go into summer quarters. The opportunistic Seminoles took advantage of this and used the summer months to grow their crops, safe from the army's harassment.²⁴

Regardless of whether the army was campaigning or in quarters, diseases indiscriminately ravaged the ranks. Dysentery and diarrhea were especially common, caused by unsanitary conditions in the camps. While on the march, the men drew their water from any source, including stagnant ponds and water where livestock had traveled.²⁵ Another factor in the high incidence of illness during the war was the fact that personal hygiene was not considered to be very important. Often, months went by before the men took a bath, and they constantly complained about fleas and lice.²⁶

Soldiers also frequently suffered from fever, which some post surgeons thought was caused by breathing "bad air" from the marshes.²⁷ Others, such as Dr. J.H. Baldwin at Fort Foster, attributed it to decaying vegetation, which they believed produced "miasmatic inhalations."²⁸ Often the fever, which was actually malaria, reached epidemic proportions, forcing the abandonment of posts and reorganization of the army. The June 1841 sick report showed only 3,802 of the 4,831 men stationed in Florida available for service. Twenty-one percent (1,029) were sick.²⁹

Hospitals were established at Picolata and Cedar Key in early 1841, when the interior posts proved unable to handle the increasing number of sick soldiers. Not only did the absence of soldiers because of illness deplete the forces in the field, the need to transport and care for the sick created an additional drain on manpower.

Treatments for the various diseases were usually as primitive as the diagnoses. Most drugs and compounds available treated only the symptoms. For example, pecac, a root, was commonly given to induce vomiting, which, it was believed, reduced the fever.³⁰ Many deaths resulted from lack of understanding of diseases, and the proportion of fatalities caused by illness is reflected in army records compiled after the war. The Fourth Infantry Regiment, for example, served in Florida in 1836 and 1837. Of the unit's total of 128 deaths during this period, eighty-six percent were from disease.³¹

Despite inauspicious beginnings, the army, through its perseverance and ingenuity, was able to overcome most of the adversities it encountered during nearly seven years of sporadic and unorthodox

warfare. Extensive troop movements throughout the peninsula led to the creation of very detailed maps, improved roads, better communications, and more efficient delivery of supplies. Rivers and streams, which in the early years of the war were a disadvantage, were later used to the military's advantage. The lessons learned from Dade's Massacre and other early military failures eventually resulted in the army adopting the Indians' style of fighting.

Once they converted to guerilla warfare, the army became an effective fighting force. Initially, the troops were unsure of the effectiveness of their new tactics, because few direct engagements with the Seminoles resulted. The soldiers soon learned, however, that they underestimated their own efficiency. By penetrating the wilderness and forcing the Seminoles to stay on the run, they disrupted the entire Indian culture, causing a collapse of their ability to wage war.³²

The total number of Indian casualties inflicted during the war is unknown, but over 3,000 were captured or surrendered and shipped west. When the hostilities ceased in 1842, only an estimated 112 warriors and 189 women and children remained in Florida, forced deep into the Everglades.³³

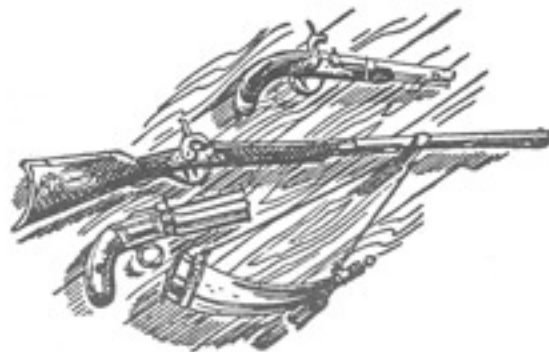
Despite these elements of success, the United States government found the Second Seminole War to be a costly and unpopular conflict, one which possibly could have been averted had the government followed the advice of Florida officials and residents and mobilized sufficient troops at the first indication of potential hostilities.

Instead, government inaction through the 1820s and early 1830s bolstered Seminole confidence. Once war erupted, human failings as well as natural and geographic obstacles hindered the army's ability to complete its mission. Had the potential for jurisdictional disputes between Scott and Gaines been anticipated and addressed by the War Department, a coordinated effort by both generals' forces possibly could have ended the war in its early stages. Instead, the military became committed to a prolonged and often frustrating war.

Because of the climate and lack of medical knowledge, disease became a greater threat to the army in Florida than the Indians they were fighting. Of the 1,466 deaths of regular United States troops between 1835 and 1842, seventy-five percent (1,101) were caused by disease.³⁴

In addition to the cost of soldiers' lives, the United States government spent be-

tween \$30,000,000 and \$40,000,000 fighting the Seminoles in an isolated and inhospitable territory. What they gained, in addition to the virtual destruction of Seminole power, was a vital knowledge of the Florida wilderness and invaluable, though difficult lessons in strategy, tactics, and logistics.



ENDNOTES

- 1) John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1967), 53 (hereafter cited as Mahon, *Second Seminole War*).
- 2) *Ibid.*, 129; Ann H. Shoemyen, ed., *Florida Statistical Abstract, 1968* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), 196 (hereafter cited as Shoemyen, *Statistical Abstract*).
- 3) Mahon, *Second Seminole War*, 53; Woodburne Potter, *The War in Florida* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), 27 (hereafter cited as Potter, *War in Florida*).
- 4) Potter, *War in Florida*, 25, 36, 98; John Bemrose, *Reminiscences of the Second Seminole War*, ed. by John K. Mahon (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1966), 34-35 (hereafter cited as Bemrose, *Reminiscences*); Mahon, *Second Seminole War*, 101.
- 5) John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York: Appleton & Company, 1848, reprint ed., Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1964), 90-91 (hereafter cited as Sprague, *Florida War*).
- 6) *Ibid.*, 131, 280; Potter, *War in Florida*, 169; Jacob Rhett Motte, *Journey Into Wilderness*, ed. by James F. Sunderman (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1963), 145 (hereafter cited as Motte, *Journey*).
- 7) Potter, *War in Florida*, 130; Mahon, *Second Seminole War*, 119; Henry Prince, "Diary," photocopy in P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville (hereafter cited as Prince, "Diary").
- 8) Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 50, 88, 92; Potter, *War in Florida*, 134-35.
- 9) Motte, *Journey*, 145; Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 52, 90; Potter, *War in Florida*, 98, 146. Breastworks were usually constructed when the troops were camped for the night or under attack. They consisted of pine logs stacked three high and formed into a triangle or square. Pickets were fort walls usually constructed from eighteen foot long logs with about two feet buried in the ground, Prince, "Diary."
- 10) Potter, *War in Florida*, 152; Sprague, *Florida War*, 238, 276; Motte, *Journey*, 121-22; Henry Hollingsworth, "Diary," photocopy in Broward County Historical Commission archives, Fort Lauderdale (hereafter cited as Hollingsworth, "Diary").
- 11) Sprague, *Florida War*, 239.
- 12) *Ibid.*, 280, 360; George Buker, "The Mosquito Fleet's Guides and the Second Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 57 (January 1979), 308.
- 13) U.S. House of Representatives, *Causes of Hostilities of Seminoles*, 24th Congress, 1st session, 1836, 267; Shoemyen, *Statistical Abstract*, 196; Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 51. The Indians traded for small caliber rifles and good quality gunpowder.
- 14) Potter, *War in Florida*, 130, 168-75; Prince, "Diary;" Sprague, *Florida War*, 114-15, 134; Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 88.
- 15) Sprague, *Florida War*, 136, 157-58.
- 16) *Ibid.*, 273.
- 17) Hollingsworth, "Diary."
- 18) Potter, *War in Florida*, 99, 124.
- 19) *Ibid.*, 140; Sprague, *Florida War*, 118.
- 20) Hollingsworth, "Diary;" Potter, *War in Florida*, 166; Prince, "Diary;" Sprague, *Florida War*, 281-82.
- 21) Motte, *Journey*, 193.
- 22) *Ibid.*, 146; Ellis Hughes, "Diary," photocopy in Broward County Historical Commission archives, Fort Lauderdale; Potter, *War in Florida*, 175. The steamboat *Santee* was contracted by the navy to deliver supplies to posts along the Atlantic coast between Key Biscayne and St. Augustine.
- 23) Sprague, *Florida War*, 141.
- 24) *Ibid.*, 252.
- 25) *Ibid.*, 141; Motte, *Journey*, 222.
- 26) Prince, "Diary;" Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 34, 94.
- 27) Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 94; Hollingsworth, "Diary."
- 28) Michael G. Schene, "Fort Foster: A Second Seminole War Fort," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, 54 (January 1976), 330-31.
- 29) *Ibid.*; Sprague, *Florida War*, 257.
- 30) Sprague, *Florida War*, 274.
- 31) Bemrose, *Reminiscences*, 93.
- 32) Sprague, *Florida War*, 318.
- 33) U.S. House of Representatives, *Correspondence Between the War Department and Commanding Officer in Florida*, 27th Congress, 2nd session, 1842, H.R. 262.
- 34) Sprague, *Florida War*, 596.