

## The Battle of Caloosahatchee

<b>Date:</b>	23 July 1839
<b>Location:</b>	Trading post on Caloosahatchee river, Florida
<b>Result:</b>	Decisive Seminole Victory
<b>Commanders and Leaders:</b>	<p><b>American:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lieutenant Colonel William S. Harney</li> </ul> <p><b>Seminole:</b><sup>1</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Holata Micco (Billy Bowlegs)</li> <li>- Chakaika</li> <li>- Hospertarke</li> </ul>
<b>Strength:</b>	<p><b>American:</b> 28 dragoons<sup>2</sup></p> <p><b>Seminole:</b> 150-160</p>
<b>Casualties and Losses:</b>	<p><b>United States:</b><sup>3</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 20 casualties. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dead: 11 dragoons, 5 civilians, at least 1 enslaved interpreter;</li> <li>• Wounded: 2 dragoons</li> <li>• Captured: 1 interpreter</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- John L. Bedford, Private, Co. D</li> <li>- John Bigelow, Sergeant, Co. E</li> <li>- Charles Brown, Private, Co. A</li> <li>- Corporal Haywood, Co. D</li> <li>- John Jeffs, Private, Co. F</li> <li>- Private Luther, Co. C</li> <li>- Edward Mee, Farrier, Co. F</li> <li>- Horace Nicholas, Private, Co. C</li> <li>- Job Simmons, Sergeant, Co. C</li> <li>- Robert Thompson, Private, Co. F</li> <li>- Richard White, Private, Co. F</li> </ul> <p><b>Civilians</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- James Dallam (sutler)</li> <li>- Morgan (sutler's clerk)</li> <li>- Howard (Dallam's employee)</li> <li>- Hughey (Dallam's employee)</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Testimony of Sampson, quoted in: John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1848), 316.

<sup>2</sup> The number of dragoons present at the Caloosahatchee trading house varies from source to source. In a statement made after the attack, Lt. Col. Harney, the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons at Caloosahatchee claims that he was in command of twenty-eight dragoons when he established the encampment. "Harney to Dancy, August 1, 1839" quoted in: Theophilus F. Rodenbough, ed., *From Everglade to Cañon with the Second Dragoons: an Authentic Account of Service in Florida, Mexico, Virginia, and the Indian Country, Including the Personal Recollections of Prominent Officers* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1875) 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Historians disagree on the exact number of U.S. casualties sustained at Caloosahatchee. Extant records of the battle are inconsistent, which is the cause of these disagreements. For the purpose of this article, the total number of 17 dead is based on accounts contained within the following sources: Rodenbough, *From Everglade to Cañon*, 36-37 ; Sprague, *Florida War*, 526-529.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mr. Smith (Dallam's employee)</li> </ul> <p><u>Enslaved interpreters</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sandy</li> <li>- Sampson (captured)</li> </ul> <p><b>Seminole:</b> None<sup>4</sup></p>
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### **Caloosahatchee Alternate Names/Spellings**

- Caloosahatchie
- Carlosahatchee
- Coleosahatchie
- Coleasahatchie
- Harney Massacre
- Caloosahatchee Massacre

### **Overview**

The Battle of Caloosahatchee was a major conflict in the Second Seminole War that occurred on July 23, 1839. A group of approximately 150 Seminole Indians ambushed a unit of United States Cavalry, known as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons, at a trading post located on the Caloosahatchee River, near the modern city of Cape Coral.<sup>5</sup> The battle, popularly known as the “Caloosahatchee Massacre” or the “Harney Massacre,” resulted in the death of eleven members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons, under the command of Lt. Col. William Harney, as well as five civilian traders and one enslaved African American interpreter. Occurring in the wake of a tentative peace agreement reached at Fort King in May 1839, this battle led to public outcry against the Seminoles, and ended the American pretention of ending the war without total removal of the Seminoles from the Florida territory.<sup>6</sup>

### **Prelude**

In May 1839, the United States and some groups of Seminoles, including Chitto Tustenugge, the leader of the Miccosukee, enacted a temporary and unwritten peace agreement at Fort King, on the site of modern-day Ocala.<sup>7</sup> The Fort King treaty, also known as the “Macomb Treaty” after Gen. Alexander Macomb, the chief negotiator of the agreement, was intended to temporarily end hostilities between the United States and Seminoles “until further

<sup>4</sup> No sources reviewed for this article indicate that the Seminole sustained any casualties during the battle.

<sup>5</sup> John and Mary Lou Missall, *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Missall and Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, 165-169; George R. Adams, “The Caloosahatchee Massacre: Its Significance in the Second Seminole War.” *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 48, no. 4, (April 1970): 368-380.

<sup>7</sup> *Army and Navy Chronicle*, vol. 8 (Washington D.C., 1839) 364; The Fort King treaty was not agreed upon by all Seminoles. While the U.S. viewed Chitto Tustenugge as the “principal chief of the Seminoles”, he was only the chief of the Miccosukee and did not represent all Seminoles. George Adams notes that there were “at least four bands of hostiles” absent from the Fort King talks. Thus, the Fort King agreement was non-binding amongst the entirety of the Seminoles. Adams, “Caloosahatchee Massacre”, 372.

arrangements are made,” paving the way for further negotiation and, ultimately, the “peaceful” removal of the Seminoles from the Florida territory.<sup>8</sup>

The Fort King agreement stipulated that the remaining Seminoles in Florida would be restricted to a reservation but would not be subject to immediate removal. Additionally, the treaty required the maintenance of trading posts within the allotted Seminole territory so that the Seminoles could trade for necessities within the confines of their reservations. Subsequently, the United States built a trading post on the northern bank of the Caloosahatchee River, near modern Cape Coral, as partial fulfillment of this requirement. The trading post was operated by James Dallam, a former U.S. infantryman, and was defended by twenty-eight members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons under Lt. Col. Harney.<sup>9</sup>

The treaty, however, did not end hostilities for long. Many Americans in Florida were unhappy with the idea of allowing a Seminole reservation to remain within the state. Furthermore, not all Seminole chiefs were party to the talks, and those who were absent were likely unaware that any peace agreement had been signed.

### **The Battle**

On the morning of July 23, 1839, a group of about 150 Seminoles ambushed the twenty-eight members of the United States 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons encamped at the trading post on the banks of the Caloosahatchee River. The attack began at daybreak, when the Seminoles simultaneously attacked both the trading post (led by Hospertarke) and the encampment of Dragoons (led by Chekika), located approximately half a mile from each other.<sup>10</sup>

The Seminole attack was a “complete surprise.”<sup>11</sup> The Dragoons, armed with Colt repeating rifles but no ammunition, had not posted sentinels the night of July 22 and were completely unprepared when the attack came. Among the dead were eleven Dragoons, one African American interpreter, and five civilians who operated the trade house.

Some of the deaths occurred in the initial attack, but other dragoons died after fleeing into the river. The Seminoles reportedly lured them back to shore with the promise of safety before killing them. Others were taken prisoner and later executed. The remainder, including Col. Harney, ran for the river where they escaped. Harney and the other soldiers who escaped the attack eventually regrouped and returned to the scene of the battle where they found the trading post ransacked and their comrades’ bodies mutilated. They later escaped via canoe to a nearby U.S. ship.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Gen. Alexander Macomb, quoted in Sprague, *Florida War*, 228-229.

<sup>9</sup> “Harney to Dancy, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1839” quoted in Rodenbough, *From Everglade to Cañon*, 38; John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835-1842*. Rev. ed. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1985) 261; “Indian Affairs” *The National Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), 17 August 1839.

<sup>10</sup> Sprague, *Florida War* 317.

<sup>11</sup> “The War Renewed!” *The Pittsburgh Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA), 13 August 1839.

<sup>12</sup> Missall and Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, 165; “Caloosahatchie’ – Statement of Survivors” quoted in Rodenbough, *From Everglade to Cañon*, 504-505; United States Senate, December 24, 1839, *Message from the President of the United States, to the two Houses of Congress, at the commencement of the first session of the*

In testimony given after the attack, Col. Harney explained that on the morning of the attack, his Dragoons were caught off guard and without ammunition because ammunition was not distributed, nor had sentinels been assigned on the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, as per protocol. Harney's explanation for this oversight was that he had been hunting wild hogs on Sanibel Island on July 22, and he did not return to the trading post until late in the evening after a long day of travel. Upon his return, he immediately fell asleep before making sure that these duties were fulfilled.<sup>13</sup> Harney explained that his troops were unprepared because Gen. Zachary Taylor had failed to requisition him an additional officer, and that Harney instead had to entrust command duties to Sgt. John Bigelow while he was away hunting.<sup>14</sup> Harney spoke of Bigelow's leadership and the unfortunate fate his troops suffered:

As I had no commissioned officer with me, I was compelled to leave the camp at Caloosahatchie in charge of Sergeant Bigelow, who, by his former conduct, had evinced himself worthy of the most implicit confidence. Unfortunately, by his ill-placed reliance on Indian integrity he has fallen a victim to Indian treachery, dying, as he had lived, a brave soldier. When I left this Sergeant, I instructed him *never to place himself nor any of his party in the power of the Indians, and, however confident he might feel of their friendship, to use at all times the same precautions as if he suspected their faith.*<sup>15</sup>

Harney cited this lack of sufficient support staff as one of the main reasons the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons were caught unprepared, and were unable to defend themselves from the surprise attack. Claiming that he had requested an additional officer for his unit so that he could delegate his responsibilities to an officer, Harney continued:

[I]t could not be expected of me to attend to the minutiae of inspecting sentinels and posting guards; and that if any censure was attributable to any one, it should be laid to the authority which refused me the proper means of guarding the trading-house by not complying with my requisition for an officer.<sup>16</sup>

For the Seminoles, the surprise was a complete success, as they sustained no casualties at the hands of the unsuspecting 2<sup>nd</sup> Dragoons.

### **Aftermath**

Though the attack on the Caloosahatchee trading post was a clear violation of the Fort King agreement, it is unclear what motivated the Seminoles to attack, or if they were even aware that a treaty had been signed. As historians Mary Lou and John Missall note, at face value, the Seminole had received many of the concessions they initially sought from the United States in the Fort King agreement, namely the ability to avoid total removal from Florida.<sup>17</sup> Yet, despite

*Twenty-sixth Congress*, "No. 1: Report of the Major General Commanding the Army" (Washington: Blair and Rives, Printers) 55-59.

<sup>13</sup> "Report of the Major General Commanding the Army", 58.

<sup>14</sup> "Harney to Dancy" in Rodenbough, *From Everglade to Cañon*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Missall and Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, 166.

this perceived victory, the Seminole may have suspected the United States would not honor the terms of the treaty given that the U.S. military's history of bad faith negotiations such as having captured Osceola and other important Seminole leaders during a fake truce.<sup>18</sup> It is also possible that the Seminoles responsible for the attack may not have been aware that any treaty was signed at Fort King or that they might not have approved of a treaty even if they were aware of its existence.

Offering a different interpretation, one newspaper speculated that the Seminoles might have attacked because "the Indians were not apprized of [Harney's] return," late in the previous evening, seemingly suggesting that the battle was a reaction to military movement in the night. In other words, the Seminoles might have expected the military to inform them of their comings and goings on Native American land.<sup>19</sup> While this explanation is perhaps unlikely, it is still unclear if the Seminole attack was a malicious violation of the Fort King treaty, the result of skepticism based on American bad faith negotiation, or certain Seminole chiefs not knowing of the treaty. Regardless of the Seminole motivation for the attack, the Battle of Caloosahatchee ended the tentative peace agreement made at Fort King in May 1839, renewing the American commitment to war, and cementing the notion among many Americans that total removal was the only way to answer the "Florida question."<sup>20</sup>

### Aftermath/Reprisals

While the Fort King agreement presented an opportunity for peace in 1839, many Americans living in Florida were skeptical of the deal from the outset since they opposed leaving any Seminoles in the territory. In the aftermath of the Caloosahatchee battle, American public commitment to removal was solidified, as a sense of outrage at the attack permeated public discourse. One newspaper said of the attack, "thus has ended that precious and greatest of all humbugs—the 'Macomb Treaty,'" while another stated:

These are some of the fruits of this miserable and fraudulent treaty—and these, too, are the very Indians who accompanied Col. Harney from Tampa to Fort King, to dupe the Commander in Chief of the United States Army.—Surely the Government can no longer doubt the "good faith" and the "peaceable intentions" of the Seminoles, the opinion of the people of St. Augustine" and "Tallahassee," to the contrary notwithstanding.<sup>21</sup>

Another example of public support for total removal and brutality toward the Seminoles is visible in what one historian describes as "one of the most ghastly and widely publicized events of the war." In December of 1840, Lt. Col. Harney led a group of ninety men on a quest for vengeance through the Everglades to "Chakaika Island," named for one of the alleged leaders of the assault on Harney and the Dragoons at Caloosahatchee. In this attack, Harney "dressed and

<sup>18</sup> Osceola was captured under the false flag of truce on October 21, 1837 by the order of General Thomas Jesup. For an overview of this event, see John Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War*, 214-218.

<sup>19</sup> "From the South" *The Pittsburgh Gazette* (Pittsburg, PA), 31 August 1839.

<sup>20</sup> Missall and Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, 165-168; "Florida question," *The National Gazette* (Philadelphia, PA), 17 August 1839.

<sup>21</sup> "Important from Florida—Renewal of Indian hostilities" *The Pittsburgh Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA) 13 August 1839.

painted his men like Indians” and attacked the Seminole village located on Chakaika Island, where they refused the surrender of Chakaika, electing to summarily execute him and several other surrendering warriors instead.<sup>22</sup> Harney, displaying the cruelty that solidified his reputation as an Indian fighter, “sadistically strung Chakaika’s body up” in a tree alongside two fellow Seminoles as a display to Chakaika’s wife, children, and friends.<sup>23</sup> One American died during the attack, with five others sustaining injury and at least one other dying from disease upon their return from the Everglades.

In his biography of Harney, George Adams states that “few, if any, officers earned as much notoriety as Harney for the cruel and summary punishment” doled out against Chakaika, but notes that Harney was immensely popular across Florida after this attack.<sup>24</sup> Harney’s 19<sup>th</sup> century biographer, L.U. Reavis, seems to agree with this notion, stating that “there was great rejoicing at the success of Colonel Harney all over Florida; and although his summary vengeance upon some of the prisoners called forth imprecations from many, those were drowned by the general burst of approbation.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Legacy**

Historians have argued that the Battle of Caloosahatchee was a turning point in United States/Seminole relations during the Second Seminole War. From the American perspective, the Battle of Caloosahatchee effectively ended any notion that the Second Seminole War would end quickly and without total removal of the Seminoles from the Florida territory. Furthermore, military strategy changed in the wake of the battle, as U.S. military leaders approved the use of bloodhounds to track and attack the Seminoles, a practice the military had debated yet had not adopted prior to the battle.<sup>26</sup> Americans living in Florida had long been skeptical of coexisting with the Seminoles, and the attack on the trading post in the wake of the Fort King agreement garnered significant public outcry across the United States.<sup>27</sup> This battle and the abandonment of the peace established at Fort King ensured the continuation of hostilities in the Second Seminole War and solidified the notion of total removal.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew K. Frank, *Before the Pioneers: Indians, Settlers, Slaves, and the Founding of Miami* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017), 86.

<sup>23</sup> George Rollie Adams, *General William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001) 77.

<sup>24</sup> Adams, *General William S. Harney*, 76-77.

<sup>25</sup> L.U. Reavis, *Life and Military Services of General William Selby Harney* (St. Louis: Bryan, Brand, & Co.), 144-145.

<sup>26</sup> Missall and Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, 171; Adams, “Caloosahatchee Massacre”, 379. Historians have debated whether the use of bloodhounds against the Seminole was adopted as a direct result of the battle at Caloosahatchee. The Missalls argue that the army had considered the practice for sometime before the attack, but committed to it after Caloosahatchee, since the army saw it as a way to facilitate removal and to expedite the renewed war.

<sup>27</sup> Missall and Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, 169; Adams, “Caloosahatchee Massacre”, 373.