

CHIEF BOWLEGS AND THE BANANA GARDEN: A REASSESSMENT OF THE
BEGINNING OF THE THIRD SEMINOLE WAR

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examines in depth the most common interpretation of the opening of the Third Seminole War (1855-1858). The interpretation in question was authored almost thirty years after the beginning of the war, and it alleges that the destruction of a Seminole banana plant garden by United States soldiers was the direct cause of the conflict. This study analyzes the available primary records as well as traces the entire historiography of the Third Seminole War in order to ascertain how and why the banana garden account has had such an impactful and long-lasting effect. Based on available evidence, it is clear that the lack of fully contextualized primary records, combined with the failure of historians to deviate from or challenge previous scholarship, has led to a persistent reliance on the banana garden interpretation that continues to the present. Despite the highly questionable and problematic nature of this account, it has dominated the historiography on the topic and is found in almost every written source that addresses the beginning of the Third Seminole War. This thesis refutes the validity of the banana garden interpretation, and in addition, provides alternative explanations for the Florida Seminoles' decision to wage war against the United States during the 1850s.

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INTRODUCTION

The Third Seminole War began on December 20, 1855 when a United States Army surveying unit led by Lieutenant George L. Hartsuff was ambushed and attacked by a war party of Seminole Indians while conducting reconnaissance in the Big Cypress Swamp in southern Florida. Beginning in the 1880s and continuing to the present day, virtually every written account that addresses the opening of the Third Seminole War contains the following interpretation, or something strikingly similar: While exploring an abandoned Seminole village, several men in Hartsuff's company maliciously destroyed a banana plant garden belonging to Seminole Chief Holata Micco, or Billy Bowlegs, which angered the Chief so much that he led the attack on the soldiers two days later. According to many authors, this alleged incident was the direct catalyst leading the Seminoles to wage war against U.S. soldiers. The origin of the "banana plant story" comes from ex-soldier Andrew Canova, who included it in his book, *Life and Adventures in South Florida*, that was published in 1885, thirty years after the opening Seminole attack of the war.

This thesis examines the written history of the Third Seminole War in order to determine why Canova's account became the standard interpretation of the conflict's beginnings, and why scholars and the public alike have continued to accept this interpretation despite the multiple factors that have persistently undermined its validity. A reassessment of the available evidence from the Third Seminole War's origins as well as an analysis of the social and political context in which the U.S. public understood the event help to provide explanations. Specifically, increasing white American sympathy for Indians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, combined with often contradictory but persistent negative images of Native peoples,

both influenced and legitimized Canova's account, while the failure of subsequent historians to conduct primary source analysis led to a continued reliance on the banana plant story as established fact for more than a century. Only a handful of historians have ever refuted or ignored Canova's interpretation, and the lasting effects on the historiography are significant and noteworthy.

In order to understand the opening of the Third Seminole War, it is necessary first to analyze the written history of the war and come to terms with the larger social trends and dominant popular depictions of Native Americans that influenced the first wave of literature on the conflict. The early literature on the Third Seminole War cannot be separated from the context of the hegemonic white society that produced those writings. White observers of the conflict rarely recorded the perspectives of the Florida Seminoles while the Seminoles themselves did not keep written records of their history during this era. Historians have interpreted the Seminole Wars through the prism of late-nineteenth century white American culture, and almost exclusively emphasized the white-authored source material. Consequently, as historian Robert Berkhofer explains, "to understand the White image of the Indian is to understand White societies and intellectual premises over time more than the diversity of Native Americans. Although the social and cultural attributes of Native Americans influenced the conception of them by Whites, it is ultimately to the history of White values and ideas that we must turn for the basic conceptual categories, classificatory schema, explanatory frameworks, and moral criteria by which past and present Whites perceived, observed, evaluated, and interpreted Native

Americans.”¹ Historian Brian Dippie made a similar argument when he also analyzed the history of white perceptions of Native Americans in his book, *The Vanishing American* (1982). Dippie expanded on the concepts put forth by Berkhofer in order to illustrate how these popular attitudes both influenced and justified the United States’ Indian policies.² Therefore, this thesis centers on the published work of white authors and the history of ideas regarding American Indians as a means of deciphering the endurance of the banana plant incident being considered as the major spark that ignited the Third Seminole War.

This thesis will also illustrate how the use of Canova’s account by two subsequent authors validated its accuracy and usefulness in the eyes of later historians. Minnie Moore-Willson’s *The Seminoles of Florida* (1896) and Charles Coe’s *Red Patriots* (1898) were both well-received works by scholars and the public alike, and both were highly influential on the historiography thereafter. Both authors relied exclusively on Canova’s account to explain the cause of the Third Seminole War, and therefore are vitally important to consider for this study. The timing of Canova’s work is crucial to understanding its impact on the literature since it was published at a time when little was known about Indians in Florida, and when attitudes were beginning to shift towards more positive representations of Native Americans, although the undercurrent of traditional belief in the inferiority of the “red race” still persisted.³

¹ Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), xvi.

² Brian Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982).

³ Both Berkhofer and Dippie discuss the continuity and change that has defined white attitudes toward American Indians, often alternating between hatred and reverence. Mikaela Adams extends this concept to the Florida Seminoles in her article “Savage Foes, Noble Warriors, and Frail Remnants: Florida Seminoles in the White Imagination, 1865-1934,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 404-435.

In addition to evaluating the initial wave of literature on the Third Seminole War, this thesis also places special emphasis on two works published later in the twentieth century, both of which were written by amateur historians. John O. Parrish's book *Battling the Seminoles* (1930) and Ray B. Seley, Jr., Jr.'s article "Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants" (1963)⁴ are two of the only accounts that offer alternative explanations to the banana plant incident as the cause of the war. Therefore, it is vital to this study to uncover the reasons why almost every historian has overlooked or disregarded the research done by Parrish and Seley, Jr.. Most of the available works of history that cover the outbreak of the Third Seminole War are examined in this thesis in order to determine how dependent they are on the banana plant interpretation, and whether or not consideration is given to alternative interpretations or the broader factors that contributed to the war's outbreak.

Although the focus of this thesis is the secondary literature regarding the outbreak of the Third Seminole War, primary source analysis, alternative interpretations, and suggestions for further research are provided in Chapter 3 by taking into consideration a wide range of factors that contributed to the war. Although Canova claimed to provide an unknown account of Florida history, other sources detailed the causes and events of the Third Seminole War as well, including newspapers, the writings of settlers and soldiers, both during and after the war, and government documents. Also examined are the impact of the many laws and measures enacted by Florida's policy-makers as they pertained to removing the Seminoles by nonviolent means.

Despite the paucity of source material featuring the voices of the Florida Seminoles, Chapter 4 attempts to offer some Seminole perspectives on the opening of the war and their

⁴ John O. Parrish, *Battling the Seminoles: Featuring John Akins, Scout* (Lakeland, FL: Southern Printing Company, 1930). Ray B. Seley, Jr., Jr., "Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants," *Tequesta* 23 (1963): 3-14.

possible motivations for fighting in 1855. Some factors have largely been underestimated by historians, or are altogether ignored in other interpretations concerning the Third Seminole War. Specifically, events and circumstances in Indian Territory (modern day Oklahoma) may have had a much larger impact on the Florida Indians' motivations than most scholars acknowledge. The Western Seminoles had been petitioning the U.S. government for a new treaty which would provide them with lands separate from their bitter rivals, the Creeks, whom the Seminoles were forced to cohabitate with since the removals following the Second Seminole War. After a year and a half of bloodshed in the Third Seminole War, the United States signed a new treaty that granted to the Western Seminoles lands distinct from the Creeks. In addition, the targets chosen by the Seminoles during the war, the importance and symbolism of Seminole agriculture, and the role of Chief Billy Bowlegs are addressed in Chapter 4. Despite the lack of primary source material related to the outbreak of the Third Seminole War, complex and nuanced explanations are still possible and must be examined in order to avoid overly-simplistic and possibly patronizing interpretations like the banana plant story that have distorted understandings of the Third Seminole War from its beginnings to the present.

CHAPTER 1: FOUNDATIONS OF THE BANANA PLANT STORY

The opening chapter of this thesis closely examines the portion of Andrew Canova's book that introduced his banana plant interpretation of the Third Seminole War to the reading public. While discrediting Canova as an historian is not the most useful of exercises, highlighting some of the factual errors and inconsistencies in his writing does provide insight into his motivations and source base. What follows is an analysis of two books that utilized, and therefore largely legitimized, Canova's banana plant account, Minnie Moore-Willson's *The Seminoles of Florida* (1896) and Charles Coe's *Red Patriots* (1898). The third section of this chapter examines how these three books fit into white American society at the turn of the twentieth century. The evidence indicates that popular attitudes towards Native Americans influenced the acceptance of Canova's account. The banana plant interpretation included elements of both Indian victimization and Indian treachery, and therefore exemplified Americans' emerging sympathy for Indians at the beginning of the twentieth century, while still reinforcing traditional depictions of natives' "savage" behavior.

Summary of the Second and Third Seminole Wars

When the U.S. government officially declared the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) to be over on August 14, 1842, it had yet to achieve its goal of removing all Native Americans from peninsular Florida. The conflict was the longest, bloodiest, and costliest war fought by the United States up to that point, and would retain those distinctions in regards to all other subsequent so-called Indian Wars. By the end of 1843, 3,824 Seminoles had been sent west to

Indian Territory,¹ and approximately 360 remained in Florida.² The commanding officer in Florida at the close of the war, General William Worth, concluded a temporary agreement to allow those Seminoles still in Florida to remain “for a while,” since hostilities no longer existed, at least in his estimation.³ The years of uneasy peace between the second and third wars (1842-1855) are crucial to understanding the renewal of violence in 1855, and will be carefully analyzed in Chapter 3 of this study.

With the Seminoles’ decision to attack Hartsuff’s company, the Third Seminole War began on December 20, 1855. Although the conflict was not an officially declared war by the United States, and did not feature any large pitched battles, several violent engagements took place throughout 1856 and 1857. The Seminoles employed hit-and-run tactics on isolated outposts and settlements, while the U.S. army initiated a search-and-destroy campaign in the hopes of locating Seminole villages and strong-holds. The death of important Seminole war leader Ossen Tustenuggee, the discovery and destruction of Bowlegs’ primary camp, and the use of shallow-draft boats by the Florida militia all contributed to the capitulation of the majority of the Seminoles, including Bowlegs and 164 of his followers. Colonel Gustavo Loomis, the commanding officer in Florida at the time, proclaimed hostilities at an end on May 8, 1858, although seventy-five more Seminoles agreed to emigrate as late as February 15, 1859.⁴ More than one hundred Seminoles remained scattered across South Florida, but the U.S. government

¹ John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War: 1835-1842* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1967), 321.

² John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Process, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York: Appleton, 1848), 512.

³ William Worth, General Order no. 27, August 11, 1842, *The Territorial Papers of the United States. The Territory of Florida, 1839-1845 Vol. XXV*, Clarence Edwin Carter, ed. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962), 519. Hereafter cited as *Territorial Papers of Florida*.

⁴ James W. Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 134-144.

ceased its negotiation attempts and considered the remaining Indians too small in number to warrant any further removal efforts.

Andrew Canova's *Life and Adventures in South Florida*

In 1885, almost thirty years after the outbreak of the Third Seminole War in Florida, former soldier Andrew P. Canova published a small book entitled *Life and Adventures in South Florida*. In the introduction, former Florida judge and congressman Robert W. Davis informs the reader that Canova's sketches were originally contributed to the *Southern Sun* newspaper of Palatka, Florida, as weekly articles, but, "the suggestion of their permanent preservation in some collected form was so often made him that he finally consented to give them to the public" in book form. Davis goes on to suggest that *Life and Adventures* "graphically deals with a phase of life in Florida which will nowhere else be found."⁵ This claim is not as much of an exaggeration as it may first appear. Besides government records and newspaper articles, no substantial writings were readily available to the general public concerning the Third Seminole War until Canova's book was published. This is one of the primary reasons why his work was so influential, and since no alternative interpretations existed, Canova's accounts were well-trusted by virtually every author who wrote after him. *Life and Adventures* was updated and re-published in 1906, which provides further evidence of the book's popularity. Despite its initial success, and its usefulness as a unique source on a little-known subject, Canova's book, and the highly questionable interpretations contained therein, has had a surprisingly long-lasting effect upon the historiography of the Third Seminole War.

⁵ Andrew P. Canova, *Life and Adventures in South Florida* (Tampa, FL: Tribune Printing Co., 1885), introduction, np.

In the opening paragraph of *Life and Adventures*, Canova contends that he provides his accounts “with all possible accuracy,” but he also warns the reader that his book “shall be a description of personal experiences and observations, rather than a history of the war itself.”⁶ He goes on to state that “In placing this series of sketches before the public, *of course I must say something* about the way the war started.” (My emphasis). It seems that Canova’s opening few pages, which contain the banana plant incident, were not originally a part of his newspaper articles, but rather were added later when he decided to publish his tales as a book. Canova’s interpretation of the opening of the Third Seminole War is included in his work because it provides a neat beginning to his narrative, not because he was actually involved in any way with the initial Seminole assault. Canova joined the war effort in January of 1856 as a member of the State militia volunteers, and was not a federal soldier. That fact does not necessarily preclude him from obtaining accurate second-hand information from the regular troops. But a careful reading of Canova’s work, as well as the available primary records, suggest that he was unlikely to have been fully knowledgeable regarding the specifics of the attack on Hartsuff’s company, or the full context of the situation in general.

Canova begins his account by describing the garden of Billy Bowlegs which contained “some magnificent banana plants, which were the delight and solace of the chief’s heart. He had reared them with parental care, until they were fifteen feet high, and he was jealous of his darlings.”⁷ That a Seminole chief maintained an impressive garden is not surprising, but the official military reports of reconnaissance state that this particular village had been abandoned before the previous wet season, and that all signs indicated that no Indians had been present there

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

for some time. Canova goes on to explain that “some of Hartsoff’s (sic) men (like a good many of us) couldn’t keep their hands off the beauties.” The following morning, “Bowlegs came through the early mist, bathing his stalwart ankles in the dew...coming to his beloved garden, he was surprised and shocked to find the banana plants, once so tall and graceful, with leaves torn to shreds, and some of the stalks broken short off at the ground by some ruthless hand.” To modern readers, it may seem obvious that Canova’s writing has more in common with dramatic literature than with objective works of history. Even still, the notion that soldiers may have helped themselves to some fruit is not an inherently problematic claim. But, the following segment of Canova’s work should have raised red flags amongst scholars as an obvious attempt to embellish the events surrounding the opening of the war, and to reduce the interpretation to a matter of personal confrontation.

Canova claims that Bowlegs visited the soldier’s camp and “accused the men of the outrage. They admitted it with the utmost coolness, but signified no intention of making good the loss, nor of giving any cause for their actions, other than they wanted to see how ‘Old Billy would cut up.’ When Billy saw that remonstrance and complaint were useless, he went back and summoned his braves together. ‘Hyeefus! Eestahotka holiwagus! Was the war cry.” So, for Canova, the onset of the war was a simple case of cause and effect: a personal insult was inflicted on Chief Bowlegs, causing him to seek retribution through violence. While this interpretation provides a clear narrative that is easy for most people to understand, the full range of factors and circumstances surrounding the Third Seminole War were so complex that a simplified explanation is not adequate. And, if the garden destruction story has some truth to it, it

is reasonable to assume that some U.S. soldiers may have actually believed that the incident was the primary cause of the Seminoles' decision to wage war.

Although Canova claims to utilize the “most authentic accounts” for his information regarding the Seminole attack, he makes several errors in detail which indicates that his sources were not written accounts, but rather oral. For one, Canova had the date wrong. The Seminole attack occurred on the morning of December 20, 1855, not December 24, as he states. And two, he spells Hartsuff's name wrong, as Hartsoff. These two minor errors suggest that Canova's knowledge of the events almost certainly came to him through word-of-mouth from other troops, and he was unlikely to have been aware of the full context of the situation. Supporting this notion is the fact that when his book was re-published in 1906, Canova included mention of “several instances” that occurred before and during the war which he was not even aware of when the “first edition was published.”⁸ The instances he refers to are fairly well-known events that were commonly found in print in the state's newspapers as well as in the books by Minnie Moore-Willson and Charles Coe, both of which were published several years prior to Canova's re-publication. It is interesting to note that someone who both fought in the war and wrote an “authentic” account of the conflict's opening attack was not even aware of some of the war's most significant battles and events.

Another passage of Canova's introduction deserves analysis. While describing the Seminole attack on the U.S. troops, Canova states that Hartsuff “ran into the water and began emptying his Colt's revolver at the Indians, who were soon dismayed by the strange weapon...It was the first revolver they had seen, and Bowlegs promised to cease firing if Hartsoff (sic) would

⁸ Ibid., 53.

come out and show his pistol.” While there is certainly an historical link between Samuel Colt’s firearms and the Seminole Wars in Florida, there are still several problems with Canova’s sequence of the events. For one, Colt’s revolving rifles and pistols were actually first introduced in Florida during the Second Seminole War, when General Thomas Jesup authorized the purchase of fifty of Colt’s rifles, and twenty-five pistols, in early 1838.⁹ The success of Colt’s repeating firearms was widely known to both soldiers and civilians throughout the United States, and Colt was producing between 1,500 and 2,000 pistols per week by the early 1850s.¹⁰ Furthermore, several of Colt’s rifles fell into the hands of Seminole warriors during the Second Seminole War, and since Bowlegs and others fought in both the Second and the Third Wars, it seems unlikely that the Indians would have been wholly ignorant of the newer technology.

There are a few elements of accuracy in Canova’s passage. Hartsuff did hide in a lily pond for cover, and the Indians did call for him to “come out, come out.” But, he did not run into the pond while continuing to fire upon the Indians. He actually fell into the water while trying to escape, having been wounded badly, and could barely keep his head above the water line. When the attack initially began, Hartsuff was in his tent and did return fire with his revolver, but after being wounded twice, he was unable to load his own gun, and had to rely on a private to load the musket of a fallen soldier for him, which he was only able to fire with one functional arm. After receiving a third wound, a bullet to the chest, Hartsuff decided to abandon the fight and made his escape. The lieutenant eventually found his way to a camp of soldiers three days later. After recovering from his wounds, on February 27 Hartsuff was ordered to command a select unit of

⁹ Wayne R. Austerman, “Privately Purchased During the Seminole War, Sam Colt’s Revolver Carbine Did Not Remain a Secret Weapon For Long,” *Military History* 14, no. 2 (June 1997): 1-2.

¹⁰ R. L. Wilson, *Colt: An American Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985), 66.

mounted men, who were given special equipment, including Colt's revolvers and lariats.¹¹ So, Canova was partially correct about Hartsuff utilizing a Colt's revolver, but his timing was off by a few months.

It is somewhat unfair to criticize Canova so harshly since he was not a professional historian, and was clearly writing with an intention to captivate readers with extraordinary tales of Indian fighting and wilderness adventures. He even includes a story about a fight supposedly witnessed by a fellow soldier between a bear and a panther, and another in which a soldier allegedly mounted an alligator, "which he rode to the shore, like a horse."¹² Anecdotes such as these should have been a warning to all of his readers as to the seriousness and accuracy of his book, but for whatever reason, subsequent authors have continued to rely on his interpretation of the opening Seminole assault of the Third Seminole War. *The Seminoles of Florida* (1896), by Minnie Moore-Wilson, and *Red Patriots* (1898), by Charles Coe, were two of the first books to include Canova's banana plant account, and helped to lay the foundation that would influence the first wave of the historiography in the early twentieth century. While there is no way of knowing how popular or well-read Canova's *Life and Adventures in South Florida* was in the late nineteenth century, it may be speculated that the book received a second publication run in 1906 due in part to the success of the works by Moore-Willson and Coe.

Minnie Moore-Willson and Charles Coe

In 1896, Minnie Moore-Willson published *The Seminoles of Florida*, and although the tone is often sentimental and subjective, it stands as one of the first efforts to provide a complete

¹¹ Seley, Jr. Jr., "Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants," 12-13.

¹² Canova, *Life and Adventures*, 99, 120.

history of the Florida Seminoles. Moore-Willson, along with her husband James Willson, were key members of the “Friends of the Florida Seminoles,” and their efforts proved instrumental in the passage of an act by the Florida Legislature which provided the Seminoles with a permanent reservation covering 100,000 acres in South Florida.¹³

Interestingly, Moore-Willson’s first edition did not include any mention of the Third Seminole War, but rather, only in a revised edition published in 1910 does Moore-Willson discuss Bowlegs and the opening of that conflict. “According to most authentic reports,” begins Moore-Willson, before going on to copy Canova’s account practically verbatim. Bowlegs’ “fine garden,” contained “some magnificent banana plants which were the delight of the old Indian’s heart.”¹⁴ She then describes the exact same scene of vandalism, confrontation, rebuttal, and the subsequent Seminole attack, changing few words from Canova’s writing. Where Canova writes, “Like a flash of electricity the news encircled and permeated the South, and Billy Bowlegs became the target of every pioneer’s rifle,” Moore-Willson echoes, “Like a flash of electricity the news encircled Florida, and Billy Bowlegs became the target of many old muskets.” Although Canova is not cited or mentioned directly anywhere in *The Seminoles of Florida*, it is clear from Moore-Willson’s almost complete reliance on *Life and Adventures in South Florida* that Canova’s work was her sole source for her segment on the Third Seminole War. The fact that Moore-Willson did not make an attempt to corroborate Canova’s work with available

¹³ Esperanza B. Varona, Biographical Note, Minnie Moore-Willson Papers, 1888-1949: University of Miami Special Collections, <http://proust.library.miami.edu/findingaids/?p=collections/findingaid&id=675&q=&rootcontentid=29824> (accessed January 17, 2015).

¹⁴ Minnie Moore-Willson, *The Seminoles of Florida* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1910), 39. 1896 edition: <https://archive.org/details/seminolesofflori00moor>, 1910 edition: <https://archive.org/details/seminolesflorid00willgoog> (both accessed November 22, 2014).

newspapers, government documents, or from her contacts among the Seminole people, is telling, and foreshadows a tendency amongst scholars to deem first-hand accounts written by ex-soldiers in this conflict to be mostly trustworthy.

Considering Moore-Willson's activism and work with the Seminole tribe, it is apparent that her book bears many similarities to, and was heavily influenced by, the work of Helen Hunt Jackson, and her groundbreaking book on the mistreatment of all American Indians, *A Century of Dishonor* (1881). Just as Jackson intended her work to influence changes in governmental policies towards Native tribes, Moore-Willson's book had a similar objective of shedding light on the Seminole cause and their need for improvement in living standards. Moore-Willson sometimes went to extremes to justify the past actions of the Florida Seminoles, such as her claim that, "Without doubt the Indian has always been the victim...and while the Indians themselves, in many cases practiced cruelty, it was always in retaliation for some grievous wrong of anterior date."¹⁵ While her assertion regarding Seminole retaliation for previous wrongs could be applied directly to the banana plant incident, it is more likely that, even if the garden vandalism story is true, it was part of a larger pattern of mistreatment and harassment of the Seminoles, and that grievous wrongs had been multiplying for years leading up to the outbreak of violence in December 1855.

Charles Coe was a newspaper editor born in Connecticut, who moved to Florida later in life and became interested in the Florida Seminoles and their struggle to obtain legally-titled land in the late nineteenth century. Coe's *Red Patriots: The Story of the Seminoles* (1898) was the only full-length book that he ever wrote, and the explicit purpose of the work was to paint the

¹⁵ Ibid., 1910 edition, 57-58.

Florida Seminoles in a positive light in order to bring attention to their attempt to acquire land. In the introduction to the reprinted edition of *Red Patriots* (1974), historian Charlton Tebeau suggests that because of Coe's "singleness of purpose" he "sometimes overstates the case for the Indians." Tebeau also notes however, that Coe "makes a considerable contribution to Florida history" thanks to his analysis of the Florida Seminoles in the years following the end of the Second Seminole War after the vast majority of the tribe was removed west to Indian Territory.¹⁶ Despite Coe's biases and intentions, *Red Patriots* is a very well-researched effort, due in large part to his ability to live in Washington D.C. during his investigation into the history of the Florida Seminoles. He was able to utilize government records and examine evidence in a manner that no author before him had attempted.

While Moore-Willson relied primarily on personal affiliations and locally-published works for her source material, Coe provided analysis of the documentary records. Coe included extensive broader context in his attempt to provide a full history, including consideration of events both in Florida and in Indian Territory, and the years of removal negotiations leading up to the war. Despite his attempt at a more complete approach, Coe still pointed to the alleged garden incident as the spark that led directly to hostilities, calling it, "the immediate cause of this last warfare with the Seminoles." Coe "submits the valued testimony of Andrew P. Canova, a native Floridian, who served in the campaign," and goes on to reprint most of Canova's introduction in its entirety. Coe then offers some insight of his own in support of Canova's work, stating that the Seminole attack on Hartsuff's team "had been clearly provoked by his men," and that even though "the Indians had retired to their homes immediately after taking revenge, war

¹⁶ Charles H. Coe, *Red Patriots: The Story of the Seminoles* (1898; repr., Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1974), xxi-xxxiii.

was at once proclaimed.” So, Coe took for granted that Hartsuff’s men maliciously destroyed Bowlegs’ garden and were well aware of likely retaliation, but he also implies that the Seminoles’ revenge was justified, that they sought no further war targets, and that the decision to wage war was determined solely by the United States following the initial Seminole attack. Regarding the subsequent bloodshed following the initial Seminole assault, Coe stated that, “In January and March, 1856, two encounters took place between the soldiers and Indians,” and that, “The last battle of the year occurred on April 7.”¹⁷ In reality, between January and July of 1856, the Seminoles committed at least ten different hit-and-run style assaults, mostly directed at isolated settlements and small detachments of troops, killing twenty-eight soldiers and civilians.¹⁸ Although the Seminoles held the offensive in the early stages of the war, Coe claims that they were “hunted like wild beasts.”¹⁹ There were a few more traditional style battles during this time as well, but instead of considering the affair mutual combat between bitter foes, Coe implies that the Indians were correct to exact revenge, and that the United States was wrong to pursue a war against them for that reason.

By stating that the U.S. government made the decision to proclaim war against the Florida Indians after Hartsuff’s company was ambushed, Coe implies that the Seminoles did not, and could not have, made that decision autonomously. This perspective fails to acknowledge that the Seminoles could have possessed the agency and competency required to undertake military operations against American forces. With several of the Florida Indians’ leaders having gained combat experience in the previous wars with the United States, including Bowlegs and Sam

¹⁷ Ibid., 211-213.

¹⁸ James W. Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War: 1855-1858 The Final Stand of The Seminoles Against The Whites* (Chuluota, FL: The Mickler House Publishers, 1982), 41-53.

¹⁹ Coe, *Red Patriots*, 215.

Jones, and given the tense situation in South Florida as the pressure to emigrate West mounted, it is evident that the war party of Seminoles who initiated the conflict was fully aware that their actions would lead to explicit open warfare. Regardless of the banana plant theory, the attacking Seminoles made a deliberate decision to begin a war with the U.S. army, knowing full well that most white Floridians had been waiting for such an excuse to forcibly expel the remnant of the tribe from the peninsula.

Social Context

The Third Seminole War ended when the western branch of the tribe was finally granted a new treaty separating them from the Creeks in Indian Territory, and Chief Bowlegs and his followers agreed to leave Florida in 1858. There still remained more than one hundred Seminoles living in Florida, but they kept their contact with whites to a bare minimum over the following two decades. By the 1880s, the Florida Seminoles reemerged in the public's consciousness and white Americans began to seek answers regarding their status and the events of the little-known third war. So in this sense, Canova helped fill a gap in the literature by providing a simple explanation for the war's outbreak. Canova's source material for his work came directly from his own memory of events, but historian David Thelen reminds us that memories are always constructed, never merely reproduced, and that people often construct memories in response to changing circumstances, usually to satisfy a present need or concern.²⁰ Considering the limited number of writings at that time that addressed the Third Seminole War, Canova was fulfilling a need since many white Americans had a newfound fascination with the Florida Seminoles and

²⁰ David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 1118-1121.

wanted to know more about their wars with the United States. Thelen also insists that, for modern historians, “the important question is not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time.”²¹ In order to answer this question, it is useful to consider the broader societal and cultural trends that influenced popular opinions of Native Americans in the late nineteenth century.

In the early and mid-nineteenth century, white attitudes towards American Indians were dominated by suspicion, distrust, and hatred, especially in the southeastern states and those frontier areas where interaction with Indians was a daily reality. But, by the end of the century, and particularly in those areas vacated by Indian populations, attitudes toward them began to shift to curiosity, sympathy, and of course, paternalism. Some Americans insisted that the Indian races were doomed to extinction, and the efforts of painters like George Catlin and Charles Bird King, along with former Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas McKenney to at least preserve images of important Native American leaders, attests to the once sincere belief that all North American Indians would one day vanish altogether. The concept of the “Vanishing American” both influenced and justified governmental policies, first with Removal and the Reservation system, and then with the Dawes Act of 1887 and individual land allotment. Policy makers hoped these efforts would assimilate natives into mainstream culture, and if not, perhaps extinction of Indians would actually become a reality.²²

Reformers and others sympathetic to the cause began to realize that the Indian problem was not simply going to disappear, either through assimilation or extinction, and many

²¹ Ibid., 1125.

²² See Dippie, *The Vanishing American*.

Americans demanded more practical solutions, as well as admissions of past failures. The United States' former dealings with the Indian tribes, including forced removal and innumerable broken treaties, came under more and more scrutiny and criticism. The American public also took notice when atrocities and outrages continued to be committed towards Native Americans throughout the late 1800s. Numerous outright massacres, including at Sand Creek, Fort Robinson, and Wounded Knee, the virtual genocide taking place in California, the murders of Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull, and the Ponca tribe's controversial legal battles, just to name a few, contributed to the new viewpoint that American Indians were largely helpless, and sometimes blameless, victims. Several national Indian organizations, including the Women's National Indian Association (WNIA), were formed for the purpose of aiding their cause, and of course, civilizing, Christianizing, and educating the Indians.²³

Works of non-fiction began to appear that condemned the government's past actions, such as Helen Hunt Jackson's *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), and former Commissioner of Indian Affairs George Manypenny's, *Our Indian Wards* (1880). Jackson, partly influenced by witnessing Ponca Chief Standing Bear's plea for assistance on an eastern U.S. speaking tour in 1879, hoped to expose the hypocrisy of the treaty system. To her, treaties were "convenient and obvious fictions," and could so easily be "abrogated since one of the parties had no legal status and thus no business entering into treaties in the first place." Jackson's book was highly critical of United States' Indian policies and had a massive impact on popular opinion, with some comparing it to what Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for the antislavery

²³ For analysis of Indian atrocities see William M. Osborn, *The Wild Frontier: Atrocities During the American-Indian War From Jamestown to Wounded Knee* (New York: Random House, 2000).

movement.²⁴ Likewise, Manypenny's *Our Indian Wards* condemned the atrocities committed against Native populations and insisted that the desire for Indian lands would only continue until significant reforms were enacted.

These reform movements and newer attitudes spread to the Florida Seminoles in the form of a friends' society ("Friends of the Florida Seminoles") dedicated to obtaining land for them, and two books that initiated the first wave of literature on the Florida Seminoles and greatly influenced the historiography thereafter. Both Moore-Willson's *The Seminoles of Florida* (1896) and Coe's *Red Patriots* (1898) were biased works of advocacy, but were highly regarded by the community of white Americans interested in Indian reform, and both had a positive impact on the Florida Seminoles' quest to obtain legally titled lands in the state. Historian Harry Kersey, Jr. notes that Moore-Willson's work in particular "was a poorly written, undocumented, maudlin creampuff, and almost totally unreliable for its ethno-historic content – yet perfectly attuned to the national sentiment for reform of federal Indian policies at the end of the nineteenth century."²⁵ So, despite the history of bitter warfare with the Seminoles, by the end of the century, a portion of Florida's white population was dedicated to assisting them and preventing further animosity.

Despite these developments that painted Native Americans in a more positive light than any time previous in the history of the United States, most representations of Indians persisted in portraying them as "savage," uncivilized, and still of an inferior social status. Even the most renowned historians of the nineteenth century, George Bancroft and Francis Parkman,

²⁴ Frederick W. Turner, III, "The Century after 'A Century of Dishonor: American Conscience and Consciousness,'" *Massachusetts Review* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1975): 724-725.

²⁵ Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "The Friends of the Florida Seminoles Society: 1899-1926," *Tequesta* 34 (1974): 13.

considered American history itself as “the epic struggle between civilization and savagery,” and were firm believers in the divine providence of “Manifest Destiny” and the intrinsic inferiority of certain races.²⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, a prolific writer of history himself, even dedicated his four-volume series *The Winning of the West* to Parkman, with the inscription, “To Francis Parkman, To Whom Americans Who Feel a Pride in the Pioneer History of Their Country Are So Indebted.”²⁷ The concept of an ever-advancing Westward frontier as being the quintessential way to define the American experience, crystallized of course by Frederick Jackson Turner in his famous address in 1893, incorporates the basic premise that Native peoples stood in the way of the coming progress and therefore would inevitably either have to assimilate or perish. Whether American Indians were viewed as “noble” or “ignoble,” the underlying assumption is that they all still shared the same “savage” traits, and were not fit to participate in civilized society.²⁸ In *A Final Promise*, Frederick Hoxie contends that the intensifying racial tensions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to the U.S. abandoning its goal of extending full citizenship to American Indians, noting the failure of the government’s “final promise” of complete assimilation.²⁹ The inherent contradiction was that while many white Americans had a

²⁶ Michael McConnell, Introduction to the Bison Book Edition of *The Conspiracy of Pontiac: And the Indian War After the Conquest of Canada to the Massacre at Michillimackinac*, by Francis Parkman, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press), viii. See also Peter Charles Hoffer, *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, and Fraud--American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 21-28.

²⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), np.

²⁸ See Berkhofer, *The White Man's Indian*. Also, Brian Dippie, “American Indians: The Image of the Indian.” *Nature Transformed*, TeacherServe. National Humanities Center
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntecoindian/essats/indimage.htm> (accessed April 23, 2014).

²⁹ Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 239-244.

desire to atone for past Indian abuses, Native peoples were still largely viewed as inferior due to the dominant racial ideology of the period.

Regarding the Florida Seminoles, while some white Floridians hoped to shed a positive light on the plight of their state's Indian population, many others persisted in considering them barbarous bloodthirsty murderers. Mikaela Adams, in her essay "Savage Foes, Noble Warriors, and Frail Remnants: Florida Seminoles in the White Imagination, 1865-1934," highlights that while public perception was slowly being altered, "writers of dime novels and Indian-fighter memoirs continued to draw upon ideas of Seminole savagery well into the 1930s to capture the attention of their audiences and to create a foil for imagined white bravery and racial 'superiority.'"³⁰ Since the three bloody Seminole Wars had captured the American public's imagination, the Seminoles were considered the true-to-life embodiment of the "Indian menace." As South Florida remained an unconquered frontier in the eyes of many whites, comparisons to the "Wild West" were easy to draw, and even the popular weekly publication *Buffalo Bill Stories* featured an issue that detailed the fictional exploits of savage Seminoles who commonly fed prisoners to alligators.³¹ The work of Andrew Canova fit seamlessly into this trend of writing. While his banana plant account may inspire some sympathy for the supposedly disrespected Seminole Chief, the many typical descriptions of savage Indian characteristics found throughout the book belie the ideology behind the writing. Canova attempted to show compassion for the Seminoles in his work, but his use of terms like "half-made," "dusky," and "rascals" illustrate his resentment and condescension.³²

³⁰ Mikaela M. Adams, "Savage Foes, Noble Warriors, and Frail Remnants: Florida Seminoles in the White Imagination, 1865-1934," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (Winter 2009): 406.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 411-412.

³² Canova, *Life and Adventures in South Florida*, 10, 14, 27.

Coe and Moore-Willson are also good examples of the contradictory attitudes towards American Indians around the turn of the twentieth century. While they lauded the integrity and honesty of the Florida Seminoles, both authors considered them somehow an exception to the rule of Indian savagery. Coe noted that the Seminoles displayed none of the “inhuman cruelty” that “characterized most of our Western tribes,”³³ while Moore-Willson maintained that “the caustic remark that the only good Indian is a dead Indian might apply to the savage Apache,” but not to the Seminoles.³⁴ Despite her high regard for the Seminoles, in typical contradictory fashion, Moore-Willson still considered them a “helpless” and “frightened people,” highlighting both the sympathy and condescension expressed by even those who considered themselves champions of Indian rights.³⁵

Moore-Willson and Coe both relied exclusively on the banana plant account to explain the cause of the Third Seminole War, with Coe praising the “valued testimony of Andrew P. Canova...who served in the campaign.”³⁶ Both of their books had a clear agenda of casting the Seminoles in a favorable light in order to bring attention to their situation and obtain legally-titled lands in the state for them. Providing a complete history of the Seminole people, including their wars with the U.S., was not the primary goal of either author, although both attempted to do so. Historian Peter Hoffer reminds us that writers during this era were fundamentally amateur historians, “not because they were inept or inattentive to their research or writing but because they did not earn a living teaching or writing history.”³⁷ This observation is certainly true of

³³ Coe, *Red Patriots*, 117.

³⁴ Willson, *The Seminole of Florida*, 79.

³⁵ Minnie Moore-Willson, “The Seminole Indians of Florida,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (July 1928): 76-77.

³⁶ Coe, *Red Patriots*, 211.

³⁷ Hoffer, *Past Imperfect*, 13.

Moore-Willson and Coe, as their books on the Seminoles were the only full-length published works of history either ever completed. But, considering the dearth of reliable literature regarding the Third Seminole War during the following decades, both books were accepted as accurate and reasonably objective historical scholarship by subsequent authors.

Conclusion

It was in this context that Canova's interpretation was so willingly accepted. His "valued testimony" was praised by two respected authors, and his account simultaneously fit into the newer perception of Indian victimization, while it also reinforced the traditional belief that Indians were sensitive to personal insult and prone to react with "savage" violence. The banana plant interpretation satisfied the two requirements to be considered accurate by late-nineteenth century white American standards regarding Indians. For one, the Seminoles were depicted as blameless victims who had war forced upon them by the actions of a few ruthless individual whites. And on the flipside, the Seminoles could still be viewed as savages due to both the trivial nature of the event that allegedly caused them to attack, and because their subsequent attacks were portrayed as barbarous frontier depredations, rather than as strategic military objectives.

Canova absolved the Seminoles from any wrongdoing though by explaining the attack as a matter of justified retaliation, placing blame on the actions of a few cruel soldiers who acted on their accord and essentially forced a war upon the Indians. The Seminole assault was presented as an instance of immediate revenge for a personal affront, a concept certainly familiar to white

American southerners, with their traditions of masculine honor and acceptable violence.³⁸ But, this interpretation denies that the Seminoles could have planned their campaign of warfare in advance for a much larger purpose. Rather than viewing the Seminole decision to attack as tactical and strategic, it is depicted as reactionary and short-sighted. By placing the entire blame for the war on the alleged actions of Hartsuff's men, Canova's account also conveniently removed any responsibility from the national government, Florida's settlers and politicians, including the state militia volunteers, and white society in general. It was an easily-digestible and guilt-free interpretation that was unconditionally accepted as fact by the first wave of authors to write on the Third Seminole War, since Canova was considered an eye-witness to the events.

The timing of the publications by Canova, Moore-Willson, and Coe is an important factor to consider when trying to determine the reasons for their lasting influence on the historiography. The shifting attitudes of white Americans and the new-found fascination with Indians, the reemergence of the Florida Seminoles into public view, and the lack of full-length literature on their more recent history, all played a part. And while none of the three authors provided what would be considered professional works of history by modern standards, with Coe's being the closest, they did offer a wealth of information that was new to most readers. The reasons why the subsequent generations of authors continued to rely so heavily on the banana plant account found in these three early books is the next subject under consideration for this thesis.

³⁸ See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Edward Baptist, *Creating an Old South*, Chapter 4, "Hot-Blooded Fellows and the Flush Times of Middle Florida" (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

CHAPTER 2: MODERN HISTORIANS AND THE BANANA PLANT STORY

This chapter traces the entire known historiography of the Third Seminole War in a mostly chronological fashion, and includes every written piece that discusses the Seminole assault on Hartsuff's unit. A common theme among many of the works is that they are not primarily focused on that opening attack of the conflict, but rather on peripheral or narrower topics. Another common occurrence is that many of the authors were not professionally trained historians. Virtually every source, especially early on, repeats Canova's account with little variation, but two pieces deserve special attention for their challenge to the standard interpretation: John Parrish's *Battling the Seminoles* (1930), and Ray B. Seley, Jr., Jr.'s "Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants" (1963). Parrish's book alleges that the Seminoles made a decision to attack federal troops at a tribal council meeting well prior to Hartsuff's foray, and Seley, Jr.'s study flatly refutes the validity of the banana plant tale, yet most subsequent authors ignored the work by these two amateur historians. Only in recent years have a handful of authors chosen to cast doubt on, or altogether ignore Canova's account, and their contributions are discussed together towards the end of this chapter.

After Moore-Willson and Coe endorsed and brought attention to Canova's account, the banana plant story became the standard accepted interpretation in written works that addressed the Third Seminole War. Since so little was known and so few sources existed that detailed the Third War and the lives of the Florida Seminoles thereafter, Coe and Moore-Willson's contributions were significant, and trusted by subsequent authors. The Second Seminole War was a much more common and popular literary topic, as evidenced by the proliferation of

sensational accounts found in periodicals.¹ In addition, the historiography of the war had begun much earlier with the publication of John T. Sprague's *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusions of the Florida war*, and Joshua R. Giddings' *The Exiles of Florida*, both in 1848. But, whenever the Third War was discussed in these works, it was invariably Canova's account that was used to explain the outbreak of hostilities in 1855.

The First Wave of Literature: 1925-1959

In 1858, *Harper's Weekly* published a story that detailed a trip to New Orleans taken by Seminole Chief Billy Bowlegs and other Florida Seminoles during one of the government's removal negotiation attempts. In 1925, forestry and agricultural specialist John Gifford reprinted and published the *Harper's* piece into book form, with comments "freely added" by the author. *Billy Bowlegs and the Seminole War* (1925) includes the original Harper's story in its entirety, as well as explanatory interjections by Gifford, such as the inclusion of Canova's banana plant interpretation of the opening of the conflict. In Gifford's version, the Seminole War of 1855 "was really due to a surveyor in the Big Cypress who stole Billy Bowlegs' bananas and ruthlessly trampled on the plants out of sheer bravado and meanness. They refused to make good the loss and shots followed."²

By initiating the Third Seminole War, Gifford contends that the Seminoles were "more or less in the right,"³ but he nevertheless concludes that the inherent racial qualities of Indians were to blame for the Seminoles' history of conflict. Confirming the conclusion reached by Hoxie that

¹ See Adams, "Savage Foes."

² John C. Gifford, *Billy Bowlegs and the Seminole War* (Coconut Grove, FL: Triangle Co., 1925), 50.

³ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

racial attributes contributed heavily to the perceptions of Native Americans in the early twentieth century, Gifford regularly used racial criteria to classify and explain different groups of people. Gifford noted that “The Indian mind, like the mind of the Oriental, is hard to fathom,” and suggested that the settlement and development of South Florida was ultimately beyond the understanding of the Seminole people, that the coming of industry was something “which the Indian fails to comprehend.”⁴ Although he called the Seminoles “lowly” and “considered dirty by some,” they were “never-the-less far superior to the cunning thieving gypsy.” Reiterating a claim made by the *Harper’s* author, Gifford asserts that the Black allies of the Seminoles exerted considerable influence over their Indian masters, since “The negro is more aggressive and adaptable. He is happier even in bondage.”⁵ Hoxie contends that “In the early twentieth century American leaders argued that each group should play its proper role and work with others to preserve the social order. Blacks should take on manual tasks and keep to themselves in the rural South. Eastern Europeans should be small merchants and tradesmen. Native-born whites should be professionals and political leaders.”⁶ Gifford extended this concept even within the realm of manual labor, himself witnessing that “The Hindoos excelled at hoeing, the Indians at picking berries and the negroes at cutting the bush.” According to Gifford, to escape the practice of racial categorization, all that Native peoples had to do was embrace capitalism, since “Color prejudice fades away in the presence of ability and especially wealth,” noting that “The Navajo is about the only tribe that is self-supportive and increasing in population, mainly due to the blanket business.”⁷ So, Gifford continued the trend of examining the Seminole people in terms of their

⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁵ Ibid., 20-27.

⁶ Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, 242.

⁷ Gifford, *Billy Bowlegs*, 20-27, 49.

racial traits and perceived deficiencies in comparison to white society and white values. And while his writing is certainly more racially charged than most other authors, his work still highlights the immense influence that the dominant ideology of the era had on written histories of Native Americans.

Gifford's book contains other examples which make it consistent with the dominant view points towards Native Americans in the early twentieth century. The triumph of civilization over savagery and the fatalism embodied in the concept of the "Vanishing Indian" are both evident in his writing. He also attempted to rationalize the history and fate of Native Americans while absolving white society of any wrongdoing. Gifford noted the high death rate and virtual extinction of certain tribes, but claimed that "This was happening long before the white man appeared on the scene," and besides, "The meaning of sovereignty is not very clear to primitive peoples, especially to the Indian." Echoing Parkman and Bancroft, Gifford compared the Seminoles to the natural landscape of Florida, both of which stood in the way of civilization, such as the endangered royal palm, destined to pass "on like the Seminole into the realm of the past...All these and lots of other things that formed the Florida of yesterday must no doubt in time fall before the juggernaut of modern progress." Gifford goes on to note how little the Seminole people liked to work, how much they liked to drink liquor, and how "remarkable" it was that Chief Bowlegs could sign his name.⁸ Here is the same paradox displayed by Moore-Willson and Coe of supposed sympathy, combined with over-simplified condescension and racial evaluations in discussions of the Seminoles' history and culture.

⁸ Ibid., 24-41.

John Parrish, John Akin, and the Tribal Council

Battling the Seminoles (1930) by John Parrish is a relatively similar book to Canova's *Life and Adventures in South Florida*, with a sympathetic tone reminiscent also of the works by Coe and Moore-Willson. Parrish relates a series of individual stories as they were told to him over the course of many years by an old acquaintance named John Akin, who acted as an Army scout during the Third Seminole War. So like Canova's book, *Battling the Seminoles* is not a full history of the war or Seminole culture, but contains personal vignettes of Indian fighting adventures, and was not recorded in print until many years later. Parrish did not relate any information from Akin regarding the opening attack of the war or the alleged banana plant episode. An account that is provided in the book offers details of an event not found in print anywhere else, but was supposedly common knowledge to Akin and other Florida settlers in the late nineteenth century. Akin told Parrish of a Seminole tribal council meeting that was held in the fall of 1855 "on the east side of Taylor's Creek north-east of Lake Okeechobee," and was attended by all of the different branches of the tribe. At this council meeting, the decision was made to attack the army surveying parties when an opportunity presented itself. A young war chief named Tiger was the most adamant, while Chipco was the lone chief who opposed the use of violence, according to Akin. This account represents the first interpretation since Canova's which offered an alternative explanation for the Seminoles' motivation behind the attack on Hartsuff's team. Although Akin pointed to the tension between the Indians and settlers over the issue of cattle as being the primary cause behind the Seminoles' decision to wage war, he simply may not have been aware of the multitude of other factors at play.⁹

⁹ Parrish, *Battling the Seminoles*, 215-218.

Considering Parrish's work a piece of reliable history is at least as questionable as taking Canova's book at face value. But the notion of a council decision made prior to the commencement of open hostilities provides a logical explanation, especially since the occurrence of tribal meetings held to discuss important matters was common knowledge to most everyone in North America in the nineteenth century. In fact, Canova twice in his book makes off-hand remarks about his fellow volunteer soldiers "calling a council of war" before making certain decisions about their course of action.¹⁰ In addition, the discovery by Hartsuff's unit that all of the Indian villages in the area of the Big Cypress Swamp had been relocated prior to the winter dry season of 1855-1856 suggests that they were likely all aware of the coming bloodshed. Although the work by Parrish contains clearly exaggerated passages, sensationalized accounts, and factual errors, those same factors have not prevented Canova's work from being trusted by most historians. And while both books are problematic as dependable sources of history, Parrish's council decision account seems much more probable than Canova's, though few subsequent historians have taken *Battling the Seminoles* into account in their research on the topic.

The next three books to be published that included analysis of the opening of the Third Seminole War were all local histories focused on various portions of the extreme southern tip of Florida, but they were quite different from one another. Manatee County, Florida, which sits just south of Tampa Bay and north of Charlotte Harbor, was the topic of choice for Lillie McDuffee in *The Lures of the Manatee: A True Story of South Florida's Glamourous Past*, published in 1933. McDuffee's work lacks citations and is written in the style of personal reminiscences as

¹⁰ Canova, *Life and Adventures*, 41, 91.

told to her by members of Manatee County's community. She writes of "memorable visits" made by Chief Bowlegs to families in the area that have "been preserved through these nearly three generations."¹¹ When addressing the outbreak of violence in 1855, McDuffee paraphrases Canova's account and even increases the amount of descriptive language when referring to Bowlegs' banana garden, calling it, "treasured," "prolific," "magnificent," and "handsome," "with abundant delicious fruit – that would provide a treat for all the little Seminoles of Big Cypress."¹²

Although sympathetic to the Seminoles' history of conflict, McDuffee still defined their condition in terms that white American capitalists of the early twentieth century could understand when she stated that Bowlegs' "garden represented the best of the Indians' meager possessions." And she did not hesitate to employ the typical Indian war imagery common in the dime novels of the era, claiming that with Bowlegs' "burning hatred," "he made ready for his revenge. The pot of paint was once more brought out – a frenzied dance perhaps – and a chorus of war whoops and the march was on." Inverting the traditional hero/villain dichotomy, with McDuffee's account, the Indian Chief is the hero, since, "Billy Bowlegs was very human and had a keen perception of justice and injustice." But, the villain(s) was certainly not the early settlers of Manatee County, whose history McDuffee was *glamourizing*, but rather the unnamed federal troops, who "seemingly regarded the Indian as being devoid of feeling or pride," and deserved the convenient brunt of the blame for inciting the wrath of the Seminoles.¹³

¹¹ Lillie Brown McDuffee, *The Lures of Manatee: A True Story of South Florida's Glamourous Past* (Nashville, TN: Marshall & Bruce Co., 1933), 88.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³ *Ibid.* McDuffee also incorrectly states that "In the early morning hours of Christmas Eve," the Seminoles "reached the fort and made their memorable attack." But the attack occurred on December 20 in the Big Cypress swamp, and did not occur at any fort.

Journalist, environmentalist, and free-lance writer Marjory Stoneman Douglas penned an influential work with her 1947 book *The Everglades: River of Grass*. Douglas dedicated much of her long life to preserving and protecting the Everglades from various drainage attempts, and *The Everglades* is clearly an attempt to draw attention to the region's importance and rich history. Douglas' work is fairly well-researched, though lacking direct citations, and her prose has a professional tone, and does not contain any of the typical "savage" Indian imagery. She covers the interwar years quite extensively (1843-1854) before relying on the banana plant account to explain the opening of the war. Douglas erroneously claimed that Canova was among Hartsuff's ambushed unit, and does not offer much of her own assessment except to note that it was a "trivial depredation" that caused Bowlegs to strike.¹⁴

In contrast to the informal writing style and locally-published works of McDuffee and Douglas, *Lake Okeechobee: Wellspring of the Everglades* (1948) by Alfred J. and Kathryn A. Hanna represents more deeply researched scholarship. The prolific husband and wife historical writing team provide much broad context to the history of the Lake Okeechobee region, especially regarding national politics and economics. A major focus of this work is on the various drainage and reclamation efforts involving Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades swamp, but the authors also address national expansion, the politics of slavery, and the impact that the Armed Occupation Act of 1845 and the Swamp Land Act of 1850 had on the settlement of the state by white Americans. The Hannas also detailed the years leading up to the Third Seminole War in a more clear and complete way than any authors had done up to that point in time. The years of removal negotiations, surveying schemes, trade restriction tactics, the accumulation of

¹⁴ Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades: River of Grass* (New York: Rinehart, 1947), 264.

troops in South Florida, and the problems between the Seminoles and Creeks in Indian Territory are all analyzed by the authors. But, rather than build a case that some combination of these factors led to the fighting, they relied completely on the banana destruction account, calling it “one of those needless acts of vandalism that never should have occurred.”¹⁵ It is interesting to note that twenty-two out of the twenty-three sources listed by the authors at the end of the chapter are found in governmental archives, with the lone exception being Canova’s *Life and Adventures in South Florida*.

In 1949, newspaper and magazine editor Karl Grismer published *The Story of Fort Myers: The History of the Land of the Caloosahatchee and Southwest Florida*. Grismer wrote several other city histories during his career, including books on Sarasota and St. Petersburg, Florida, and Kent, Ohio. *The Story of Fort Myers* is written from the perspective of the early white settlers in the area and relays the bitterness directed towards the federal government and its seemingly ineffectual policies with regards to removing the perceived Seminole menace. Grismer’s book is an unsympathetic take and is peppered with unabashed bigotry, evidenced by his statement that, “Unquestionably the Indians had countless faults and many vices. They were not particularly loveable characters.”¹⁶ The author’s own biases actually parallel the racism of the 1850s that he was writing about, and in the process, he may have unintentionally provided a quite accurate representation of the sentiments that early white Florida settlers had towards Native Americans. Grismer addresses the years and factors preceding the war in a similar

¹⁵ Alfred Jackson Hanna and Kathryn Abbey Hanna, *Lake Okeechobee, Wellspring of the Everglades* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1948), 63.

¹⁶ Karl H. Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers: The History of the Land of the Caloosahatchee and Southwest Florida* (St. Petersburg, FL: St. Petersburg Print Co., 1949), 59.

manner to the Hannas, but he is more adamant that the government intentionally desired the Seminoles to “be goaded into warfare” by its harassing tactics.

Regarding Grismer’s analysis of the third war and the destruction of Bowlegs’ bananas, the writer went to somewhat extreme lengths in order to embellish Canova’s account, perhaps influenced by his background in journalism. “‘Let’s tear the hell out of it and see what Billy does,’ yelled one of the men,” claimed Grismer. In addition to bananas, Grismer asserts that the soldiers “smashed the pumpkins growing nearby and uprooted the potatoes,” and when the Seminole Chief demanded compensation, the troops “tripped Billy and sent him sprawling. When he arose, his face was covered with dirt.”¹⁷ None of this is mentioned in Canova’s book, or in any source for that matter, with the exception of Bowlegs allegedly confronting Hartsuff and demanding some form of compensation from the soldiers. The claim that Hartsuff’s men physically accosted the chief is not found in writing anywhere else, not even in Canova’s account. Perhaps Grismer’s preference for sensationalism over objective accuracy was simply an attempt to sell books since it has been noted by his biographer that the Great Depression struck Grismer rather hard, and forced him to pursue several different career paths in his lifetime.¹⁸ Despite relying on the banana plant account and trusting its accuracy unequivocally, just like every other author before him, Grismer did make a more unique and significant claim when he wrote that, “There is no doubt but that the Indians would have gone on the warpath again even if the wanton destruction of Billy’s banana patch had not occurred.”¹⁹ Here is the logical leap of

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸ Scott Taylor Hartzell, *Remembering St. Petersburg, Florida: Sunshine City Stories* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2006), 46.

¹⁹ Grismer, *The Story of Fort Myers*, 60.

speculation that most authors have been unwilling to make, which would effectively make the accuracy of Canova's account a moot point.

In addition to the reliance on Canova's work to explain the outbreak of the Third Seminole War, most of the works analyzed so far also have in common the fact that they were not focused exclusively on the war itself, but rather on topics which were peripheral to the conflict. As highlighted by Mikaela Adam's essay, many works of fiction and nonfiction in the early twentieth century addressed the Seminoles in general, and most often the Second Seminole War, but only the few works analyzed here contain any discussion of the Third War. The goal of Coe and Moore-Willson was to inspire sympathy in order to obtain land for the Florida Seminoles. Gifford's book was mostly a reprint of the *Harper's Weekly* article detailing Bowlegs' trip to New Orleans, peppered with his scientific racist observations. McDuffee, Douglas, the Hannas, and Grismer provided local histories of slightly different regions of South Florida, and as such, the Seminole Wars were not their primary focus. This trend would only continue with author after author simply plugging Canova's account into whatever specific historical topic they happen to be emphasizing.

The following three works actually do have the Seminole people as their primary topic, but all three are more concerned with the tribe's contemporary cultural makeup than with their history of warfare with the United States. Herpetologist Wilfred T. Neill's *The Story of Florida's Seminole Indians* (1956) offers a very brief and simplified history of the third war, which the author interestingly refers to as "The Third Seminole Uprising." He attempted to stimulate sympathy with his audience when he related the banana plant story by stating that, "We may imagine the emotions that filled the breasts of the chieftain and his people. They had been hunted

from place to place, declared outlaws...and now, this further indignity was thrust upon them.”²⁰ Neill does not address any broader context for the events that led to the war, and his readers are left to assume that the “Third Seminole Uprising” was fought for the sole purpose of avenging the indignity of the vandalism to Bowlegs’ garden.

Archaeologist and historian Irvin Peithmann contributed *The Unconquered Seminole Indians: Pictorial History of the Seminole Indians* to the historiography in 1957. Despite a mostly positive endorsement from a young reviewer named James Covington, who would later distinguish himself as among the most prominent historians of the Florida Seminoles, Peithmann’s work displayed the typical shortcomings of writings on the Third Seminole War. Peithmann provided short vignettes of episodes during both the Second and Third Seminole Wars, but did so out of chronological order, which makes the progression of events difficult for readers to trace. One of his sections contains the banana plant story, which he paraphrases slightly from Canova’s version, as most authors before him had done. Peithmann authored several works on the history of American Indians during his career, but Covington characterizes Peithmann’s use of the term “half-breed” as “unwise,” and notes that the term had not been used by modern writers for some time.²¹ Equally unsettling is a statement such as the following, referring to the reasons why white Americans wanted the Seminoles removed from Florida: “It was beyond their understanding that the government wanted them to leave and give new lands elsewhere on which to live.” So, even without employing terms such as “savage” or “ignoble,”

²⁰ Wilfred T. Neill, *The Story of Florida's Seminole Indians* (St. Petersburg, FL: Great Outdoors, 1964), 23.

²¹ James W. Covington, review of *The Unconquered Seminole Indians*, by Irvin M. Peithmann, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (October 1957): 171.

Peithmann still portrayed Native Americans as inherently intellectually inferior, and even explicitly stated that the Seminoles “seemed to want no part of white man’s civilization.”²²

The third of these similar offerings is Wyatt Blassingame’s *Seminoles of Florida* (1959), which also focuses on the tribe’s cultural features but still contains discussion of the three wars. Blassingame was an eclectic and prolific writer who authored many short stories, essays, juvenile books, novels, and works of history, including biographies on Osceola and Ponce de Leon, in addition to his book on the Florida Seminoles. Regarding his treatment of the Third Seminole War, Blassingame ignored all events and factors that preceded the conflict, and moved directly from the close of the Second Seminole War to the familiar banana plant story. The books by Neill, Peithmann, and Blassingame illustrate that even by the 1950s many Americans were still being introduced to the existence of the Florida Seminoles, and the popular fascination with their cultural makeup and tribal customs may have prevented authors such as these from fully analyzing the documentary evidence regarding their history of warfare.

Additional Highly Questionable Versions of the Banana Plant Story

The following three works contain highly questionable versions of the banana plant account, and while they have been largely dismissed and ignored by most scholars, they deserve analysis here, if for no other reason than to highlight the uncertainty surrounding the time period and events in question. Works such as these are difficult to evaluate, but all three highlight the problems associated with relying on word-of-mouth stories passed down through generations.

²² Irvin M. Peithmann, *The Unconquered Seminole Indians: Pictorial History of the Seminole Indians* (St. Petersburg, FL: Great Outdoors Association, 1957), 44.

In 1957, the “duly elected Chief and Historian” of the tiny Florida Choctaw band (less than one hundred members), Horace G. Ridaught, published *Hell’s Branch Office*, for the purpose of correcting “the scanty and often inaccurate references made to this little band of Choctaw Indians in our history books.”²³ Ridaught claims to have received most of his information from his grandmother, who lived through both the Second and Third Seminole Wars, and saw her husband and other family members fight alongside the United States against the Seminoles.

According to Ridaught’s grandfather, the opening of the Third Seminole War occurred under entirely different circumstances than any other account has made known. Supposedly, Hartsuff had prearranged a meeting with Billy Bowlegs under the pretense of offering the chief a “reward for good behavior.” On their way to the rendezvous at Bowlegs’ (abandoned) village, Hartsuff and his men burned down the U.S. forts in the area for the purpose of framing the Seminoles. And when the Indians made their appearance, “The little company of men opened fire, without warning, catching the unsuspecting Indians by surprise... The only Indian shots fired was [sic] directed at the leader of this shameful ruse, Lieutenant Hartsoff (sic).”²⁴ Ridaught claims that his grandfather was a “disinterested eye witness” to the events, but was “deemed unworthy to testify in any matter, according to the law of land.”²⁵ While the Ridaught family’s account clearly contains many problems and unanswered questions, the author is correct to point out that no known written sources have survived from that era other than those authored by white Americans. Unfortunately, *Hell’s Branch Office* is so plagued by factual, spelling, and

²³ Horace G. Ridaught, *Hell’s Branch Office* (Citra, FL.: Privately printed, 1957), introduction. Ridaught claims that the Florida Choctaw band consisted of eighty-nine members in 1955, but they are not federally recognized, nor does any written evidence exist that confirms their continued residence in the state besides his book.

²⁴ Ridaught, *Hell’s Branch Office*, 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

grammatical errors, combined with the author's lack of research and obvious liberties taken, that most of the arguments in the book are wholly unconvincing in any way, and subsequent authors have probably been wise to disregard Ridaught's accounts.

D.B. McKay was a highly influential civic leader in Tampa during the early decades of the twentieth century. McKay served two terms as Tampa's mayor, like his uncle and grandfather before him, owned and published the *Tampa Times* newspaper, acted as Director of the First National Bank, and was one of the founders of the University of Tampa.²⁶ For twelve years the *Tampa Times* featured a column titled "Pioneer Florida," which contained historical vignettes and personal anecdotes on a range of Florida topics, authored by many different writers. McKay compiled the articles into book form and published *Pioneer Florida* in 1959, complete with his own editorial comments. In a section that contains several stories related to the Third Seminole War, McKay reprinted a letter written by a Miss E. Panchita Kendrick "about 1856." Prefacing this letter, McKay notes that "There are many – and wildly divergent – stories of the origin – the provocation – of the last war with the Seminole Indians in Florida. The official report is to the effect that it was caused by the unprovoked attack by followers of Chief Billy Bowlegs on a scouting party of regular army troops... Another, which was widely current among the pioneers, was that a party of army engineers on a spree invaded the plantation of old Bowlegs and maliciously destroyed many fine fruit trees."²⁷ It is initially unclear what other interpretations McKay is referring to when he states that there are "many" origin stories, since he admits that the official records indicate the attack was unprovoked, and virtually every other

²⁶ Biographical note in the Donald Brenham "D.B." McKay Collection, University of South Florida Libraries, <http://digital.lib.usf.edu/SFS0036137/00001> (accessed November 10, 2014).

²⁷ Donald Brenham McKay, *Pioneer Florida* (Tampa, FL: Southern Pub. Co, 1959), 561.

source written since then refers to the banana plant account as the direct cause. But the letter from Miss Kendrick contains a version of events not found in print anywhere else.

Miss Panchita Kendrick was the daughter of W.H. Kendrick and a cousin of John T. Lesley, both of whom fought in Florida's volunteer militia during the Third Seminole War. Miss Kendrick's letter is a good example of a source that was likely assembled using a combination of written reports and word-of-mouth information. She begins by describing Bowlegs' village and garden but makes no mention of banana plants or any damage done to them by the U.S. troops, which is not surprising considering she was writing during the war, and three decades before Canova's version of the events came to light. But Kendrick's account is arguably even more shocking and questionable than Canova's. She claims that "Lieutenant Hartsuff with 10 men left Fort Myers with the intention to visit Billy Bowlegs' garden, and if the chief was there share his hospitality for the night and return the next day. Billy being absent," the team started back to Fort Myers, set up camp for the night, and then "some 25 or 30 of the Billy Bowlegs Indians made their appearance. They were apparently delighted to see Lieutenant Hartsuff and showed him every mark of kindness and respect." Before proceeding any further, several problems with her account are already notable. For one, we know that Hartsuff had orders to survey the entire area over the course of several weeks and make reports regarding the whereabouts of the Seminoles, not to visit only Bowlegs' village in order to "share his hospitality." In addition, it seems quite unlikely that the Seminoles would have been kind and respectful to the troops considering that the Indians had burned down the newly constructed forts in the vicinity and relocated their towns to more remote areas of the Big Cypress Swamp.

Kendrick goes on to assert that Hartsuff “had a demijohn of whiskey, with which he anticipated making them so communicative that he could ascertain what course they intended to pursue in relation to a proposition made them by the United States government to move to Arkansas. The Indians imbibed pretty freely, dancing and carousing until nearly daylight. Then Lieutenant Hartsuff, believing that he discovered some signs of hostility,” destroyed the remainder of the whiskey. “But this made matters worse, and so exasperated them that they commenced an indiscriminate firing upon the camp.”²⁸ Despite this assertion, according to government records, Hartsuff was not authorized to negotiate with the Seminoles, but was ordered to explore the area, and that Indian Agent “Casey will take care of Indian affairs.”²⁹ Kendrick’s explanation of a drunken negotiation attempt gone wrong is an obvious embellishment, and was likely augmented by the rumors and gossip contributed by her Indian-fighting kin. It is interesting that her account of the event did not gain the traction that Canova’s did, presumably due to the lack of publication, or else this thesis might be refuting a slightly different version of the same episode.

Albert DeVane was an amateur historian and a life-long friend to many of the Florida Seminoles from the time of his introduction to Billy Bowlegs III in 1917, until his death in 1969. The writings of DeVane are particularly difficult to analyze because he never actually produced a single published work. Instead, after his death, the Sebring Historical Society collected and compiled his writings and notes into book form and titled it *DeVane’s Early Florida History*

²⁸ Ibid., 561-562.

²⁹ Colonel Harvey Brown to Lieutenant George Hartsuff, December 5, 1855, *Letters Sent, Registers of Letters Received, and Letters Received by Headquarters, Troops in Florida, and Headquarters, Department of Florida, 1850-1858*. State Archives of Florida. Originals held by National Archives, Washington, D.C., Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Record Group 393. Microfilm. Hereafter cited as *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

(1978). The book's introduction notes its many faults: repetitive topics, manuscripts with missing pages, letters with no replies, and a large portion of the book is simply a collection of other authors' writings merely transcribed and reprinted. The reproduction of primary source materials serves as a useful tool for researchers, but otherwise the book lacks any semblance of consistent themes or interpretations. Included in it are fragments of military correspondences, portions of works by Alexander Webb, Francis Boggess, and John Parrish, and sections of other historians' writings, such as James Covington, D.B. McKay, and Ray Seley, Jr., all of whom DeVane was in communication with.³⁰ Historians would seek out DeVane for his personal knowledge of the Florida Seminoles' family lineage and their history and culture since the early twentieth century. Also included in the book are writings by Park DeVane, Albert's brother, as well as journalist Wesley Stout.

The DeVane brothers were actually in contact with Ray Seley, Jr. in the early 1960s while he was writing his article that refuted Canova's account, "Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants." Park DeVane accompanied Seley, Jr. as the two searched for the actual location of the Seminole attack on Hartsuff's unit. Seley, Jr. used this archaeological assessment of the area to support his claim that the Seminole war party was likely not even aware of what may have occurred at Bowlegs' garden. Nevertheless, Park DeVane wrote an article which is mostly a reprint of Seley, Jr.'s work, in which the author declared that he was still "of the opinion that the banana plants were destroyed and the incident did cause the Indians to retaliate." Park DeVane goes on to assert that even the modern Seminoles knew "The true story of this attack," and concludes that "It is likely that Hartsuff accomplished exactly what they wanted by drawing a

³⁰ The Works of Webb, Boggess, Parrish, Covington, McKay, and Seley, Jr. are all discussed elsewhere in this thesis.

fight from the Indians.”³¹ Park DeVane’s insistence on the accuracy of the banana plant theory might be one of the best pieces of supporting evidence available in favor of Canova’s account due to the DeVane brothers’ personal relationship with modern Seminoles. But the fact that Florida Seminoles were aware of the banana plant story by the 1950s or 1960s is not strong enough evidence on its own to confirm the account.

The Literature: 1960-Present

In 1962, Fred Wallace published an article that focused on an important peripheral element of the Third Seminole War with “The Story of Captain John C. Casey.” Wallace was an amateur historian, and the life story of Casey was his “pet project.”³² Casey played an integral role in the removal of the Florida Seminoles in the 1850s, and his strong personal friendship with Chief Bowlegs is a central feature of Wallace’s essay. Despite Wallace’s sparse use of citations, it is clear that he utilized Canova’s account when he wrote of “wanton vandalism” done to Bowlegs’ “home,” and its role in sparking the war. Wallace downplays the fighting entirely though when he asserts that “No engagements of importance took place.”³³ Wallace is yet another author whose scope of topic prevented him from fully analyzing the attack on Hartsuff’s crew, but who still insisted on including the garden vandalism interpretation to explain the cause of the war.

³¹ Park DeVane, *DeVane's Early Florida History* (Sebring, FL: Sebring Historical Society, 1979), np.

³² Back Matter: *Florida Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (October 1962).

³³ Fred W. Wallace, “The Story of Captain John C. Casey,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (October 1962), 140.

After years of authors employing the banana plant story in their writings while focusing primarily on various other aspects of Seminole history, an amateur historian named Ray B. Seley, Jr. came along and made the banana plant story the sole focus of his research. “Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants” (1963) was published in *Tequesta* and Seley, Jr.’s impetus for writing this piece was explicitly to discover the accuracy of Canova’s tale. Seley, Jr. utilized the military records concerning troop movements in Florida almost exclusively, and offered a detailed analysis of the surviving soldiers’ official eyewitness reports. His investigation concludes that regardless of the truth behind the American soldiers’ theft and/or destruction of Bowlegs’ bananas, the attacking Seminoles would not have been aware of their actions due to their likely route to the scene of ambush. He concluded that the Seminoles had already decided upon an assault on the patrolling U.S. soldiers prior to their visit to Bowlegs’ abandoned village. Although Seley, Jr. flatly refutes the banana plant story as the cause of the war, the majority of subsequent authors have not taken a cue from his study, and many continue to ignore the need to reevaluate the source materials and prevailing interpretations regarding the Third Seminole War. Some authors have even used Seley, Jr.’s essay to further promote the banana theory, with a few even citing “Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants” as their primary source. Rather than instigating a new trend of fuller interpretations, Seley, Jr. seems to have unwittingly reinforced and continued the trend of relying on Canova’s account. Reminiscent of Lillie McDuffee’s informal writing style, and similar in scope to the Hanna’s *Lake Okeechobee*, is Lawrence Will’s *Cracker History of Okeechobee; “Custard Apple, Moonvine, Catfish and Moonshine”* (1964). Will covers a range of loosely-related topics, and includes his discussion of the opening of the Third Seminole War in a chapter titled “Sam Colt’s Famous Six Guns,” which notes the soldiers’

initial usage of the famous firearms during the Second Seminole War. Will included in his work the banana plant account as the direct cause of the Third Seminole War and quoted Canova more closely than most authors had done before him.³⁴

Historian Kenneth W. Porter, best known for his book *The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* (1996), penned a biographical essay on Bowlegs in 1967. In “Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco) in the Seminole Wars,” Porter traces the chief’s life from his first appearance in the written record during the Second Seminole War until his death in Indian Territory. His article contains extensive citations of a wide range of sources, but Porter does not provide any references for his paragraph that discusses the banana plant destruction and the attack on Hartsuff’s unit. Although he did not mention Canova by name, he did attribute the account to “a member of the party” that was ambushed, which of course is not accurate. Porter considered the actions of the Florida Seminoles as only postponing the inevitability of removal, and he speculated that Bowlegs “was determined to die fighting, or at any rate not to leave his home without a last fight,” before admitting that his reasons are not fully known.³⁵ In a similar manner as the assessment of Fred Wallace, Porter contends that the Third Seminole War “was almost entirely lacking in the drama of the Second or even the First.”³⁶

Florida historian George C. Bittle contributed to the historiography a brief article titled “Florida Frontier Incidents during the 1850s” (1970), which details some of the exploits of Florida’s militia companies before and during the war. When referring to the opening attack of

³⁴ Lawrence E. Will, *Lawrence Will's Cracker History of Okeechobee: "Custard Apple, Moonvine, Catfish and Moonshine"* (St. Petersburg, FL: Great Outdoors, 1964), 60-61.

³⁵ Kenneth W. Porter, “Billy Bowlegs (Holata Micco) in the Seminole Wars,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (January 1967): 237.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

the war, Bittle cites Canova's work as "the official account of this episode."³⁷ Interestingly, Bittle utilized Canova's *Life and Adventures* primarily for its extensive accounts of day-to-day life in the Florida militia, which is arguably Canova's more valuable contribution and his book's most useful asset to scholars.

Charlton Tebeau

Unlike many of the authors analyzed thus far, Charlton Tebeau (1904-2000) was a distinguished and celebrated historian. At various times during his long career, Tebeau served as chairman of the Department of History at the University of Miami (Florida), president of the Florida Historical Society, and editor of *Tequesta*, in addition to authoring more than ten works of history centered on Florida's past. What is so noteworthy about Tebeau regarding interpretations of the Third Seminole War, is that early in his career, in his book *Florida's Last Frontier: The History of Collier County* (1957), he relied entirely on Canova's banana plant account when he addressed the opening of the conflict. But the next time that Tebeau's research and writing returned him to that familiar territory, he did not settle for the typical interpretation. Instead, he took heed of Ray Seley, Jr.'s essay which refuted Canova's theory, and even addressed the debate directly in the text of his book, *Florida From Indian Trail to Space Age: A History* (1965). Tebeau noted that the study undertaken by Seley, Jr. "seems to correct the oft-told story that Hartsuff's men stripped the leaves from banana plants in Bowlegs' garden 'to see the old man cut up,'" but unfortunately, few other authors seemed to be paying attention to the debate. And, in his acclaimed work, *A History of Florida* (1971), Tebeau completely disregarded

³⁷ George C. Bittle, "Florida Frontier Incidents during the 1850s," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (October 1970): 155.

any mention of the alleged banana plant incident, and instead relied only on primary sources contemporaneous with the war, including the written correspondences of U.S. military officers and local newspapers. Elsewhere in the book, Tebeau mentions Canova, and notes that he was “well known” for telling “tall tales,”³⁸ perhaps a subtle allusion to the banana plant tale which Tebeau was now confident enough to ignore completely. *They Called it Fogartyville: A Story of the Fogartys and Fogartyville* (1972), by Ollie Z. Fogarty, is a local and family history centered on the frontier period of South Florida. Although Fogarty provides a brief bibliography, he does not offer direct citations, and even warns his readers that “Some fiction has been used to connect the many bits and pieces of facts into a composite picture, a word mosaic of history.”³⁹ While this admission likely disqualifies the book for consideration as serious scholarship, it is still noteworthy for its mention of the banana garden incident. Fogarty does not list Canova in his bibliography though, but instead, Lillie McDuffee’s *The Lures of the Manatee* (1933) is listed, and is the only one of his sources that contains the account. Like McDuffee, Fogarty employs the familiar imagery of the savage Indian by stating that the destruction of Chief Bowlegs’ garden caused “furious resentment among the Seminoles,” as they “donned their war paint” and embarked on a “reign of terror.” Fogarty even adds a new twist to the tale by claiming that following Bowlegs’ demand for compensation, the American soldiers “rudely tripped him, laughing uproariously at the discomfiture of the proud warrior.”⁴⁰

Historical archaeologist Charles H. Fairbanks briefly analyzed the three Seminole wars in his book, *The Florida Seminole People* (1973), which is much more focused on the anthropology

³⁸ Charlton W. Tebeau, *Florida's Last Frontier: The History of Collier County* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1957), 49.

³⁹ Ollie Z. Fogarty, *They Called It Fogartyville; A Story of the Fogartys and Fogartyville*. (Brooklyn, NY: T. Gaus' Sons, 1972), title page.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

of the tribe than on military and political issues. Nevertheless, in one short paragraph devoted to the Third War, he includes the banana plant story, before summarizing the entire conflict as “inconclusive.”⁴¹ Fairbanks’ work lacks citations and was likely intended for a broad audience, but his brief bibliography includes Moore-Willson’s *The Seminoles of Florida* as the only source containing the banana plant account. So, like Fogarty, Fairbanks relied solely on secondary literature, without consulting Canova’s text itself, let alone any actual primary sources.

Prominent Florida historian and recognized expert on the Seminole and Miccosukee Tribes of Florida, Harry A. Kersey, Jr., contributed *Pelts, Plumes, and Hides: White Traders among the Seminole Indians, 1870-1930* (1975) to the literature on the Florida Seminoles. Although it represents excellent scholarship and was well-received by the community of historians, *Pelts, Plumes, and Hides* suffers the same drawback as many other books when it comes to addressing the Third Seminole War: that conflict is not the main focus of the study, and as such, receives little of the analysis and primary source research that his main topics receive. Kersey supported the banana plant account and referenced three secondary sources in his citations: Kenneth Porter’s “Billy Bowlegs in the Seminole Wars,” John Gifford’s *Billy Bowlegs and the Seminole War*, and Ray B. Seley, Jr., Jr.’s, “Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants,” although Seley, Jr.’s piece explicitly refutes the garden incident as the cause of the war.

One of the first attempts to offer a full history of all three Seminole wars was provided by anthropologist Virginia Bergman Peters with her book *The Florida Wars* (1979). The majority of Peters’ work is focused on the Second War, perhaps appropriately so, but, as renowned Seminole war historian John Mahon notes in a book review, “Since no full history of the Third Seminole

⁴¹ Charles H. Fairbanks, *The Florida Seminole People* (Phoenix, AZ: Indian Tribal Series, 1973), 33.

War has ever been printed, it is disappointing to find the treatment here so lean.”⁴² Peters’ paragraph on the opening Seminole attack is virtually identical to all those that came before, and includes the oft-used line from Canova’s work which posits that Hartsuff’s men destroyed Bowlegs’ garden “just to see how old Billy would cut up.” Peters cites this quotation directly as being found in “government records,” but she does not specify which records. However, the banana garden story is not found in any government sources, and certainly not the quotation about “how old Billy would cut up,” yet there are several other works listed in her bibliography which do contain Canova’s account, including Coe’s *Red Patriots*, and Porter’s “Billy Bowlegs in the Seminole Wars.”

Florida historian and historic preservation specialist Janet Snyder Matthews provided a thoroughly researched and detailed account of South Florida frontier history with *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay 1528-1885* (1983). Matthews devotes an entire chapter to the interwar war years in Florida (1843-1854), and places special emphasis on the outbreaks of violence in 1849 and in 1850 and the relationship between Chief Bowlegs and Captain Casey that is often credited for (temporarily) forestalling further bloodshed. The author then shifts her focus back and forth between the political maneuvering that was taking place in the state legislature and in Washington D.C., and the localized events taking place in South Florida as the U.S. military increased its non-violent pressure. Although one reviewer contended that Matthews’ work has more appeal as a reference volume than as interpretive history,⁴³ and while she often lets her plethora of sources speak for themselves, she

⁴² John K. Mahon, review of *The Florida Wars*, by Virginia Bergman Peters, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (July 1979): 90.

⁴³ Steven F. Lawson, review of *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay*, by Janet Snyder Matthews, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (July 1984): 96-97.

makes logical leaps of interpretation as well, such as her assertion that the Seminoles “were well aware” that the increased military activity meant that their forced removal from the state was likely imminent.⁴⁴

Regarding Matthews’ treatment of the Seminole attack on Hartsuff’s crew, she omits any mention of Canova’s banana plant story in the primary text, and instead provides a matter-of-fact account based solely on the primary military records. However, in the endnotes she offers an explicit discussion of the “oft-told tale.” Matthews quotes Covington’s assessment of the unclear evidence regarding Hartsuff’s men and Bowlegs’ garden, and then concludes that regardless of the soldiers’ fruit-motivated actions, “It would appear there was far more at issue for the chief than...violated bananas.”⁴⁵ Another interesting aspect of Matthews’ work is her use of Canova’s *Life and Adventures in South Florida* as a reference source, but only for his descriptions of either daily life in the Florida militia or the physical attributes of the landscape, whereas most authors mention his banana plant account and naught else.

The following three works are narrower in scope, and all focus on writings of participants and observers during the Third Seminole War. The first is a reprinted soldier’s diary written during the war, edited by history professor David Ramsey, who also provides a few pages of introductory information before letting the memoir speak for itself. In “Abner Doubleday and the Third Seminole War” (1981), Ramsey includes the familiar banana garden account, and attributes his source to Porter’s “Billy Bowlegs in the Seminole Wars,” and Covington’s “An Episode in the Third Seminole War,” the latter of which actually does not contain any mention of

⁴⁴ Janet Snyder Matthews, *Edge of Wilderness: A Settlement History of Manatee River and Sarasota Bay, 1528-1885* (Tulsa, OK: Caprine Press, 1983), 211.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 215, n. 11.

the banana plant story. A similar piece was written by Patricia Wickman titled “‘A Trifling Affair:’ Loomis Langdon and the Third Seminole War” (1985), in which she reprinted and analyzed an ex-soldier’s writings. Wickman traces the military career of Lieutenant Loomis Langdon, a West Point classmate of George Hartsuff’s, and included in her article a brief passage about the garden vandalism that “sparked the final conflict.”⁴⁶ She cites Canova as well as Seley, Jr. Jr. and Porter’s piece on Bowlegs for the banana account, but virtually every other source utilized by Wickman were primary documents, the latest of which being Langdon’s own memoirs written in 1899. This suggests that she felt compelled to include the standard interpretation rather than letting the primary evidence stand on its own. Yet another similar essay that contains a transcribed original document is Gary Mormino’s “The Firing of Guns and Crackers Continued Till Light: A Diary of the Billy Bowlegs War” (1985). Mormino reprints portions of a diary written by an unknown settler who lived in Tampa during the war, and includes in his introductory comments the banana plant account. Mormino cites Seley, Jr.’s article as his source, which, again, is the one written piece that is clearly a repudiation of the garden destruction interpretation.

The Works of James Covington, 1957-1993: Recognized Florida Seminole Expert

James Covington is widely considered the most accomplished historian of the Florida Seminoles, and his book *The Billy Bowlegs War: 1855-1858 The Final Stand of The Seminoles Against The Whites* (1982) remains the only full-length monograph devoted to the Third Seminole War. Covington was a professor of history at the University of Tampa from 1951 to

⁴⁶ Patricia R. Wickman, “‘A Trifling Affair:’ Loomis Langdon and the Third Seminole War,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (January 1985): 306.

1989, and a majority of his forty articles and six books are focused on the Florida branch of the Seminole tribe.⁴⁷ Covington discusses the opening of the Third War in several of his works, but his failure to analyze the banana plant account in depth is a disappointment. The evolution of his interpretations is still noteworthy, especially the way he addresses the subject before and after Seley, Jr.'s article that refutes the banana plant theory, "Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants" (1963). Although he did not ever use Canova's full account in his writings, Covington was reluctant to abandon at least the implication that whatever happened in Bowlegs' garden led to the Seminole attack.

In *The Story of Southwestern Florida* (1957), Covington uses the same set of records employed by Seley, Jr., the U.S. Army correspondences in Florida. Covington writes: "The patrol stopped at Assinwah's Town and Billy Bowlegs's Town and several soldiers pulled some bananas from Billy's *famed* plants. At five-thirty A.M. on December 20, 1855, the soldiers were suddenly attacked"⁴⁸ (My emphasis). Covington does not cite Canova, nor list *Life and Adventures in South Florida* in his bibliography, but he makes an obvious allusion to the banana story for those familiar with the written history. While it is true that one of the surviving soldiers, Private Baker, noted that when the team was scouting the Indian towns, "they saw no one there, [and] some of the party took a bunch of bananas,"⁴⁹ the concept of the bananas being "famed" could have only come from Canova, or those who wrote after him. In any case, Covington did not rely solely on his own interpretation of the primary sources, and after Seley, Jr.'s article was published, he would do so even less.

⁴⁷ Stefanie Green, "James W. Covington: Scholar, Historian," *St. Petersburg Times*, February 29, 2004. http://www.sptimes.com/2004/02/29/Hillsborough/James_W_Covington__sc.shtml (accessed November 11, 2014).

⁴⁸ James W. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1957), 124.

⁴⁹ Statement of Private Baker, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

The next time that Covington addressed the subject was in his article “An Episode in the Third Seminole War” (1966). In this piece, Covington includes a discussion of the tribal council meeting that took place prior to the attack on Hartsuff’s men, according to Parrish’s *Battling the Seminoles*, although Covington doubted the trustworthiness of the source. But he still implies that the banana theft was the direct catalyst for the Seminole assault. Covington quotes Baker exactly, without mentioning the alleged fame of the bananas, but again, juxtaposes the banana story immediately before the attack, which reads as a simple case of cause and effect.

Compounding the matter is the fact that Covington again does not let his own research stand alone. Rather than citing Baker and the primary records, he points readers to Seley, Jr.’s article for “An account of the banana stealing episode,” without mentioning that Seley, Jr.’s work rejects the accuracy of the banana plant story.

When Covington published *The Billy Bowlegs War* in 1982, prominent Second Seminole War historian John Mahon noted that the book “at long last fills a conspicuous gap in Florida history.”⁵⁰ Covington opens the book with the attack on Hartsuff’s unit before back-tracking to discuss the events that led up to the war. His treatment of the banana plant account is essentially the same as his previous article, except this time he notes in the text that “The evidence is not clear that the soldiers maliciously destroyed plants belonging to Bowlegs,”⁵¹ before relating the particulars of the attack. Again, he cites Seley, Jr.’s article as “A good account” of the episode. However, if his readers are unfamiliar with the historiography on the subject, many may wonder exactly what unclear evidence he is alluding to regarding the possibly malicious act. So once

⁵⁰ John Mahon, review of *The Billy Bowlegs War, 1855-1858: The Final Stand of the Seminoles against the Whites*, by James W. Covington, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (October 1982): 187-188.

⁵¹ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 1.

again, Covington implies that the banana plant incident played a role in the attack, while he cites an article which refutes that position.

The Seminoles of Florida (1993) represents the culmination of Covington's years of research and writing on the topic, and has an ambitious scope, stretching back to the earliest references to Seminoles, up to modern times. His assessment of the opening attack and the banana plant account are mostly unchanged, except that he drops any mention of the possible malicious nature of the incident. This time he writes that "a private may have carried along with him a bunch of bananas,"⁵² and then discusses the attack, again citing Seley, Jr.. While *The Seminoles of Florida* was praised by at least two reviewers, historians John Mahon and Jerald Milanich,⁵³ another Florida historian, Harry Kersey, took a more critical view of Covington's work. Kersey wrote: "Ethnohistorians will also be concerned that there is decidedly little emphasis given to the Indians' role in determining their own history. Seminoles are rarely portrayed as fully sentient beings; most often they are treated as the 'other.'"⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, one of the problems that faced Covington, and anyone else who decides to tackle the topic, is the lack of Seminole sources. But that means that the interpretations of historians are all the more important, in order to fill in some of the missing gaps with logical inferences. What Covington provided, however, was a compilation of events and statements, albeit impressively researched, which lacked sufficient analysis and interpretation.

One of Covington's most illuminating passages comes in an article which does not explicitly address the opening assault of the Third Seminole War. In "Seminole Leadership:

⁵² Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*, 128.

⁵³ John Mahon, review of *The Billy Bowlegs War*. Jerald T. Milanich, review of *The Seminoles of Florida*, by James W. Covington, *Ethnohistory* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 682-684.

⁵⁴ Harry Kersey, review of *The Seminoles of Florida*, by James W. Covington, *Journal of Southern History* 60, no. 4 (November 1994): 776-777.

Changing Substance, 1858-1958” (1980), Covington abandons the usual military records and instead utilized sources more focused on Seminole culture. He wrote:

“Decisions made by the Seminoles were group decisions which were binding upon all with no leader telling the others what to do. Before the so-called leader made a move, he consulted with persons who had influence in order to clarify his thinking or to judge how the matter would be received by others. Should the issue be in doubt, the decision-making process was delayed or ever set aside...Leaders of the tribe gathered during the Second Seminole War to decree a policy of death to those advocating surrender and in 1855 to decide that the military surveying parties should be attacked; thus starting the Third and final Seminole War.”⁵⁵

Here Covington provides a clear and simple interpretation of the opening of the war without getting too bogged down with the specifics of the primary sources, while displaying trust in the source of the council meeting account. The details regarding the Seminoles’ decision-making processes also serve to negate the suggestion that the banana plant incident was the direct catalyst for the Seminole attack. Despite this revelation, Covington neither refuted the banana garden account all together nor did he ever offer any direct analysis of the alleged incident himself. So the most debatable aspect of the Third Seminole War was left under-analyzed by its most prominent scholar.

Gene Burnett’s *Florida’s Past: People and Events That Shaped the State* (1986) contains sixty-three individual essays written by Burnett which had previously appeared in the magazine *Florida Trend*. Burnett wrote with a journalistic flair, and mentions briefly “Chief Bill Bowlegs” and his “rage over the destruction of his famous banana grove,” in an essay on a young settler in

⁵⁵ James Covington, “White Control of Seminole Leadership,” *Florida Anthropologist* (1965) 18, no. 3: 137.

Sarasota.⁵⁶ The author references Grismer's *The Story of Sarasota*, and McDuffee's *The Lures of the Manatee* regarding the banana plant account, continuing the trend of writers relying solely on secondary sources. And although Burnett's book clearly is intended to provide anecdotal history vignettes rather than top-of-the-field historical scholarship, it is noteworthy since it illustrates the entrenchment and dissemination of the banana plant account.

Anthropologist Merwyn Garbarino has written several books on the culture and history of the Florida Seminoles, including one simply titled *The Seminole* (1989). In it, Garbarino devotes one brief paragraph to the Third Seminole War, but does not provide a direct citation of her source for the "pillaged" garden account.⁵⁷

Florida native Canter Brown, Jr. has written extensively on Florida history, and his book *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (1991) contains a full chapter devoted to the Third Seminole War. Brown is one of the few authors, along with Covington, to include in his work the account found in Parrish's *Battling the Seminoles* of the Seminole general council meeting that allegedly took place in the fall of 1855, at which the only chief opposed to war, Chipco, was summarily banished from the tribe. But Brown goes on to recite the banana plant account as well, calling it the "spark that ignited an Indian war," and claiming that "Both Seminole and army sources agree that Hartsuff's troopers destroyed Bowlegs' grove." Of course, just because the soldiers destroyed the banana garden, does not necessarily mean that that is the direct reason for the Seminole attack. And, the "Seminole" source that Brown refers to is the DeVane brothers' "book," *DeVane's Early Florida History*. Furthermore, Brown includes a passage from Canova's

⁵⁶ Gene M. Burnett, "Young Whitaker Discovers Sarasota," in *Florida's Past: People and Events That Shaped the State*, ed. Gene M. Burnett (Englewood, FL: Pineapple Press, 1986), 36.

⁵⁷ Merwyn S. Garbarino and Frank W. Porter, *The Seminole* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 54.

book that most authors had not repeated for some time, even those who utilized the banana plant account. The passage refers to the alleged confrontation between Hartsuff and Bowlegs, with Brown going even further than Canova had, claiming that Hartsuff “kicked the chief to the ground and refused his demands,” the evening before the Seminole attack took place.⁵⁸ In the conclusion to his chapter on the conflict, Brown takes a more general view and asserts that “The Third Seminole War erupted in December 1855 as a result of pressures designed to intimidate the Indians remaining in Florida to emigrate to the west.”⁵⁹ How exactly the garden destruction and the physical confrontation fit into this much broader assessment is left for the reader to decide.

Prominent historian James J. Horgan decided to address the growing debate over Canova’s account directly in the text of his chapter on the 1850s found in *Florida Decades: A Sesquicentennial History, 1845-1995* (1995). Horgan relates the typical interpretation but calls the story “apocryphal,” and flatly asserts that “The source of this anecdote is not credible,” while he cites Seley, Jr.’s article as his reference source for the refutation.⁶⁰ Historians writing after 1995 have been less committal than Horgan about denying the banana plant account altogether, but by the end of the twentieth century, a trend had finally begun that witnessed more and more historians at least willing to call into question the accuracy of Canova’s story.

One example of this new trend in the literature is Jay Jennings’ article “Fort Denaud: Logistics Hub of the Third Seminole War” that appeared in the *Florida Historical Quarterly* in 2001. Jennings is a U.S. Army veteran himself, and his essay focuses primarily on the activities

⁵⁸ Canter Brown, Jr., *Florida's Peace River Frontier* (Orlando, FL: University of Central Florida Press, 1991), 107.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁶⁰ James J. Horgan and Lewis Nicholas Wynne, *Florida Decades: A Sesquicentennial History, 1845-1995* (Saint Leo, FL: Saint Leo College Press, 1995), 29.

of federal troops in South Florida in the years and months leading up to the war. The author details the patrols made by Hartsuff and his reconnaissance team and contends that “Whether the men vandalized Bowlegs’s garden or not is unclear, but they stole some of the Seminole’s prize bananas.” It seems that a more important question may be whether or not the evidence is clear that any of the soldiers’ actions directly caused the Seminole attack. Jennings goes on to note that “Later stories claimed that Hartsuff confronted Bowlegs and physically assaulted him, pushing him to the ground and kicking him. Perhaps this was an effort to spice up the tale, but the actual participants did not mention any contact with the Seminoles.”⁶¹ Jennings cites Seley, Jr.’s essay for his knowledge of the primary accounts of the “actual participants,” and does not seem to have consulted the original records himself.

Another example of this trend is “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” (2002), by Christopher Eck. The bulk of this article, which was published in *Tequesta*, is comprised of transcribed military letters. These letters represent a valuable primary source considerably deciphered and reprinted by Eck, who also provides interludes of contextual information for his readers. Regarding the initial Seminole assault, Eck is inclined to accept the traditional account, though he acknowledges the debate: “Though there is disagreement over the significance of the arrival Hartsuff’s troops into Bowlegs’s settlement and whether it was the actual cause of the Third Seminole War, the presence of the soldiers – who apparently trampled

⁶¹ Jay Jennings, “Fort Denaud: Logistics Hub of the Third Seminole War,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (Summer 2001), 35.

some of the crops and took some of Chief Bowlegs' bananas from his garden – may well have incensed the Seminole leader for its disrespectful quality.”⁶²

In a similar fashion to Christopher Eck's conclusion, husband and wife historians John and Mary Lou Missall are also reluctant to completely abandon the banana plant interpretation. *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict* (2004) covers all three wars, but one reviewer points out that “Like all other books that claim to address the years through 1858, *The Seminole Wars* comes up short at the end: we still have no substitute for James Covington's *Billy Bowlegs' War*.”⁶³ Another reviewer criticizes the authors' simplistic descriptions and “lack of interpretive insight,” while also noting their failure to address the third conflict in much detail.⁶⁴ In their brief chapter on the third war, the Missalls chose somewhat odd phrasing to explain the attack on Hartsuff's unit, stating that “*According to legend*, it was a rather trivial incident that sparked the explosion... Whether or not this incident really happened is open for debate; the primary account seems rather romanticized. One thing is for certain... a war party of about thirty Seminoles attacked.”⁶⁵ While the authors cast some doubt on the account, they also link the alleged garden incident with the Seminole assault in their text, which still implies a cause-and-effect relationship between the two to the reader.

Like the Missalls' work, historian Joe Knetsch also addresses all three conflicts in *Florida's Seminole Wars, 1817-1858* (2003). Knetsch's book contains a multitude of

⁶² 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* LXII (2002), 99.

⁶³ Samuel Watson, review of *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict*, by John Missall and Mary Lou Missall, *Florida Historical Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (Spring 2005): 473-474.

⁶⁴ Andrew K. Frank, review of *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Conflict*, by John Missall and Mary Lou Missall, *Journal of Military History* 69, no. 2 (April 2005): 556-557.

⁶⁵ John Missall and Mary Lou Missall, *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 213.

illustrations, and combined with its complete lack of citations, it may seem easily dismissed by the scholarly community since it is clearly intended for a wider readership. But as one familiar with the available primary sources may attest, Knetsch rarely strays from the original evidence, and actually does not include any mention of Canova's banana plant account whatsoever. The author summarizes the events in the years prior to the war in a clear and succinct manner without getting bogged down with many direct quotations. Knetsch emphasizes the "Indian Scare of 1849 to 1850" and the subsequent political pressure from Florida's governors and senators, who were in turn pressured by the state's new white constituents, who demanded protection from the Indian threat while also preemptively amassing their own citizen militias. The author notes the army's response of increased scouting and troop presence, before matter-of-factly concluding that the U.S. military's "moves were well known to the Seminoles. The result was the December 20, 1855, attack on the command of Lieutenant George Hartsuff near Billy Bowlegs's town."⁶⁶ Even in a book intended for the general public, Knetsch did not address the sensationalized banana plant account in any way, which remains a true rarity in the historiography.

Anthropologist Brent Weisman, in his book *Unconquered People: Florida's Seminole and Miccosukee Indians* (2008), discusses the banana plant account briefly before seemingly dismissing it, concluding that "it is more likely that the chiefs had decided earlier that they must fight." Weisman begins his following sentence with the phrase "In any case," before relating the particulars of the Seminole attack, which ultimately leaves the interpretation up to his readers to determine how much stock they might put in the vandalism account.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Joe Knetsch, *Florida's Seminole Wars, 1817-1858* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishers, 2003), 149.

⁶⁷ Brent R. Weisman, *Unconquered People: Florida's Seminole and Miccosukee Indians* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999), 212.

While authors such as Horgan, Jennings, Knetsch, and Weisman have in recent years begun to cast doubt upon or altogether ignore Canova's account, following the likes of Matthews, Tebeau, Covington, and Seley, Jr., before them, there are still many authors who continue to utilize the time-tested banana plant interpretation. More alarmingly, many of these sources are reference works or special interest books, and are much more likely to have an influence on the general public than the top-of-field scholarship. Even in a book titled *Facts About the American Wars* (1998), edited by John Bowman, which contains very brief synopses of each significant American conflict, the banana grove vandalism account is relied on almost exclusively under the sub-heading "Causes of the War." The author notes that "The U.S. Army and the Florida militia were more than strong enough to take on the relatively powerless Seminole Indians," which, like the banana account, seems more like a statement of interpretation rather than a "fact."⁶⁸ Similarly, Christopher Kimball's brief reference book *Timeline of Events and Battles of the Florida Seminole Wars* (2001) also contains the familiar account. Kimball credits John and Mary Lou Missall with their editing assistance, and when the author conveys the garden account, he notes that "This story is not verified, but is generally believed to be true."⁶⁹ Kimball seems to fall into the camp that is still on the fence about the standard interpretation; he is not quite willing to declare it as fact, nor is he willing to disregard it.

A History of Florida Forts: Florida's Lonely Outposts (2006), by Alejandro de Quesada, contains vignettes of many of the forts manned during the three Seminole wars. In his chapter on Fort Myers, the author discusses the third war and includes the banana plant destruction account

⁶⁸ John S. Bowman, ed., *Facts About the American Wars* (New York: H.W. Wilson Co, 1998), 174.

⁶⁹ Christopher D. Kimball, *Timeline of Events and Battles of the Florida Seminole Wars* (Goodland, FL: C.D. Kimball, 2001), 50.

to explain the outbreak. De Quesada lists Grismer's *The Story of Myers* as his source, and includes the anecdote, rarely seen in the literature any more, that Hartsuff's men "tripped Billy and sent him sprawling."⁷⁰ Despite the book's intended audience as a special interest, or "coffee-table" book, the inclusion of these anecdotes, as well as basic factual errors such as the statement that two of Hartsuff's men were killed when actually four were, make the contribution yet another a disappointment that lacks meaningful historical interpretations.

Military historian Ron Field offered his take on the Indian conflicts in Florida with *The Seminole Wars: 1818-1858* (2009). Field alters the standard interpretation slightly, but still utilizes Canova's account as his primary source material. Field claims that Hartsuff's troops destroyed Bowlegs' banana plant garden in direct retaliation for the two burned American forts in the area. Furthermore, whereas most authors quote from Canova's book the line that Hartsuff's men wanted to "see how old Billy would cut up," Field instead quotes Canova's passage about Hartsuff's Colt's revolver, and how the Seminoles were "dismayed by the strange weapon." Field's book also contains the factual error that only two of the American soldiers were killed in the ambush, rather than the actual four.

Very similar to the previous four books discussed is Donald Spencer's *Florida at War: Forts and Battles* (2011). Spencer is a computer historian who dabbles in Florida history, and his coverage of the Third Seminole War in *Florida at War* constitutes less than one full page, with no discussion of the events leading up to the conflict or the broader factors at work. Spencer launches directly into the banana plant incident, and in this version, "The soldiers teased and laughed in his face; then they packed up and left Chief Bowlegs with his anger and destroyed

⁷⁰ Alejandro M. de Quesada, *A History of Florida Forts: Florida's Lonely Outposts* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2006), 96.

garden patch.”⁷¹ Spencer also erroneously claims that only two of the American soldiers were killed in the ambush, rather than the actual four, a continuing trend that indicates many of these authors are merely copying each other’s works rather than consulting the primary evidence themselves.

In 2011, amateur historian Edward Winn self-published ...*And the Blood Sank Into the Earth: The Story of the Three Seminole Wars*. The author lists the works of John and Mary Lou Missall and Weisman in his brief bibliography, and similar to the conclusions put forth by those historians, Winn is noncommittal regarding his trust in the banana plant interpretation. He writes that “in December of 1855 a small detachment of U.S. soldiers came across one of Billy Bowleg’s villages and found it deserted. No one knows exactly what match actually started the fire, but about daylight, while the unsuspecting soldiers still slept, a war party of 30 Seminole warriors attacked the sleeping soldiers.”⁷² Of course, none of the soldiers were asleep at the time of the attack, but factual errors are nothing new to the literature regarding these events. The more noteworthy part of the passage is how the author vaguely alludes to the banana plant incident without actually ever mentioning it. Those familiar with the written history will undoubtedly understand the intended reference, but other readers are left to decipher a partial account. Winn follows the trend of neither confirming nor denying the validity of Canova’s account, and without explicitly discussing it, he only acknowledges that *something* may or may not have happened in Bowlegs’ deserted village prior to the assault. It should be noted, however, that Winn does take a wider view than most authors, and asserts that when considering the United

⁷¹ Donald D. Spencer, *Florida at War: Forts and Battles* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2011), 91.

⁷² Edward Winn, ... *And the Blood Sank into the Earth: The Story of the Three Seminole Wars* (Privately Printed, 2011), 76.

States' history with Indian wars and Removal, the occurrence of the Third Seminole War "should not come as a total surprise." He also contends that "The start the Third Seminole War was really in Washington," and traces the political snow-ball effect back to the Swamp and Overflowed Land Act of 1850, which Winn considers as the beginning of the end for the remaining Florida Seminoles.⁷³

Following in the tradition of historian and rights-activist Howard Zinn's (in)famous book *A People's History of the United States* (1980), is Adam Wasserman's contribution, *A People's History of Florida, 1513-1876: How Africans, Seminoles, and Lower Class Whites Shaped the Sunshine State* (2009). Like Zinn, Wasserman provides a sensationalized account of victimization and exploitation, and despite the tone and one-sided perspective, he does not contribute anything new to the debate regarding the outbreak of the third war. In Wasserman's version, "For no reason other than to provoke a response, the survey burned down Bowlegs' prized banana grove." He then relates the alleged confrontation between the chief and Hartsuff, when the Lieutenant "kicked Bowlegs to the ground and arrogantly refused his demands."⁷⁴ Wasserman cites as his source for this passage Covington's article "An Episode in the Third Seminole War (1966). This is significant because Covington's piece makes no mention of any damage done to Bowlegs' garden, and certainly not to any confrontation between the two military leaders. Instead, Covington quotes one of the surviving American soldiers who stated that "some of the party took a bunch of bananas" from the abandoned village. Why the author would attribute the account regarding the garden destruction and subsequent confrontation to

⁷³ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁴ Adam Wasserman, *A People's History of Florida, 1513-1876: How Africans, Seminoles, Women, and Lower Class Whites Shaped the Sunshine State* (Sarasota, FL: A. Wasserman, 2009), 302.

Covington is up to speculation, but it seems to represent another example of irresponsible scholarship, at the least.

Ethnohistorian Andrew Frank, author of *Creeks and Southerners: Biculturalism on the Early American Frontier* (2005), is “currently finishing a book-length manuscript on the history of the Florida Seminoles tentatively entitled *Those Who Camp at a Distance: The Seminoles and Indians of Florida*,” according to his website. Frank has already penned a book on the subject, simply titled *The Seminole* (2011), but its primary intended audience is a juvenile readership. Frank was the book reviewer who criticized the Missalls’ treatment of the third war in their book *The Seminole Wars*, when Frank asserted that the conflict remained “overlooked.” And although his book is intentionally simplified for a younger audience, his explanation of the opening of the Third Seminole War makes a dangerous leap of speculation. Frank claims that the act of Hartsuff’s men cutting down Bowlegs’ banana trees, “which was intentionally designed to get Bowlegs to initiate an attack on American soldiers, worked as planned.”⁷⁵ In addition to the logical assumption that the four soldiers who lost their lives, and the four others who were severely wounded, probably would have rather not been shot to pieces by Seminole rifles, Frank’s claim has no evidential support whatsoever. That Frank’s interpretation is found in a juvenile reference book on Seminole history and culture, published in 2011, highlights the continued entrenchment of the banana plant story, and its ability to be twisted and further convoluted by authors who fail to research the subject in depth themselves.

There have been many articles and books written over the years that address topics parallel to and on the periphery of the Third Seminole War, as well as others that discuss the

⁷⁵ Andrew Frank, *The Seminole* (New York: Chelsea House, 2011), 49.

conflict but omit mention of the attack on Hartsuff's unit. One recent contribution in particular deserves mention here for its notable omissions. *America's Hundred Years' War: U.S. Expansion to the Gulf Coast and the Fate of the Seminole, 1763-1858* (2011), edited by Stephen Belko, contains nine different essays on various aspects associated with all three Seminole wars.⁷⁶ The book's central thesis is that the Seminole Wars should not be viewed as separate, distinct conflicts, but rather as one continuous struggle. Several of the essays address the early origins of conflict in Florida, dating back well into the eighteenth century, and despite the implication made by the very title of the book, there is no coverage whatsoever of the conflict from 1855-1858, nor any discussion of the years leading up to that final war. The only mention of the third war, in the book's introduction, notes how little has been written on the subject, and a footnote points readers to Covington's *The Billy Bowlegs War* as the lone suggestion for further reading.

Conclusion

This chapter's analysis of virtually every work written on this subject may seem like a tedious exercise, but it is important to trace each book and essay in order to uncover the reasons for the persistent deficiencies in the historiography of the Third Seminole War. As noted in Chapter 1, social factors and popular attitudes were undoubtedly a major influence on the first wave of literature, but authors who published works in the mid to late twentieth century were plagued by other problems as well. For one, relatively few of the writers on the subject were professionally-trained historians, and many quite clearly failed to conduct their own primary

⁷⁶ Other examples of Seminole histories that fail to address the Third Seminole War are Grant Foreman's *Indian Removal: The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), and *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934), and Edwin McReynolds' *The Seminoles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957).

source analysis, which led to a dependency on secondary literature, and presumably made writers reluctant to challenge the banana plant account. The continued prevalence of factual errors is an additional by-product of the reliance on secondary sources. Another reason for the perpetuation of the banana plant story is that many written works which include Canova's account are not directly focused on the opening of the war, but rather on peripheral or over-lapping topics. Local histories, histories of wars and forts, books on Seminole culture, and books on the draining of the Everglades or the taming of the Florida frontier, are some examples of the types of works that include the banana plant interpretation, without direct analysis of the episode.

The failure of prominent historians to address the banana plant account in depth, or at all, is another reason for its continued use. The collection of essays edited by Stephen Belko, *America's Hundred Years' War* (2011), contain no analysis of the Third Seminole War whatsoever. And the few historians who have attempted to provide full histories of all three wars invariably left the third conflict under-evaluated, such as Virginia Peters' *The Florida Wars* (1979), and John and Mary Lou Missall's *The Seminole Wars* (2004). And, although Covington never quoted Canova's work directly, his reluctance to challenge the account or to provide his own clear interpretation is a disappointment, especially since he always pointed his audience to Seley, Jr.'s refutation article for further analysis.

While a handful of historians have challenged or altogether ignored the banana plant story, many more have continued to rely on the account as the official record of the events. Troublingly, many of the more recent publications are reference works or special interest books, and are more likely to have an influence on the general public and school children than the top-

of-field scholarship. There appears to be a period of lag, and a trickle-down effect that occurs between the publication of top scholarship in a field, and its dissemination to more general audiences. This is certainly the case for the literature on the Third Seminole War, and since the amount of works that rely on the banana plant account still far out-number those that do not, it may be some time yet before the trend can be reversed. But fuller interpretations will only be possible if historians can relinquish their dependence on the secondary literature in order to provide more balanced and nuanced explanations.

CHAPTER 3: OTHER POSSIBLE CATALYSTS: REASSESSING U.S. PERSPECTIVES

This chapter examines the specific events leading up to and occurring during the Third Seminole War and incorporates primary source analysis and suggestions for further research. This analysis is divided up into three main sections, consisting of the pre-war years (1843-1854), which includes a summary of the various events and measures passed as part of the U.S. government's attempts to coerce the remaining Seminoles out of Florida. The second portion is centered on the events just before and after the actual outbreak of fighting. The official statements provided by the American soldiers who survived the attack on Hartsuff's reconnaissance team are analyzed here and are especially useful in gaining insight into the days and hours just before the Seminole assault, at least from their perspectives. In addition, the third section of this chapter highlights the varied perspectives found in contemporary newspaper accounts, soldiers' memoirs, and other sources that illustrate the attitudes of Florida's white population.

Primary Source Overview

Documents from the United States government constitute the majority of primary source material relating to the outbreak of the Third Seminole War. Senate reports, the Florida Governors' administrative letters, state laws and resolutions passed, and the military correspondences of the troops on the ground in South Florida, which contain the details concerning the reconnaissance conducted by Hartsuff and the eyewitness reports of those

soldiers who survived the Seminole assault. Although the Florida Seminoles did not leave behind any written documents of their own, their words can sometimes be found in the annual reports of the Office of Indian Affairs, in the Seminole agency letters, and in Seminole agent John Casey's diary, but these instances are few, and often quite general in message.

Newspapers and periodicals covered the events as they unfolded in Florida in the 1850s and remain a useful source, albeit one with limitations due to the speculative and sensational nature of journalism. A small number of settler and traveler accounts also exist. There are a number of memoirs and autobiographies written by U.S. soldiers, but most were published many years after the conflict, which makes it difficult to determine just how accurately they reflect the events as they took place in the 1850s. Andrew Canova's book is part of this group of writings, but his was the first to offer a significantly different version of the events than had been previously known. How exactly these types of sources should be evaluated is a central problem that faces scholars who study this topic. Adding to the uncertainty of the soldiers' accounts penned decades after the war are the continued writings into the mid-twentieth century that claim to speak for eyewitnesses to the conflict, with some offering wild variations of Canova's banana garden story.

1842 – 1854: The Pressure Builds

Creating an Old South (2002) by Edward Baptist, analyzes the migration and settlement patterns of two north Florida counties in a prominent plantation area, from the opening of the Territory in 1821 up until the eve of the Civil War. While Baptist's study is limited in its coverage of the Seminole Wars, it provides insight into the cultural world of the "planter-

politicians,” who dominated the financial interests and the political decision-making, and the lower-class white settlers, who struggled for masculine independence and honor against the elite slave-owning office-holders. Two aspects of life on the Florida frontier that both classes of white pioneers agreed on, however, were their fondness of chattel slavery, and their hatred of American Indians. And, while land speculation, public office, and the extension of slavery were essential goals of many of Florida’s newcomers, the continued existence of a Native population, especially the fearsome and feared Seminoles, was never going to be deemed acceptable to elite decision-makers who held sway over Florida politics. Baptist claims that since the planter class could not apply their usual weapons of physical intimidation, social humiliation, or political domination on the Seminoles, they were therefore beyond the control of white Southern society. And since Indians could not be controlled by the typical means, the white settlers of Florida insisted that the only appropriate action was the complete removal of all Indians from the entire state.¹ Underscoring their concerns about the Seminole population was the potential for runaway slaves to ally with the neighboring Indian tribes, a consequence that produced bloody and memorable results during the Second Seminole War.

At the close of the Second Seminole War in 1842, roughly four-hundred Indians remained in South Florida, including Seminoles, Miccosukees, Yuchis, Tallahasseees, Creeks, and Choctaws.² Despite their varied tribal and linguistic differences, most people in the United States collectively referred to them by the name Seminoles. On August 14, 1842, General William Worth concluded an agreement that allocated a two and one-half million acre plot of land to be

¹ Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida’s Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 156-157.

² Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*, 113.

used temporarily by these Indians until their peaceable removal from the territory could be affected.³ While the Seminoles may have considered the reservation to be their permanent home, the precedent set by Congress's passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the designation of Florida as a U.S. state in 1845, and the lingering animosity on all sides due to the past Seminole wars, meant that the Florida Indians would repeatedly face challenges for control of the lands they lived on. Historian Stephen Rockwell claims that although the implementation of the Indian Removal Act is often viewed as a chaotic mess, the process was usually, eventually anyway, successful. It was ad hoc, inconsistent, piece-meal, certainly inhumane, but effective.⁴ And even though the military might of the United States turned its attention toward Mexico following the haphazard "conclusion" of the Second Seminole War in Florida, there were many in white society, public office-holders and citizens alike, who never lost sight of the goal to remove every last Indian from Florida.

In 1844, Worth discovered just how temporary his arrangement was intended to be. The new Secretary of War, William Wilkins, sent a dispatch to Worth explaining that despite the current "pacific disposition" of the Florida Seminoles, President John Tyler insisted that "policy requires their removal."⁵ Worth was ordered to immediately make arrangements to negotiate removal with the remaining Seminoles, but to avoid military force, resorting alone to the "arts of persuasion." However, Worth was not able to deliver this message of assurance, as the various Indian bands in Florida uniformly agreed not to engage in any negotiations with government

³ Worth, *Territorial Papers of Florida*, 519.

⁴ Stephen J. Rockwell, *Indian Affairs and the Administrative State in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 101-102.

⁵ Wilkins to Worth, October 18, 1844, *Territorial Papers of Florida*, 967-968.

officials during this period. The Seminoles expected that if they abided by the terms of Worth's agreement, they should be able to remain in the state.

In an effort to entice settlers to Florida despite the continued existence of several hundred Indians, and the fresh memory of the bitter Second Seminole War, the U.S. Congress passed the Armed Occupation Act of 1842. The act provided free acreage in Florida for any non-Native settlers willing to take up residence in Florida, improve the land, and defend themselves against the Seminole threat. Florida Governor Thomas Brown was one of several who expressed doubts over the effectiveness of the act, and historians Knetsch and Paul George point out the act's many logistical problems, including its failure to "contribute a fighting force to expel the Seminoles from Florida," in their essay "A Problematical Law: The Armed Occupation Act of 1842 and Its Impact on Southeast Florida" (1993).⁶ Conversely, historian Covington insists that the pioneers who accepted lands in the extreme southern portion of the state "constantly complained about the Seminole Indian threat in Florida and finally forced a showdown by reluctant federal officials... Thus the Armed Occupation Act indirectly resulted in the removal from Florida of most of the Seminole Indians."⁷

Despite the demands for immediate removal by Secretary of War Wilkins and President Tyler in 1844, on May 19, 1845 incoming President James Polk designated a twenty-mile wide buffer zone surrounding the temporary Indian reserve in response to complaints of boundary disputes on both sides. In addition to Seminole hunters roaming beyond the boundary lines in search of game, and white settlers squatting illegally on the Indian reserve, another primary point

⁶ Joe Knetsch, and Paul S. George, "A Problematical Law: The Armed Occupation Act of 1842 and Its Impact on Southeast Florida," *Tequesta* 1, no. 53 (1993): 63-80.

⁷ James Covington, "The Armed Occupation Act of 1842," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (July 1961), 52.

of contention was cattle. The Florida cattlemen did not keep their stock on ranches, but rather let the cattle graze freely all over the state. Cattle had always been an integral part of Seminole society as well (Billy Bowlegs was a descendent of the “Cowkeeper Dynasty”), and Indians did not hesitate to kill any stray cows that roamed near their reserve.⁸

Captain John Sprague, who was in charge of Indian Affairs in Florida, and was the first to publish a full account of the Second Seminole War, was able to meet with several Seminole leaders at Charlotte Harbor in January of 1847. Although the Indians were cautious and reluctant to meet with him, Sprague reported that they “have adopted vigorous laws to punish those who violate the relation existing between the whites and red men but the young men...are ruthless, vicious and vengeful.”⁹ Sprague’s observations indicate that while the Seminole chiefs had hopes of abiding strictly by the terms of Worth’s agreement, some of the younger warriors were difficult to control, or at least that is what they wanted the Americans to believe. Over the following two years, the Seminole chiefs refused to meet with any American official. Despite the personal friendship between Bowlegs and Indian Agent Casey, the chief sent word to the Indian agent that he and his people feared for him being “seized” involuntarily and sent west against his will.¹⁰

In response to repeated complaints by white citizens that Indians were crossing over the designated boundary to raid farms and steal livestock, Florida Governor William Mosely wrote to President Polk, urging him to remove the Seminoles, by force, if necessary. Rather than wait

⁸ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 6.

⁹ Covington *The Seminole of Florida*, 113.

¹⁰ Crawford to Ewing, May 29, 1849, U.S. Congress, *Message from the President of the United States, communicating information, in answer to a resolution of the Senate, relative to hostilities committed by the Seminole Indians in Florida during the past year, their removal, &c.* May 21, 1850, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 1849, S. Ex. Doc. No. 49, Serial 561, 3. Hereafter cited as *Relative to Hostilities*.

for national intervention, the Florida General Assembly passed a law in early 1849 that declared it illegal for the supervising Indian agent in Florida to allow the Seminoles to leave their reserve for any reason and banned the sale of alcohol to them. On July 12, 1849, a small band of Seminoles, later branded as “outsiders,” or outlaws, by the tribe’s leaders, killed one white man, wounded another, and vandalized a settlement on the east coast of South Florida, north of Fort Pierce. Five days later, the same Seminole band made their way across the peninsula, killed two more white settlers and burned down a trading post on the Peace River. No one knows exactly what motivated the killings, but Colonel C. F. Smith did not consider the actions to be indicative of war aims, “but rather as an act of retaliation for some injury fancied or real.”¹¹ Covington speculates that the killers may have been angry about the recently passed measures designed to confine them to their reserve. Or they may have been exacting revenge on unscrupulous white traders, as Smith alluded to, considering the man killed on the east coast was a former Indian trader, and the post burned down on the west coast was run by Thomas Kennedy and John Darling, two men who were invested in the economic development of South Florida and who pushed especially hard for Seminole removal.¹² The Seminole murders were disavowed by the tribe’s leaders and contact was made between Bowlegs and Casey with an agreement being reached for the Indians to turn over the culprits once they could be located and captured. Regarding the proposition of removal, Casey reported that it may be possible “within a few years,” but “The prospect of removing them peaceably is not, at present, favorable. It is believed

¹¹ Smith to Marshall, July 17, 1849, *Relative to Hostilities*, 26-27.

¹² James Covington, “Billy Bowlegs, Sam Jones, and the Crisis of 1849,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (January 1990): 303. See also, Joe Knetsch, “Florida’s Seminole Wars In and Around Manatee County,” Manatee County Historical Society Meeting. Bradenton, Florida, May 15, 2013. <http://www.manateecountyhistoricalsociety.com/2013-knetsch-on-the-third-seminole-war/> (accessed November 25, 2014).

that their laws still outlaw any chief who shall propose to negotiate on the subject.”¹³ On October 18, 1849, Bowlegs, Sam Jones, and other Seminole leaders turned over the surviving Indian murderers to General David Twiggs in the presence of the tribe’s young warriors. Andrew Frank contends that “This public act had a message for both the U.S. and Seminole dissenters: Bowlegs intended to adhere to the terms of the 1842 truce and he expected others to do the same.”¹⁴ Frank considers this episode a “success of traditional diplomacy,” and while it may be true that peace was temporarily attained, the federal government, local policy-makers, as well as Florida’s white citizens, now had a violent episode to point to as proof of the Seminoles’ inability to coexist with whites, and calls for their complete removal would grow ever louder after these murders.

Despite the Seminoles’ cooperation in punishing the guilty members of their tribe, and their insistence that removal negotiations were out of the question, immediate preparations for their removal from Florida were made by the federal government following the 1849 killings. Secretary of War George Crawford and Secretary of the Interior Thomas Ewing instructed the military commander and the Indian agent in charge in Florida that the Seminoles’ “speedy removal to the West appears desirable and necessary. The administration being thus impressed, have concluded that their removal, voluntary or forcible, is to be effected.” They insist, though, that “The *essence of this proposition* is in its application to their *voluntarily* emigrating,” before they ultimately authorized the use of force “should it become necessary...to effect the object.”¹⁵ Enticement funds totaling \$215, 000 were allocated, and a delegation of Western Seminoles (from Indian Territory) was assembled to travel to Florida in an attempt to persuade their

¹³ Casey to Adjutant General Jones, June 18, 1849, *Relative to Hostilities*, 23.

¹⁴ Andrew Frank “Preserving the Paths of Peace: White Plumes and Diplomacy during the Frontier Panic of 1849-1850,” *Journal of Florida Studies* 1, issue 2 (Spring 2013).

¹⁵ Crawford and Ewing to Spencer and Twiggs, September 17, 1849, *Relative to Hostilities*, 5-7.

relatives to negotiate for removal. Twiggs took the lead in the negotiations, offering financial inducements, five hundred dollars for each warrior and one hundred dollars for any woman or child, and was successful to a degree as 74 Indians agreed to emigrate west. Both Casey and Twiggs expressed the belief that full removal was imminently likely, but when Bowlegs and the other chiefs presented themselves for the meeting in a show of good faith, they informed the Americans that the majority of the tribe would not consider leaving Florida.¹⁶ By May 1850, Twiggs and Casey gave up and cut off the negotiations. Casey noted that “Although the hope of removing the Seminoles in a body has gone, there is still some reason to expect gradual and peaceful emigration.”¹⁷ This statement highlights two key points: a desire to leave Florida was present in some portion of the tribe, but was likely suppressed by the influential chiefs for some reason, and the Indian Affairs Office was not going to cease their attempts, and were content to remove small groups at different times if that was what it took to fulfill the goal.

Although Twiggs and the Western delegation had difficulty getting the Florida Seminoles to discuss removal, Secretary of War Crawford remained convinced that “The peaceful removal of those Indians is, and until accomplished, must continue to be, the first object of the Executive.”¹⁸ The Western Seminoles were sent home with instructions to immediately prepare a new delegation, comprised of more prominent leaders such as Coacoochee (Wildcat) and Jim Jumper, for a return trip to Florida. While the state militia was quickly demobilized, the number of federal troops in Florida increased, but many in the state wanted the white citizens themselves to solve the Seminole problem, including one newspaper editorialist who would have rather had

¹⁶ Crawford to Twiggs, March 4, 1850, *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹⁷ Casey to Twiggs, May 15, 1850, Edward T. Keenan Papers, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida.

¹⁸ Crawford to Yulee, December 31, 1849, *Relative to Hostilities*, 12.

the Indians hunted down dead for reward money than to see them “set free in the west.”¹⁹ In 1850, Congress passed the Swamp and Overflowed Land Act, which transferred title of federally owned wetlands to the states for immediate sale with the agreement that the lands would be drained and used to promote economic development. A corollary to economic stimulation was the desire to impress upon the Florida Seminoles that in a few short years “they will be entirely surrounded by the whites.”²⁰

The next incident to occur that undermined the Florida Seminoles’ efforts to remain in the state unmolested involved the murder of a young white boy in Marion County in August 1850. The Seminole killers were captured by members of their own tribe and turned over to Casey and U.S. authorities, although the alleged perpetrators claimed to be innocent and guilty only of falling out of favor with the chiefs.²¹ In the meantime, the supervision of Indian tribes was transferred from the War Department to the Interior Department and a new approach to the removal efforts was initiated. In addition to the employment of a second delegation of Western Seminoles, a private contractor, Indian “special agent” Luther Blake, was hired to effect the removal of the Florida Seminoles. Blake spared no expense (of federal funds), offered liberal terms to Bowlegs and others, even took several chiefs on a sight-seeing tour of New York City and Washington D.C. in the fall of 1852, and ultimately did not convince a single Seminole to leave Florida voluntarily. By June 1853, Casey was reappointed as the Indian agent in Florida, replacing Blake.

¹⁹ *St. Augustine Ancient City*, June 10, 1850, quoted in Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 16.

²⁰ Crawford to Twiggs, March 20, 1850, *Relative to Hostilities*, 17.

²¹ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 17.

In his 1853 inaugural address, Florida Governor James Broome announced that the presence of the Seminoles is a “blight on our prosperity,” and the state “will never submit to a policy which looks to anything short of their removal.”²² And while President Millard Fillmore agreed with the notion, he insisted that more money was needed in order to properly survey the land. But Secretary of the Interior Alexander Stuart recognized that “surveying of the country would cause hostilities,” and suggested that Congress be consulted in such affairs. Covington speculates that Fillmore, Stuart, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Luke Lea, were “reluctant to plan a shooting war” when their terms in office were soon to expire.²³ Nevertheless, the state of Florida continued to pass measures designed to aggravate the Indian population. One stipulation prohibited the Seminoles from all trading with fishing vessels on the coasts, and a law passed in 1849 made it illegal for any Indian to roam beyond the boundaries of the designated reserve, while another portion of the same law banned the sale of liquor to the Indians.²⁴

While the Office of Indian Affairs remained subject to the Department of the Interior, supervision of the Florida Seminoles was transferred back to the War Department by President Franklin Pierce in 1853. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis took over the ultimate responsibility for removal of Indians and declared the past policies as complete failures. While Davis was deciding on the elements of his new policy, yet another delegation of Seminoles from Indian Territory journeyed to Florida to confer with Bowlegs. The Seminole chiefs were again taken on a trip to New York and Washington, and again stoutly refused to consider removal. In August 1854, Davis initiated a plan that included the survey and sale of land in South Florida, including

²² *The Florida News* (Jacksonville), October 15, 1853, Florida Digital Newspaper Library, University of Florida Digital Collections, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00054483/00003?search=jacksonville+=news> (accessed February 2, 2015).

²³ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 26.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

the lands immediately bordering the Indian reserve, and an increased military presence to conduct the surveys, make roads, and build forts to protect the settler population and “so as more securely to confine the Seminoles within the Everglades region.”²⁵

The events discussed over the previous several pages are well-known and are covered in detail in government documents available at the National Archives, many of which are now accessible online, and also in the papers of Casey found at the University of Florida’s archives. The purpose of summarizing them here is to highlight the domino effect that saw the pressure on the Florida Seminoles increase exponentially, especially with the killings of 1849, and again with the adoption of Secretary Davis’ plan. These events that preceded the Third Seminole War have been analyzed by many historians, dating back to Coe’s *Red Patriots*, but some authors ignore the build-up of incidents, or at least underestimate their effects on the motivations of the Seminoles. By focusing almost exclusively on the attack on Hartsuff’s unit and the banana plant account, some writers have dismissed valuable context that helps to explain the situation more fully from all sides, especially the impact of the conditions out west in Indian Territory. The following section focuses on the movements and actions of the federal soldiers charged with patrolling the swamps of South Florida, based on an assessment of the primary documentary evidence.

U.S. Army Patrols 1854 – 1855: A Breach of Understanding

In the fall of 1854, federal soldiers were tasked with conducting reconnaissance and making maps in order to construct roads and outposts for the purpose of connecting a line of

²⁵ John M. Schofield, *Forty-Six Years in the Army* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1897), 23, <https://archive.org/details/fortysixyears00schogooq> (accessed November 24, 2014).

forts from the east coast of Florida to the west coast. In January 1855, Lieutenant George L. Hartsuff was appointed as the Army's topographical engineer in charge of the survey operations in the Everglades area south and west of Lake Okeechobee. New forts and blockhouses were constructed while old ones were reactivated during the following months of heavy activity. Hartsuff selected the sites for two of the new forts, named Fort Simon Drum and Fort Shackelford. Despite the military presence so near to the villages of Bowlegs and Sam Jones, Lieutenant John Greble noted that the Seminoles often engaged in amiable interaction with the troops in the area, and even Bowlegs himself would visit the camps and "was always very friendly." But Greble also acknowledged that he and his fellow brothers-at-arms lived under the "continual apprehension of an attack," and that perhaps "the red men only waited for a good opportunity to show themselves the most implacable foes."²⁶ Indian agent Casey reported that some Seminole leaders had complained to him that the frequency of troop movements in the area made hostilities likely, and he requested that the military commander in Florida, Colonel John Munroe, inform his troops that and Seminoles found within the designated Indian boundary were "not to be questioned or molested." Casey also contended that a stricter enforcement of the no-trade policy may have an impact on the Seminoles' decision to continue resisting removal.²⁷

The newly constructed blockhouses and Forts Drum and Shackelford were temporarily abandoned when the military activity in the swamplands came to a pause in June 1855 because of the extreme rainfall brought on by the region's wet season. Another overlooked aspect of the origins of the Third Seminole War is the impact of the wet and dry seasons in South Florida.

²⁶ Benson J. Lossing, *Memoir of Lieut.-Col. John T. Greble, of the United States Army* (Philadelphia, PA: Printed for Private Circulation, 1870), 36, <https://archive.org/details/lieutcoljohntgre00loss> (accessed November 24, 2014).

²⁷ Casey to Munroe, October 28, 1854, and December 13, 1854, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

Major road and fort construction, as well as accurate reconnaissance mapping, were only possible during the dry season, roughly from December through May. From June until November, the water levels were so high that most of the trails and roads were unavailable for heavy activity that required wagons and draft animals. During the dry season of 1854-1855, the Seminoles watched with interest and curiosity from their nearby villages, but remained “friendly,” as the massive amount of federal troops set about their work. But the following winter season, Hartsuff and the first patrol team of the season would find the situation altered significantly.

Hartsuff and a team of ten other men set out from Fort Myers on December 7, 1855 with orders from Colonel Harvey Brown to return to Forts Drum and Shackelford “and those parts of the Big Cypress Swamp explored last year,” in order to “examine their present condition; whether the forts are in good order and have not been disturbed.” In addition, the unit was to report on the “cultivation and provisions of the Indians and more particularly,” whether the nearby villages were “inhabited now or at any time during the winter by them.”²⁸ The answer to Brown’s first inquiry was that the new forts had been more than just disturbed; they had been burned down completely. And secondly, Hartsuff concluded that no Indians had been living in the area for some time, and all of the nearby villages were now deserted and overgrown. After exploring the area for close to two weeks, Hartsuff received orders to return to Fort Myers. On the morning of December 20, 1855, as some of the men ate breakfast and others prepared the wagons for departure, a Seminole war party opened fire on the camp of American troops, killing four men and wounding four others.

²⁸ Brown to Hartsuff, December 5, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

Five out of the six surviving soldiers, besides Hartsuff, gave official reports of the Seminole assault that were sent to headquarters at Fort Brooke, near Tampa. It cannot be known whether the men conversed with each other in some form of corroboration to conceal their activities while out on their scouting, as Canova's account might suggest. But it should be noted that all five of the reports are almost identical regarding the team's movements in the days prior to the ambush, and the five men returned on foot to Fort Myers separately, in three different groups, with three of the men seriously wounded. The reports were collected from the men and mailed to headquarters on December 26, 1855. When the statements of the soldiers are evaluated, and if they are to be trusted, it seems apparent that the Seminole attack on their unit took them completely by surprise. Throughout their reconnaissance of the several Indian villages in the vicinity between Fort Myers and Big Cypress Swamp, the group encountered no signs of any Indians living in the area, as Sergeant Holland noted, "the old trails were all overgrown."²⁹ They did come across two Indians, a man and a boy, who were driving hogs, but the pair declined to offer the soldiers any information.³⁰ The party then discovered that Forts Drum and Shackelford had been burned down, along with their blockhouses, and Private Baker noticed, "that all mile posts and signboards were taken down."³¹

The one piece of evidence that does support Canova's claim also comes from Baker, who noted that while four of the men were patrolling "Billy's Camp," "some of the party took a bunch of bananas."³² This admission seems to corroborate Canova's interpretation, considering that if the soldiers were guilty of any serious wrongdoing, they would have been very unlikely to

²⁹ Statement of Sergeant Holland, December 26, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Statement of Private Baker, December 26, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

³² *Ibid.*

include it in their official statements. But the statements provided by these men suggest that they were utterly convinced that no one had been living anywhere in the area for a significant amount of time, and therefore no one would have been around to supervise Bowlegs' garden. The fact that Hartsuff's men did take some bananas from Bowlegs' garden is not in question, but rather the intentions of the troops and the supposed reaction of the Seminoles has been misinterpreted due to Canova's emphasis on personal offense. Holland asserted in his report that, "Mr. Hartsuff told me that he thought there were no Indians in the country, that he could find no signs of them, and that he thought they had gone to the sea coast and had taken with them all the troops they had last winter – the only Indians, or signs of them, that we saw, until attacked, was the two driving hogs."³³ This sentiment was echoed by Corporal Williams, who related that, "the Lieut. (Hartsuff) said he did not think any Indians had been in country to live since last year"³⁴ If the soldiers truly believed that no Indians had been living in the villages for some time, most likely since the previous dry season, then the troops were probably only guilty of food foraging, and not the malicious intent of inciting a war that is so often attributed to their actions. Regardless, the more significant historical inquiry is whether the soldiers' actions directly caused the Seminoles to attack, which, considering the available evidence, seems incredibly unlikely.

The soldiers in Hartsuff's unit had good reason to trust his conclusions regarding the Seminoles' whereabouts, evidence of their movements, and the feasibility of engaging them militarily. Hartsuff was well familiar with the region and in a report from the previous dry season, he offered some opinions regarding the Seminole situation. He considered their strongholds "impregnable," and that they "might baffle the search of our whole army" if forcible

³³ Holland, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

³⁴ Statement of Corporal Williams, December 26, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

expulsion were attempted. He also noted their stockpile of “powder and ball” and the utter failure of past expeditions to locate hidden Seminole villages in the swamps of South Florida.³⁵ In the official report of the Seminole assault on Hartsuff’s unit, Colonel Harvey Brown also displayed confidence in the summations of Hartsuff, explaining to his superiors that “he (Hartsuff), having during the last winter repeatedly passed unmolested alone, and with an escort of one man, over the very same grounds; and the Indians never subsequently having given the slightest evidence of a hostile disposition.” Brown repeatedly pointed out in his report that “not the slightest evidence” existed that suggested any Indians were in the area, since Hartsuff had informed him that “the paths that were fresh and traveled last winter, are now quite overgrown”³⁶

Estimates of the number of Seminoles who participated in the attack range from twenty-five to forty, according to the varying reports of the survivors. In attempting to discern whether the Seminole attack was predetermined by the various Indian bands, or whether the war decision was made only after the banana theft incident, some evidence from the soldiers’ reports is illuminating. Baker observed that the Indians, “were handsomely dressed in red dresses and I think they were painted.”³⁷ Holland noticed that “there were thirty five or forty Indians – they had black plumes and white ones.”³⁸ Although it is conceivably possible that the Seminole war party made their decision to attack Hartsuff’s company only after the garden incident, their sizable force and elaborate dress and war paint is another indication that a significant amount of planning was undertaken prior to the decision to attack. Furthermore, the burning of the forts and blockhouses and the removal of signage should have been a clear indication of the Seminoles’

³⁵ Seley, Jr., “Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants,” 8-9.

³⁶ Brown to Vincent, December 24, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

³⁷ Baker, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

³⁸ Holland, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

desire for U.S. troops to refrain from entering their territory all together, and that the overall situation had changed drastically since the previous season. Little else can be learned about the soldiers under Hartsuff's command from the available records except that Private John Hanna was promoted to Corporal shortly after the Seminole attack. The reason for his promotion was likely due to his decisive defensive actions during the ambush and the attrition caused by the loss of life within the unit. This may be thin evidence to base any presumptions on, but logic would indicate that any soldier partly responsible for inciting a war would not have been promoted.

Seley, Jr. posits that the two Indians driving hogs may have communicated the movement of the U.S. troops to the Seminole warriors, who then made their decision to plan an assault at the most opportune time. Seley, Jr. denies that Seminoles were even aware of the U.S. soldiers' activities in the abandoned villages since their likely route from the new villages to the scene of the ambush would not have taken them near Bowlegs' abandoned garden, which the group did not visit until two days prior to the attack.³⁹ But the possibility should not be dismissed so easily that Seminoles may have known all of the soldiers' movements, especially since Hartsuff had previously noted "their perfect system of espionage and signal fires."⁴⁰ He was referring specifically to the possibility of taking the enemy unaware, but the message was clear that the Seminoles had an effective system for maintaining surveillance over what they still considered to be their territory. Even if the Seminoles were aware of whatever may have occurred in Bowlegs' village, it still would not necessarily mean that the attack was prompted solely for instant retaliation and not some larger purpose. Seley, Jr. hypothesizes that "the attack was likely prompted by the exuberance" of one young warrior and his cohorts, who wanted "to do

³⁹ Seley, Jr., "Lieutenant Hartsuff and the Banana Plants," 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

something that would impress their own people.”⁴¹ While Seley, Jr.’s essay represents one of the best detailed studies of the movements of Hartsuff’s team, if not the only one, his explanation for the reason behind the attack fails to consider the broader context. Seley, Jr. made a point to analyze in depth the records of the troops stationed in Florida, and in doing so, failed to consult all but a few other sources. He may not have reached the same conclusion if he had considered that in the recent past, after the killings of 1849 and 1850, Seminole warriors who committed violent acts without the sanction of the chiefs were disavowed and branded as outlaws. The collective Seminole response to the ambush on Hartsuff’s men was not to claim ignorance and seek a path to peace, as they had done in the past, but rather to continue with coordinated assaults on outposts and individuals all across South Florida.

While examination of the surviving U.S. soldiers’ reports alone does not provide the context needed to fully understand the factors that led to bloodshed, it does provide insight into the perspectives of the American soldiers so often blamed for inciting the war. Analyses of the soldiers’ statements, their precise movements in the days leading up to the attack, including their discovery of the burned forts and abandoned villages, and the later revelation of an Indian council gathering, all seem to indicate that the Seminole attack was predetermined to some degree, and not the result of a personal insult stemming from agricultural destruction. Since Hartsuff was the army’s topographical engineer, and had been responsible for furnishing the most detailed map to date of the Seminoles’ primary villages, in addition to overseeing the construction of the two new forts that were subsequently burned down, it was probably not a

⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

coincidence that his unit was the one chosen for the assault, as Covington has pointed out.⁴² Perhaps Lieutenant Greble was correct when he suggested, albeit with hindsight, that the Seminoles' friendly disposition during the previous season of activity was merely a façade intended to mask their preparations for war.

Further Perspectives: Newspapers, Soldiers' Memoirs, and Florida's White Settlers

Contemporary newspapers represent another perspective from which to consider the Seminole attack on the American soldiers, and many can now be found online in the Florida Digital Newspaper Library. It was no secret that the majority of white Floridians wanted the remaining Indians in the state removed by any means necessary although occasionally the opposite view was expressed. One settler wrote to the *Jacksonville Florida News* and pointed out that in his opinion, only the cattle barons on the South Florida frontier stood to benefit from the Indians' departure.⁴³ Florida's white citizens sometimes disagreed on whether either federal troops or the volunteer militia should have the primary responsibility of removing the Seminoles.⁴⁴ Just five days before the assault on Hartsuff's troops, a writer for the *Tampa Herald*, having considered the accumulation of soldiers and the military activity taking place, wrote that "We expect by every mail from Fort Myers to hear of commencement of active

⁴² Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 35.

⁴³ *Jacksonville Florida News*, August 27, 1853, Florida Digital Newspaper Library, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00054483/00175?search=florida+=news+=jacksonville> (accessed February 3, 2015).

⁴⁴ Writers for the *Tampa Herald*, January 20, 1855, Florida Digital Newspaper Library, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00086612/00001?search=tampa+=herald> (accessed February 3, 2015), and the *Jacksonville Florida Republican*, January 17, 1856, quoted in Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 36, both wanted the state militia to be heavily involved in removing the Seminoles, while a writer for the *Tampa Florida Peninsular*, December 23, 1856, quoted in Covington, *Billy Bowlegs War*, 36, wanted the federal government to "exert her supremacy."

operations.”⁴⁵ Once the hostilities had actually commenced, most newspapers reported the assault in a matter-of-fact manner, with the *Tallahassee Floridian and Journal* running the headline “Another Indian War Commenced,” while the *Tampa Peninsular’s* headline stated “Ten Soldiers Fired Upon by the Indians.”⁴⁶ An official military report was sent from the army’s headquarters in Florida to the local newspapers that simply stated that the soldiers of an “exploring party...were suddenly attacked by a party of Seminole Indians”⁴⁷ The *Tallahassee Floridian and Journal* concluded that “The unprovoked attack upon Lt. Hartsuff’s command...assures us beyond doubt, of the determined hostile purposes of the tribe,” while the *Tampa Peninsular* called for the “speedy eradication of...the incubus which has ruled the destiny of our State.”⁴⁸

Many white Floridians did not seem surprised or daunted by the commencement of another Indian War, and even Secretary of War Crawford had previously expressed his belief that there existed “what appeared to be a prominent wish of a portion of the inhabitants of Florida to engage in a war with the remnant of Indians in that State,” although he also believed that an even larger portion of the white citizens held the opposite inclination.⁴⁹ Another aspect of the Third Seminole War that largely has been overlooked by scholars is the differences between Florida’s settlers, many of whom had a personal interest in seeing the Seminoles removed, and the federal soldiers and officials, who often conducted their duty with seeming indifference, but sometimes also expressed disdain for the state’s white population. Major Justus McKinstry, upon

⁴⁵ *Tampa Herald*, December 15, 1855, quoted in Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 35.

⁴⁶ *Tallahassee Floridian and Journal*, January 5, 1856, Florida Digital Newspaper Library, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00079928/00471?search=tallahassee+=floridian+=journal> (accessed February 3, 2015).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* *Tampa Peninsula*, December 29, 1855, Florida Digital Newspaper Library, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00079921/00024?search=tampa+=peninsular> (accessed February 3, 2015).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Crawford to Twiggs, March 20, 1850, *Relative to Hostilities*, 16.

arriving in South Florida in late 1855, noted in a letter that “The ‘Crackers’ of Florida seem delighted at the prospect of another Indian war in their midst.” But McKinstry considered the endeavor unworthy of the effort and that the value of land in South Florida had been falsely inflated, concluding that, “If Uncle Samuel had an eye to his own interest he would present the country to Billy,” since “The dime is about the value of the peninsula south of this river (the Caloosahatchee)”⁵⁰

Canova was not the only ex-soldier who fought in the Third Seminole War and penned a memoir of some sort years later, and Justus McKinstry was not the only federal soldier to criticize Florida’s white citizens. John T. Greble was born in Philadelphia, rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and was killed in the early days of the Civil War while fighting for Union forces. Greble, as previously noted, also served in Florida as one of the army’s mapmakers prior to the outbreak of the Third Seminole War and his comments on the conflict are found in his memoir, transcribed and edited by his biographer, Benson J. Lossing. Greble felt that the “planters and speculators” of Florida and Georgia were to blame for both the Second and Third Seminole Wars, and in a passage found in a letter to his parents, he describes the circumstances from his perspective: “The Indians are perfectly peaceable, and are the best inhabitants of the State, according to my way of thinking. I will not conceal from you, however, that it is the intention of the government to have them out of Florida. A group of politicians have represented that the country occupied by the Indians is the most fruitful in the world – good land for coffee plantations, spice-groves, and all that – and the Indians, accordingly, have to vacate, unless they

⁵⁰ Major Justus McKinstry to W.A. Gordon, Ft. Myers, FL, December 30, 1855, Florida History Miscellaneous Manuscripts, University of Florida, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History.

change their minds in Washington when they learn the true nature of the country.”⁵¹ Presumably, some of the same “planter-politicians” featured in Baptist’s study of “Middle Florida” were also directly involved in passing the laws and measures against the Seminoles and investing in plans for the use of lands in South Florida, but a scholarly attempt to connect the two subjects has not been undertaken as of yet. Neither Greble, nor his biographer Lossing, directly mentioned the opening Seminole attack of the war, but Lossing notes that Hartsuff was Greble’s “fellow academician” and was “engaged” in “that service,” referring to the war.⁵² Lossing also quotes at length a glowing eulogy written by Hartsuff on the occasion of Greble’s death which suggests that the two may have been close friends, but this piece of evidence and the omission of the banana plant story do not necessarily have any impact on the accuracy of Canova’s interpretation.

Another ex-federal soldier, Loomis L. Langdon, provided his perspective on the Third Seminole War in Florida when he was asked to author some personal reminiscences of his time in the U.S. Army for the *The History of the First Regiment of Artillery* (1879), compiled by William L. Haskin. Langdon was born in Buffalo, New York, rose to the rank of Brigadier General, and fought for the Union in the Civil War. During his tenure in Florida, he actually served under Greble for a time and offered views similar to those of his commanding officer as to the reasons why the army was sent in to survey the Seminole lands. Langdon wrote that “The whites on the western side of Florida were forbidden to invade the lands reserved to the Indians, but they had cast longing eyes to that region as pasture ground for their cattle, and indeed, officials had been sent in there to make maps of the country.” Unlike Greble, Langdon does

⁵¹ Lossing, *Memoir of John T. Greble*, 38-39.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 41-42.

discuss the Seminole attack, calling it “Hartsuff’s massacre.” In his brief description of the event, Langdon wrote that Hartsuff’s unit “was surprised early one morning by Bowlegs and half his party killed, he himself being badly wounded, and only escaping after lying hidden till after nightfall up to his neck in a swamp.”⁵³ Although four dead out of eleven is not quite half of the party, Langdon may have just been simplifying matters for his readers since his description of Hartsuff’s escape method suggests that he did have intimate knowledge of the attack. But Langdon, like Greble, simply does not mention anything regarding the soldiers’ movements or actions in the days before the Seminole attack. Langdon does offer some interesting insight into the way that soldiers remember and retell war stories, which may also shed some light on Canova’s interpretation. Langdon prefaced his memoirs with this warning to readers regarding the writings of ex-soldiers: “I have written all the more freely, perhaps, from remembering that when seated around the campfire, each contributing his part to the entertainment of the evening, none of us ever have our fluency checked by the thought that we are being criticized.”⁵⁴

John M. Schofield was born in western New York State, fought for the Union in the Civil War, and rose to Secretary of War under President Andrew Johnson before retiring as the Commanding General of the U.S. Army. Schofield also served in Florida and wrote about his experiences in *Forty-Six Years in the Army* (1897). He notes that he “was ordered out of Florida before the Seminoles found out what the plans of the War Department were.” While it may be easily dismissed as an insignificant and passing remark, Schofield seems to suggest that the plan to survey and sell land near the Indian reserve was enough to prompt the Seminoles to war.

⁵³ William L. Haskin, *The History of the First Regiment of Artillery, from Its Organization in 1821, to January 1st, 1876* (Portland, ME: B. Thurston and Company, 1879), 388, 392.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 373.

Schofield refers to Hartsuff as one of his “most intimate friends,” and describes the attack on his unit briefly before attributing it to “bad luck.”⁵⁵ Like Greble and Langdon, Schofield did not cover any events that occurred just prior to the Seminole assault.

Yet another veteran of the Third Seminole War who published a memoir, *Campaigning in Florida in 1855* (1909), was Alexander Webb. Webb was born in New York City, served as a Union General in the Civil War, and received a Medal of Honor for gallantry at the Battle of Gettysburg. Concerning the Seminole assault, Webb wrote that Bowlegs “had, without any provocation on the part of the United States troops, attacked and murdered part of Lieutenant Hartsuff’s command and severely wounded the lieutenant.”⁵⁶ Webb’s insistence on the lack of provocation by the U.S. troops could have been a direct response to the account offered by Canova since Webb’s memoir was written well after Canova’s book, and even after the books by Coe and Moore-Willson, or it could simply be because that is the way he remembered it.

Regarding Florida’s white citizens, while Greble placed blame with the planters and speculators and Langdon pointed to the desires of cattlemen, Webb echoed McKinstry’s assessment concerning the poor “Cracker Jack” settlers: “The white population of lower Florida and middle Florida was as ignorant and lawless as the Indian, and was largely dependent upon the money paid to the soldiers quartered in their vicinity for their support.”⁵⁷ Webb makes a compelling point regarding the economic influx that often accompanied Indian wars and Removal efforts in the nineteenth century. Historian John Ellisor referred to the phenomenon as “Indian business” in his study, *The Second Creek War* (2010), a subject which has many

⁵⁵ Schofield, *Forty-Six Years in the Army*, 24-25.

⁵⁶ Alexander S. Webb, “Campaigning in Florida in 1855,” *Journal of the Military Service Institution* 45 (November/December, 1909), 401-402.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

similarities and parallels to all three Seminole Wars. While most whites in Florida simply wanted the Seminoles removed as quickly as possible by the 1850s, there were others who stood to gain financially. Cattlemen stood to gain two-fold: by having the Indians removed, more land would be available for grazing and in the interim a market for beef would be created by the influx of soldiers and activity. A man identified as “Captain Finegan” was accused by a visitor from Massachusetts of attempting to incite “another Indian War” for the sole purpose of selling beef to the army.⁵⁸ And a Tampa settler commented years later that once the war began in late 1855, his family got into the freight business in order to supply goods to the troops, and “Things around Tampa began to be active and quite a lot of money was placed in circulation.”⁵⁹

Many of Florida’s white citizens were eager to form militia units with the hopes of having a hand in vanquishing the Seminoles left in the state while also receiving government pay for their efforts. But the volunteer militias were often less than ideal fighting forces. During the frontier panic of 1849-1850, Secretary of War Crawford chided Florida Governor Thomas Brown for the mustering of volunteer companies without proper authority.⁶⁰ In 1852, some of Florida’s civilian soldiers received criticism for the forceful seizure of several Indians who had wandered beyond the boundary of their reserve.⁶¹ And in the early months of the war, the state militia was plagued by poor organization, the refusal of some companies to perform foot patrols, the distrust of some frontier settlers, and the incompetence of some officers.⁶² But later in the

⁵⁸ Arthur W. Thompson, “A Massachusetts Traveller on the Florida Frontier,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (October 1959): 6.

⁵⁹ James McKay, Jr., “Reminiscences of Capt. James McKay, Jr.” *The Sunland Tribune* XVII (November, 1991): 78-87. <http://www.hillsborough.communityatlas.usf.edu/upload/documents/ReminiscencesCaptJamesMcKayJr.pdf> (accessed November 24, 2014).

⁶⁰ Crawford to Brown, March 11, 1850, *Relative to Hostilities*, 16.

⁶¹ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 23-25.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 37-39, 54-56.

war, the state militia redeemed itself by locating many of the Seminoles' hidden villages, and is often credited with helping to bring about an end to the conflict with their use of boat patrols.⁶³ Besides Canova, the only other Florida volunteer soldier to leave behind a written record of his experiences was Francis C. M. Boggess, who published *A Veteran of Four Wars* in 1900.

In his autobiography, Boggess discusses his family's history, which included an accumulation and subsequent loss of wealth due to the fluctuating market prices in the cotton industry. Boggess relates his difficulties in finding employment in Florida, and his reluctant acceptance of a teaching job, although "school teaching was repugnant" to him. He went on to detail his involvement with the Florida militia, and like Canova, claimed to provide a "Heretofore Unwritten History of the Florida Seminole Indian Wars." Boggess, unlike all of the federal soldiers whose writings were discussed previously, did include the banana plant account, and even the assertion that Bowlegs "and Lieutenant Hartsuff had a quarrel and Hartsuff kicked him down the steps." What makes this work unique is that Boggess claims to have been in Hartsuff's company "for forty days after he recovered...and has heard him relate the fight and all the particulars. Lieutenant Hartsuff said all he wished was to come up with Billy Bowlegs."⁶⁴ The implication that Hartsuff held a personal grievance toward the Seminole chief is not surprising, nor is the revelation that Hartsuff may have believed that the actions of his men caused the attack. Despite the apparent confirmation of Canova's interpretation, there are several factors that diminish the credibility of Boggess' work. *A Veteran of Four Wars* was published fifteen years after Canova's work, and a few years after the works of Moore-Willson and Coe. It

⁶³ Ibid., 71-76.

⁶⁴ Francis Calvin Morgan Boggess, *A Veteran of Four Wars. The Autobiography of F.C.M. Boggess. A Record of Pioneer Life and Adventure, and Heretofore Unwritten History of the Florida Seminole Indian Wars* (Arcadia, FL: Champion, 1900), 2-3, 32, 43-45.

is possible that Boggess could have heard the tale straight from Hartsuff, or from other persons in the years after the war, but the phrasing that he uses in his book suggests that he had already seen the account in print, and that by 1900, the banana plant story was mostly common knowledge, at least to Floridians. In addition, Boggess claims that “Hartsuff killed four Indians” during the ambush, but in the official report of the incident, the commanding officer admits that it was not known by the American troops if any Seminoles had been killed or not.⁶⁵ It would seem that Boggess’ knowledge of the Seminole assault was not as all-encompassing as he would have liked his readers to believe. Although he does not mention Canova directly, Boggess may have had an interest in supporting the claim of his fellow volunteer, or at least, that the two men shared similar backgrounds and outlooks that made them more susceptible to having been familiar with, and having faith in the accuracy of the banana plant account.

The division of white society in Florida along class lines is a prominent feature of Baptist’s study *Creating an Old South*, and while struggles for political and social power played out in North Florida (then commonly known as Middle Florida), these aspects of white society were much less significant in terms of the Third Seminole War. That the actions and attitudes of the newly professionalized federal soldiers compared and contrasted with Florida’s volunteer militia and civilian population, however, represents a potentially fruitful avenue for further scholarly investigation. In addition to the number of federal soldiers born in the northern United States, many of the troops in Florida were born outside of the United States. At Fort Dallas (Miami) in 1850, seventy percent of the soldiers were foreign-born.⁶⁶ Abner Doubleday loathed the “German or Irish emigrants who finding themselves penniless in our large cities had enlisted

⁶⁵ Munroe to Headquarters Department of Florida, December 23, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

⁶⁶ Eck, “South Florida’s Prelude to War,” 70.

to get bread,” and who “were no match for the savages.”⁶⁷ And a Captain L.A. Hardee commented on a violent confrontation between a lieutenant of the Florida militia and a sergeant of the federal army, before the “threat of war between Regulars and Volunteers was quelled.”⁶⁸ The cultural and class makeup of the American soldiers during this war has been ignored by historians, but is important to consider for this topic since the most common interpretation comes from a volunteer soldier (Canova), and the often conflicting attitudes of the men who fought in the war is worth careful consideration.

Conclusion

This chapter’s analysis of the primary records regarding the opening attack of the Third Seminole War highlights what some previous historians likely learned for themselves as well: that the available sources do not yield any definitive answers concerning the Seminoles’ precise motivations for their assault on Hartsuff’s unit. However, conclusions may still be reached through a close textual analysis of the surviving soldiers’ reports, and the contextual clues evidenced by the Seminoles’ actions prior to the attack. Hartsuff’s troops were uniformly convinced that no significant number of Seminoles were in the vicinity of their patrol, and they all insisted that they were taken completely by surprise by the attack. Their official statements indicate that the U.S. soldiers were certainly not looking to “pick a fight” with the Indians, like some authors since have claimed. Had the troops been expecting retaliation for their actions in Bowlegs’ abandoned garden, they also likely would have defended their encampment more securely.

⁶⁷ David, Ramsey, ed., “Abner Doubleday and the Third Seminole War,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (January 1981): 327.

⁶⁸ *DeVane’s Early Florida History*, NP.

Regardless of the actions of Hartsuff's soldiers during their reconnaissance, two pieces of evidence indicate that the Seminole attack was almost certainly premeditated. For one, the burning of Forts Drum and Shakelford, which were the newest forts and were closer to the Seminole towns than any other U.S. strongholds, was a clear sign of hostile intentions. The Seminoles likely considered the army's patrols as unacceptable intrusions onto their lands, and a violation of General Worth's 1842 agreement. And two, the relocation of all of the nearby Indian towns prior to the winter dry season of 1855-1856 was another ominous, and seemingly obvious indication that relations with the Seminoles were severely troubled. Had the Seminoles not relocated their villages prior to the assault, it would have been much more difficult to remain hidden in the swamps for as long as they were able to. Additional Seminole actions, reactions, and general behaviors are addressed further in the following chapter.

An examination of the writings and memoirs penned by ex-soldiers, again, does not yield much in the way of definitive conclusions, but a few points should be noted. It is interesting and perhaps quite significant that only Canova's fellow volunteer militiaman, Boggess, corroborated his story concerning the banana garden. Conversely, none of the former federal troops mentioned the banana story in their writings, and some even explicitly blamed Florida's planters, speculators, and cattlemen for indirectly instigating the war. This suggests that perhaps the banana plant story was initially only well-known and popular amongst Floridians, including those who fought in the volunteer militia. As D.B. McKay pointed out, the tale "was widely current among the pioneers."⁶⁹ Whether or not the account was "widely current" before or after the publication of Canova's book is uncertain, but it seems likely that Canova was the sole

⁶⁹ McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, 561.

source of the story, and that it only became well-known to Floridians following his work, and the works of Moore-Willson and Coe.

CHAPTER 4: OTHER POSSIBLE CATALYSTS: REASSESSING SEMINOLE PERSPECTIVES

Despite the scarcity of source material that contains the perspectives of the Florida Seminoles, interpretations of their viewpoints can still be achieved by using the available records in a slightly different manner. By focusing on the Seminoles' actions, reactions, past experiences, and general behaviors, conclusions may be reached that shed light on their possible motivations and goals. While the voices of the Florida Seminoles are mostly silent in the sources, the perspectives and desires of the Western branch of the tribe are better known, but historians of the Third Seminole War have virtually ignored the impact that the larger portion of the tribe may have had on those still in Florida. The events and circumstances in Indian Territory, and how they may have affected the decisions of the Florida Seminoles, are analyzed here as well.

Seminole Actions and Reactions

One method for analyzing the possible reasons behind the Seminole attack of December 20, 1855, is to compare the incident to the previous Seminole killings in 1849-1850, when seemingly similar circumstances prevailed. The murders in 1849 and 1850 were immediately disavowed by the entire Seminole tribe and were explained as isolated incidents related to personal disputes. The Seminole attack in 1855 shared the same basic characteristics as the earlier killings; it was an act of immediate retribution committed without the knowledge or sanction of the rest of tribe, if Canova's account is to be trusted. But the Seminoles' actions in the aftermath of the various violent episodes highlight the drastically altered situation in 1855.

By all accounts, in 1849-1850 Bowlegs and the other Seminole leaders went above and beyond expectations by capturing the Indian killers themselves and turning them over for punishment.

But in 1855, there was no Seminole apology or promise of justice, although Canova would have us believe that the forces of personal insult and revenge were still the primary factors. If the assault of 1855 was truly a short-sighted act of retaliation, then why did no Seminole leaders come forward to renounce the attack? It could be supposed that Bowlegs had the ability through his influence to quell any Indian criticism of the ambush. But despite the factional nature of the various Indian bands, all of the villages in the area of the Big Cypress Swamp had been relocated prior to the winter dry season of 1855-1856 and the Seminole ambush, as Hartsuff's team had learned. Even during the last few months of the spring dry season in 1855, the army scouts began reporting that in the area between Fort Myers and the Big Cypress Swamp, few Indians were seen, as "They had generally abandoned their homes and sought to avoid the Troops."¹ This suggests that all of the Indians in the vicinity were well-aware of, and in agreement regarding, hostile intentions towards the surveying soldiers. As noted previously, the abandoned villages and the burned forts were a clear indication of an unsettled situation.

Although the work of writer John Parrish suggests that Chief Chipco was opposed to the use of force, he and his band were at least made aware of the intentions of the remainder of the tribe at the Seminole council meeting in the fall of 1855. Unlike the murders in 1849 and 1850 when the Seminoles were left vulnerable to reprisal due to the undeclared and unsanctioned actions of the outsiders, in 1855, the entire tribe seemed well prepared for the American response

¹ Munroe to Cooper and Thomas, July 15, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

since they had all moved their villages to more secure locations. And following the opening of the war, one of the first orders given to military personnel in the field stated that “All Indians met with will be considered as hostile.”² It did not matter to U.S. officials that some members of the tribe may have been against violent measures; that the attack was upon federal soldiers meant that the response would be swifter and more severe than the reaction to the previous killings. The Seminoles would have been acutely aware of the likely federal response and it would have been practically a necessity for Bowlegs to secure effective hiding places for the new villages prior to the attack on Hartsuff’s unit, or else large portions of the tribe would have been left exposed, and easily captured or killed.

After the assault in late 1855, the subsequent war targets chosen by the Seminoles provide further evidence that a campaign of warfare was planned well before Hartsuff’s fated patrol. From January 6, 1856 until June 14, 1856, small groups of Seminoles coordinated attacks on at least eleven different targets all over the state, ranging from Fort Dallas (Miami), to Pasco County (north of Tampa). Even without further evidence it seems unlikely that such a lengthy and far-reaching campaign of violence would be undertaken solely in response to a personal insult involving garden vandalism. Covington claims that the “Seminoles raids were not planned in great detail but arranged more on the spur of the moment...against relatively unprotected places,”³ but the evidence indicates that the Seminoles may have chosen certain targets for very specific reasons, and some were actually quite well-protected. An assault on the home of plantation owner Dr. Joseph Braden, known as “Braden Castle” for its fortified defenses, was repelled by the inhabitants but the Seminoles were able to seize seven African slaves, several

² Vincent to Hill, December 23, 1855, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

³ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 41.

mules, and some food and supplies, which may have been their primary purpose in the attack anyway. In addition, the Seminoles made several assaults upon relatively well-protected wagon trains for the purpose of procuring much needed supplies and another attack may have been an act of personal revenge stemming from events that occurred back during the Second Seminole War.⁴

Many authors, including Covington, portray Seminole strategy as guerilla in nature, and comprised solely of the intention to spread fear and panic along the South Florida frontier through random attacks and bloodshed. But historian Samuel Watson warns that “references to ‘guerilla warfare’ are far too vague...to assess Seminole military strategy,” and “do not do justice to the rationality, vision, complexity, and dilemmas of the Seminole war effort.”⁵ The failure of historians to analyze Seminole military strategy is another byproduct of the same mindset behind the banana plant theory: the intrinsic intellectual inferiority of Native peoples, whether consciously recognized or not.

Seminole Allies

While a handful of white Floridians and federal soldiers voiced their support in favor of the Seminoles’ cause, the Florida Indians did have other allies who are virtually silent in the documentary evidence. Cuban fishermen and traders were known to have kept up a reciprocal relationship with the Seminole people and supplied them with arms, ammunition, and liquor, items often denied them by Florida’s government. “Spanish Fisheries of Charlotte Harbor”

⁴ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 42; Covington, *The Seminoles*, 133.

⁵ Samuel Watson, “Seminole Strategy, 1812-1858: A Prospectus for Further Research,” in *America’s Hundred Years’ War: U.S. Expansion to the Gulf Coast and the Fate of the Seminole, 1763-1858*, ed. William S. Belko (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 156, 172.

(1973), by E. A. Hammond, addresses the topic during an earlier period and focuses primarily on the prevalence of Seminole Indians taking work in the Spanish fisheries along the southwest Florida coast.⁶ According to the U.S. government, all Florida Indians were barred from visiting the shorelines on either coast for any reason. But evidence shows that in addition to the Spanish fishing villages, cattle drives on the west coast and “contraband trade” on the east coast were maintained by the Seminoles throughout this period.⁷

Another small piece of evidence that suggests a strong bond of trust between the Seminoles and some of the Cubans and Spaniards in the area concerns the panic of 1849-1850. When John Casey attempted to contact Bowlegs and the other Seminole leaders, he placed tokens of peace in the Spanish fishing villages along the coast where the Indians were likely to find them. And when Bowlegs decided to answer Casey’s call, it was Cuban John Felipe Bermudez who acted as intermediary after Bowlegs placed a white flag on the door of his fishing hut in Sarasota Bay. Bermudez was said to have “lived on most friendly terms with the Indians; but, having also been in free intercourse with the whites, abandoned his property” after the Seminole murders had occurred in the area. It is interesting to note that Bermudez was on good terms with both the white settlers and the Seminoles, and before Casey was able to confirm that the peace sign left by Bowlegs was intended for him, he also considered that the white flag could have possibly been a direct message to Bermudez, “as an assurance of his own security.”⁸ The exact role that was played by the Seminoles’ Cuba-based allies during the period represents

⁶ E. A. Hammond, “The Spanish Fisheries of Charlotte Harbor,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (April 1973): 355-380.

⁷ Haines to Cooper, October 10, 1854, *Letters Sent, Troops in Florida*.

⁸ Morris to Jones, August 20, 1849, *Relative to Hostilities*, 59-60.

another untapped area of research, and perhaps primary source material found in either Cuba or Key West would yield even more insight into the subject.

Although the majority of white Floridians were unified in their contempt for the Seminole Indians, the previous analysis highlights that the situation was not such a clear “white versus red” issue. Even within the Florida state militia, Canova himself notes the existence of “half-breeds” and “Spaniards” fighting with the volunteers, which further illustrates the multi-cultural makeup on both sides of the conflict. And of course, the Seminoles’ relationships with free Africans and slaves is always an intriguing but complex piece of the historical puzzle, but as yet no historian has examined their specific affiliation for the period of the Third Seminole War.

Seminole Agriculture

Despite the position of this thesis that an alleged incident of garden destruction did not cause the Third Seminole War, the importance and significance of agriculture to the Seminole culture should not be dismissed all together without some analysis. In addition to hunting game and grazing cattle, the cultivation of crops was vitally important to the Seminoles’ sustenance and way of life. In 1847, Captain John Sprague reported that thanks to “The game of the country, climate and natural productions...every necessary want is supplied. Corn, pumpkins, potatoes, beans and peas are raised fresh.”⁹ In the years prior to the Third Seminole War, Indians would often bring fruit and other goods to exchange at the area’s trading posts, including the Kennedy and Darling store.¹⁰ Even into the early decades of the twentieth century, Seminoles would still

⁹ Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*, 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

bring excess “garden produce” to barter with at trading posts.¹¹ And in the scouting reports of the American soldiers who conducted reconnaissance and patrols before and during the Third war, references abound to fields of cultivated crops being found, up to twenty acres worth in one instance.¹² Historian Knetsch speculates that the success of the Seminoles’ crops may have even inspired a level of envy among Florida’s white settlers.¹³

Even Canova commented on the fertility of the area and the abundance of wild fruit, despite his insistence that Bowlegs’ banana plants were somehow a special exception. Canova asserted that the “region may be termed, with propriety, *the home of the banana*, for frost seldom, if ever, enters the dominion of the Big Cypress” (my emphasis). “Banana plants, fifteen feet or more in height, and immense corn, were among the products of this fertile region.”¹⁴ In addition, it was well-known that the tribe’s women were responsible for planting crops, preparing meals, and tending to livestock, while the men primarily hunted game, a reality even acknowledged by Canova.¹⁵ If a typical Seminole man did not engage in the cultivation of crops, then it seems doubly unlikely that a chief with the prestige and responsibilities of Bowlegs would have “reared” his banana plants “with parental care,” as Canova suggested. Another detail of Seminole farming practices serves to further undermine Canova’s account: Once the women planted a set of crops, “they would allow wild plants to mingle with their crops in the fertile soil. For this reason, the land was full of wild fruit and vegetables.”¹⁶ While the importance of

¹¹ Alan K. Craig and David McJunkin, “Stranahan’s: Last of the Seminole Trading Posts,” *Florida Anthropologist* 24, (June 1971), 48.

¹² Loomis to Headquarters Department of Florida, Fort Brooke, December 6, 1857, Edward Keenan Papers.

¹³ Knetsch, “Florida’s Seminole Wars In and Around Manatee County,” np.

¹⁴ Canova, *Life and Adventures in South Florida*, 66-69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁶ “Seminole Tribe,” Kidport Reference Library, <http://www.kidport.com/reflib/usahistory/NativeAmericans/Seminole.htm#Books> (accessed January 17, 2015).

agriculture to the Florida Seminoles cannot be denied, a deeper contextual analysis reveals the extremely doubtful nature of Bowlegs' personal attachment to his abandoned banana garden, especially when much more important issues were at stake, like the survival of his people.

Indian Territory, Seminole-Creek Conflict, and the Need for a Satisfactory Treaty

In order to more fully understand the reasons why the Florida Seminoles chose to wage war against the United States and the people of South Florida in 1855, it is illuminating to look beyond the state lines and to consider the broader circumstances. Historical investigations that address the Third Seminole War usually adopt one of two approaches. The majority of studies focus almost exclusively on local events that occurred in Florida. Other accounts concentrate on the majority of the Seminole people, and since a much larger portion of the tribe was sent west following the close of the Second Seminole War in 1842, most of these studies barely discuss the subsequent events that occurred in Florida. Covington informs us that even two of the best books on the history of the Seminole people, Grant Foreman's *Indian Removal* (1932), and Edwin McReynolds's *The Seminoles* (1957), "pay little attention to the Third Seminole War."¹⁷ But likewise, Covington, the Missalls, Peters, and most other Florida historians devote hardly any space to the circumstances of the Seminoles who had already emigrated west to Indian Territory, and the possible impact that their condition had on the motivations and actions of those Seminoles still remaining in Florida. Despite the fact that over four decades have passed since Covington's statement, the dichotomy in the literature persists. Furthermore, the divide in the historiography actually parallels the bureaucratic disconnect that existed within the Bureau of

¹⁷ James Covington, "An Episode in the Third Seminole War," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (July 1966): n1.

Indian Affairs in the years between the Second and Third Seminole Wars and affected their efforts to induce the Florida Seminoles to leave the state willingly.

The annual reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs are an especially useful source for gaining insight into the western portion of the Seminole tribe, but this source base has been vastly underutilized by historians of the Florida Seminoles. These records contain a wealth of information regarding the Seminoles in Indian Territory, where communication and contact with government officials was much more frequent than in Florida and more often recorded for posterity. The Seminoles' decision to wage war for a third time in Florida was certainly the result of a combination of reasons. But the one factor that receives the least consideration from scholars is the condition of the Western Seminoles as they struggled to maintain control of their affairs and adjust to their new homes in Indian Territory. The suffering of their kin in the West and the destitution that awaited them there may have been the most decisive factor that determined the Florida Seminoles' resolve to remain in the peninsula, even at the risk of open warfare.

The intense rivalry and factionalism among the Seminole and Creek peoples and their complicated history of both conflict and alliance have been well-noted by many historians of both tribes. *Removal Aftershock* (1994), by Jane Lancaster, details the myriad difficulties that faced the Seminole migrants after they arrived in their new lands west of the Mississippi River following the end of the Second Seminole War, including the continual problems with their Creek neighbors. Daniel Littlefield's *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (1977), and Kevin Mulroy's *The Seminole Freedmen: A History* (2007), cover much of the same ground, but with special emphasis on the Seminoles' complex relationship with their African allies. But what no scholar has undertaken is a study of the reciprocal effect of the circumstances

in both Indian Territory and in Florida, and how they may have influenced the Florida Seminoles' decision to wage war in 1855. In order to analyze the Third Seminole War from this perspective, it is helpful to briefly summarize some of the history between the Seminole and Creek tribes and their primary source of contention. Prominent historian of the Indian Removal era, Grant Foreman, explained the origins of the Creek Seminole divergence in these terms:

“When the Creek Indians made their first treaty with the United States on August 7, 1790, in order to placate the people of Georgia, the government induced the Indians to promise the return to the whites of all negroes living among the Seminole. The latter declared that the Creeks had no control over them and repudiated their undertaking. This claim of the whites and the promise of the Creeks and their assumption of authority over the Seminole, were destined to influence profoundly the history of these people.”¹⁸

Indeed, disputes between Seminoles and Creeks involving the status of so-called “Black Seminoles” only continued and intensified in Indian Territory, where the disparate groups were compelled to coexist by U.S. government dictates, and where “civilized tribes” like the Cherokees and Creeks began to engage more heavily in chattel slavery.

During the Second Seminole War in Florida, General Thomas Jesup and other military commanders often made promises of freedom to the African Seminoles if they would separate from their Indian allies.¹⁹ The ambiguous legal status of these Africans would prove to be a constant source of conflict once they were sent west to Indian Territory. Jesup had also contracted several hundred Creek warriors to fight against the Seminoles, and allowed them to retain any African slaves that they may have captured in the process. When the first sizable group of Seminole emigrants arrived in Indian Territory in 1838, they found that their allotted

¹⁸ Foreman, *Indian Removal*, 315.

¹⁹ Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 15-16.

lands were already occupied by some of the very same Creeks who had waged war against them and captured many of their African allies.²⁰

By January 1839, as the Second Seminole War still continued in Florida, communications had reached President Martin Van Buren's desk concerning the strained Creek-Seminole relationship in the West. The President asked for "the early consideration and favorable action of Congress," with regards to providing the Seminoles with their own tract of land, "so that they may be separated from the Creeks."²¹ The Secretary of War had pointed out to Van Buren that, "*Humanity*, as well as sound policy, requires that the wants of those people should be promptly attended to; and it appears but just, as they are obstinately opposed to unite with the Creeks."²² The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Thomas Crawford, noted that "their destitution, in regard to clothing...is extreme. They are said to almost naked." Crawford also believed that a resolution would be fairly simple, since "All that is required is legal authority to change their location, and a fund to give them some small amount of clothing."²³ While a new area for settlement away from the Creeks, and clothing, was paramount in the short-term, what the Western Seminoles really desired was complete tribal autonomy, which would allow them to better protect their African slaves, who were really more akin to tributary allies than chattel slaves.²⁴ The Seminoles would come to discover though that concessions made to them by the U.S. government would proceed slowly and incrementally and would often take years to be realized.

²⁰ Jane F. Lancaster, *Removal Aftershock: The Seminoles' Struggles to Survive in the West, 1836-1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 28.

²¹ U.S. Senate, *Message From the President of the United States in Relation to the Condition of the Seminole Indians Who Have Emigrated*. 25th Cong., 3d sess., 1839. S. Doc. 88, 1.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁴ Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, xxvi.

Back in Florida, the Second Seminole War was winding down, and in late 1842, as noted previously, General William Worth concluded a “temporary arrangement” to allow those Seminoles still in Florida to remain “for a while.” The Indians were to confine themselves to a designated area in the southern portion of the peninsula and refrain from any acts of violence. With the majority of the tribe already sent west to Indian Territory, Worth determined that hostilities no longer existed, and that through his efforts the “thorough pacification” of the territory had been achieved. Bowlegs accepted the concession on behalf of all of the Florida Indians, although he did not actually represent all of the different bands left in the State, as Worth reported.²⁵

In 1844, the new Secretary of War, William Wilkins, sent a dispatch to Worth explaining, “Notwithstanding the President of the United States places firm reliance upon your official reports in reference to the present condition of the Seminoles in Florida, and is fully impressed with the belief that under your command a safe and pacific disposition has been established and manifested amongst those Indians, yet, it is thought that the safer policy requires their removal. Their emigration would be an act of humanity towards the Indian.” Worth was ordered to immediately make arrangements to negotiate for removal with the remaining Seminoles, but to avoid military force, resorting alone to the “arts of persuasion.” Wilkins knew that the foremost concern of the Florida Seminoles would be the circumstances that awaited them in the West. He instructed Worth, “In making your arrangements for the emigration, the Indians will be informed that the Commissioner of Indian Affairs is now in progress with a negotiation by Commissioners to adjust the difficulties that have heretofore disturbed both the Creeks and Seminoles... West of

²⁵ Worth, *Territorial Papers of the Florida*, 519.

the Mississippi, and that final measures will be adopted, very probably this fall, by the government to assign or secure homes for the future residence of the Seminoles according to their wishes.”²⁶ However, Worth was not able to deliver this message of assurance as the various Indian bands in Florida uniformly agreed not to engage in any negotiations with government officials during this period. The Seminoles expected that if they abided by the terms of Worth’s agreement, they should be able to remain in the state.

Meanwhile, events in Indian Territory moved towards a seeming resolution as it became more and more apparent that the Creeks and Seminoles needed to have their differences reconciled in some manner. In 1844, Commissioner Crawford conceded that, in addition to a separate tract of land and “a small amount of clothing,” the Seminoles also greatly desired to have their property rights guaranteed, as Crawford explained, “Their fears...are especially pointed to their slave property, to a part of which, and perhaps to much of which, the Creeks lay claim.”²⁷ The Creek General Council had begun to pass slave codes that denied the right of slaves to own property such as horses and guns, and the Seminole chiefs became concerned that the Creeks would attempt to extend these laws to the Seminoles’ African American slaves.²⁸ Some Creeks also began to press their legal claims to Seminole slaves, while others participated in outright slave raids. Although it was well known to U.S. officials that the Seminoles desperately wanted to be provided, “with a country exclusively their own, and under their own distinct and exclusive jurisdiction,” Crawford also noted that the Seminoles’ “state of deplorable

²⁶ Wilkins to Worth, October 18, 1844, *Territorial Papers of Florida*, 967-968.

²⁷ Crawford to Armstrong, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, for the Year 1844*, April 10, 1844, 26.

²⁸ Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles*, 74.

destitution,” led him to believe that incorporating the Creeks and Seminoles “as one people,” could still be accomplished.²⁹

The Seminoles were reported to still, “utterly repudiate the idea of becoming a constituent part of the Creek nation, or submitting to the Creek laws in the remotest degree.”³⁰ Despite this, the Western Seminoles agreed to new treaty on January 8, 1845, which, surprisingly, did not grant them tribal autonomy or the ability to completely govern their own affairs, but did offer new lands for settlement further away from most Creeks. One reason for this, as the Superintendent had predicted, was their continued destitution, compounded by extensive floods in the summer of 1844 that devastated their ability to raise crops. Peer pressure may have provided another reason for the Seminoles’ acceptance of the 1845 treaty. A series of pan-Indian congresses were held in Indian Territory beginning in 1838, and at an 1845 council meeting, called by Creek “peace makers,” a spirit of cooperation was evident, as were “genuine expressions of Indian friendship and goodwill, a concern ventured by several delegates over the erasure of Indian culture, and the earnest appeals that tribal ways be preserved in the face of the disintegrating impact of Anglo culture.”³¹

Although the 1845 treaty also allowed the Seminoles to create and administer their own “town laws,” they had to acknowledge, “the supremacy of the Creek general council,” which required them to refrain from passing any laws that conflicted with Creek authority.³² This meant that disputes over the legal status of the African American Seminoles would almost certainly continue. The strong bond between the Seminoles and African Americans became strained after

²⁹ Crawford to Armstrong, April 10, 1844, *Annual Report 1844*, 28-30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 156.

³¹ A. M. Gibson, “An Indian Territory United Nations: The Creek Council of 1845.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 39 (Winter 1961), 400.

³² Duval to Medill, October 15, 1846, *Annual Report 1846*, 66.

this time, due in large part to the concessions made by the Seminoles in the Treaty of 1845.³³ Nevertheless, the new Commissioner of Indian Affairs declared that the treaty was, “highly gratifying,” and it was, “hoped that now these Indians...may become a contented and happy people.”³⁴

The Seminoles in Indian Territory were well aware that their kin still remaining in Florida could serve as an invaluable bargaining tool in their continued attempts to gain complete independence in the West. In 1845, new Seminole Agent Marcellus Duval reported that the Seminoles desired their Florida brethren to emigrate west, “and would assist in persuading them to do so.”³⁵ Events occurring back in Florida would soon influence U.S. officials to take them up on their offer of assistance.

Following the many demands for the remaining Seminoles to be removed by any means necessary, the state’s legislature began to pass laws intended to apply pressure on them to emigrate. In 1849, the governor approved a measure that barred the Seminoles from leaving their reserve for any reason, and declared that anyone caught selling them liquor would be subject to fines. A small group of four to five Seminoles responded to these measures by launching violent attacks on white settlers in 1849 and 1850, killing a total of four people. In response, federal authorities developed a three-part plan to force the Seminoles’ removal that included the use of financial temptations, a large military presence in South Florida, and the negotiating skill of the Western Seminole delegates.³⁶

³³ Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles*, 91.

³⁴ Medill to Marcy, November 24, 1845, *Annual Report 1845*, 449.

³⁵ Duval to Medill, October 15, 1846, *Annual Report 1846*, 68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

However, the Western Seminole delegation's visit to Florida in early 1850 did not produce the desired result and actually seemed to strengthen the resolve of the Florida Seminoles. The situation regarding the Seminole attacks had been largely defused, at least temporarily, thanks to the tactful diplomacy of the Indian Agent Casey and Chief Bowlegs, who arranged to have the Seminole perpetrators turned over to U.S. authorities. Bowlegs had hoped that his cooperation in capturing the Seminole culprits would allow his people to remain in Florida.

Agent Duval had selected for the Florida delegation those Seminole leaders who most favored a complete reunion of all members of the tribe. Duval worried though, that for the delegates to, "give a very favorable account of this country (Indian Territory) is very problematic: if they speak of it to them as they do to me, the country would be no inducement for the others to remove."³⁷ After his delegation reached Florida, Duval received no specific instructions from Washington regarding the exact terms he was to offer. And consequently, the commanding officer of military operations in Florida, General David Twiggs, took the lead in the negotiations. The General was only able to offer financial inducements, and did convince 74 Indians to leave Florida. Despite being offered \$10,000 personally, Bowlegs and the balance of the tribe would not consider leaving Florida, however. Casey reported that he saw "no hope of inducing these people to go West in a body by any pecuniary temptation,"³⁸ perhaps implying that what Bowlegs and the Florida Seminoles truly desired was not money, but rather treaty concessions. Although there is no record of the Florida Seminoles' ever explicitly stating that their primary objection to removal was the continued strife between the Creeks and Seminoles in

³⁷ Duval, May 23, 1849, *Relative to Hostilities*, 49.

³⁸ Wallace, "The Story of Captain John C. Casey," 135.

Indian Territory, the western delegation would have made them aware of the situation. So the failure of the federal government to resolve the situation in Indian Territory, coupled with the failure to communicate direct terms and assurances to the Florida Seminoles, were largely to blame for preventing the removal of the Florida Indians in the early 1850s.

In preparing the delegation for their journey to Florida, Agent Duval uncovered a secret plot hatched by Seminole leader Wildcat (Coacoochee). Wildcat wanted the Seminole people to go a step further than simply demanding their own slice of Indian Territory; he had desires to move the entire Seminole nation completely out of the United States and into Mexico, along the Rio Grande. He attempted to send a secret message to the Florida Seminoles with instructions to “‘hold on,’ that is, not remove until removal becomes so great an object to government, as to induce it to give him a large amount, or make a treaty.” Wildcat hoped that the Western Seminoles, “‘who, jointly with the Florida chiefs will make a treaty for a country on the Rio Grande, thereby getting away from the neighborhood of the Creeks.’”³⁹ With his secret plan foiled, Wildcat and roughly one hundred followers fled Indian Territory and established a military colony in Mexico, along with approximately one thousand Kickapoo Indians. Wildcat’s scheme may have been over-reaching and impractical at the time, but it highlights the potential negotiation strategies that the Western Seminole delegations may have discussed with their Florida brethren. We simply cannot know for certain whether the Florida Seminoles were ever again asked to “‘hold on” by the Seminoles in the West until satisfactory treaty concessions could be elicited from the U.S. government. Despite the logical likelihood that both branches of the Seminole people engaged in mutually beneficial discourse when they were able to converse with

³⁹ Duval to Brown, November 5, 1849, *Relative to Hostilities*, 143.

one another, no historian has yet suggested such a connection between the need for a new treaty in the West, and the Third Seminole War in Florida.

In 1851, Duval noted the unalleviated suffering of the Seminole people in the West, as “Their numbers continue to decrease,” partly because, “The crops this year are unusually small, owing to the unprecedented drought. Their unwillingness to submit to Creek laws or Creek authority still continues,” and furthermore, “They are perfectly aware of the importance to the government of their cooperation,” in persuading the remaining Florida Seminoles to join them in the West. And in this role of removal negotiators, they perceived, “the means to claim from the government that position as a nation, and that protection in their rights, which they deem of the first importance.”⁴⁰

The Seminoles got their next opportunity in 1852 when another delegation was organized to travel to Florida. As previously mentioned, Bowlegs and a few other leaders were subsequently taken on a trip to New York City and to Washington D.C., where the chief even promised President Millard Fillmore that he would do his best to influence the remainder of the tribe in Florida to emigrate west.⁴¹ Even though the Western Seminoles were able to communicate that the circumstances in Indian Territory had been dire, but once again, seemed to be moving towards a resolution, the majority of the Florida Seminoles were still unwilling to take their chances in the West. One reason for their reluctance was the continued disputes over slave property. Even Duval was accused of actively participating in slave raids, reportedly kidnapping seven of Bowlegs’ African slaves while the 1852 delegation was away from Indian

⁴⁰ Duval to Lea, October 25, 1851, *Annual Report 1851*, 143-145.

⁴¹ Covington, *The Billy Bowlegs War*, 21.

Territory. Duval's activities prevented him from acting on behalf of the Seminoles, especially since he had a personal investment in ensuring that they remained under Creek authority.⁴²

In 1854, another Seminole delegation from the West traveled to Florida, and this time Bowlegs asserted that he had decided to never leave Florida under any circumstances. Regardless of the still unresolved situation in Indian Territory, the new Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, developed a program that would place enormous pressure on the Florida Seminoles. Davis' plan included the imposition of a complete trade embargo, the survey and sale of lands immediately bordering the Indian reserve, and an increased military presence to open forts, build roads, and make extensive patrols deep into the South Florida swamps.⁴³ The ensuing intrusions into their territory led a portion of the Florida Seminoles to initiate a campaign of warfare to resist the harassing tactics employed by the U.S. military. The Third Seminole War began on December 20, 1855, when warriors from Bowlegs' band ambushed one of the Army's surveying crews.

With open hostilities resumed in Florida, it seemed that the Seminoles finally had the government's full attention. Less than a year later, on August 7, 1856, a new treaty was entered into by representatives of the Western Seminoles, the Creeks, and the United States. New Commissioner of Indian Affairs, George Manypenny, explained that, "one of the leading objects," of the treaty, "was to enable the department to overcome the chief obstacle to the removal of the Indians...yet remaining in Florida." The plight of the Western Seminoles, "was well known to their brethren in Florida," and made them, "totally averse to removing and joining them."⁴⁴ In addition to the pressure produced by the new war in Florida, the Seminoles' cause

⁴² Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles*, 156-158.

⁴³ Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*, 126-127.

⁴⁴ Manypenny to McClelland, November 22, 1856, *Annual Report 1856*, 13.

was also aided by changes in leadership throughout the Bureau of Indian Affairs. In addition to Commissioner Manypenny, who himself insisted on “radical reforms” to improve the department, the new Seminole subagent, Josiah Washbourne, and the new Southern Superintendent, Thomas Drew, both worked to reconcile the difficulties between the Seminoles and Creeks.⁴⁵ Washbourne reported in 1857 that the new treaty, “has materially altered the condition of the Seminoles. With it the entire tribe is satisfied... They could not have signed a better treaty.”⁴⁶

Sections of the treaty itself highlight the significance of the Florida Seminoles in the decision of the United States government to finally acquiesce to the demands for a new arrangement. The opening line of the “Treaty With The Creeks, Etc.” states that “Whereas the United States desire, by providing the Seminoles remaining in Florida with a comfortable home west of the Mississippi River, and by making a liberal and generous provision for their welfare, to induce them to emigrate and become one people with their brethren already west.” Seven out of the treaty’s twenty-seven articles are explicitly concerned with its effects upon the Florida Seminoles.⁴⁷ The new treaty did not, however, immediately cause the Florida Seminoles to abandon their campaign of warfare. Skirmishes continued throughout 1857 as military patrols moved about South Florida. But in January of 1858, yet another delegation of Western Seminoles traveled to Florida to confer with Bowlegs. After being informed of the new treaty and offered monetary inducements, Bowlegs and his followers finally agreed to leave Florida, although approximately one hundred Indians still remained in the state.

⁴⁵ Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles*, 102-105.

⁴⁶ Washbourne to Rector, August 17, 1857, *Annual Report 1857*, 226-227.

⁴⁷ United States, Treaty With the Creeks, Etc., Aug. 7, 1856, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties. Vol. II, Treaties*. Compiled and edited by Charles J. Kappler (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904). <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler/Vol2/treaties/cre0756.htm> (accessed November 11, 2014).

The official reports of those working within the Bureau of Indian Affairs illustrate that an administrative disconnect existed between government agents in Washington, Florida, and Indian Territory, despite the massive amounts of correspondences sent between them. Appointment turnover, physical distance, and personal motivations were all partly to blame. Although most of the officials who worked closely with the Indian tribes were acutely aware of the problems that existed, the bureaucratic mechanisms of the U.S. government with regards to Indian Affairs moved too slowly to respond to such fluid situations. The amount of time that it took for the Western Seminoles to gain exclusive control over their affairs, and the efforts of the Florida Seminoles to resist removal, must be at least partly attributed to the bureaucratic divide.

Chief Holatta Micco (Billy Bowlegs)

Another factor to consider is the life of Chief Bowlegs and his experiences with United States diplomacy. Bowlegs was one of the seven Seminole chiefs who visited the West and signed the treaties at Payne's Landing (1832) and Fort Gibson (1833), which allegedly obligated the Seminole people to leave Florida and accept lands in the Arkansas Territory. Although the Seminole chiefs later renounced these treaties as having been conducted in bad faith, it is worth noting that Bowlegs at least had been considering the option of removal since this time, prior to the Second Seminole War. This experience undoubtedly made him wary of promises made by the U.S. government. When the Seminoles finally received a treaty to their satisfaction in 1856, it was not the act of signing the document which signaled success to Bowlegs. Only after assurances came from Western Seminoles that the proposed changes were taking effect and his

“slaves” had begun to construct houses for him in the Seminoles’ new territory out west, did Bowlegs relinquish the war effort and agree to leave Florida.⁴⁸

Many historians have underestimated Bowlegs’ possible incentives for desiring to leave Florida. Prior to the Third Seminole War, roughly 400 Indians remained in Florida,⁴⁹ and after Bowlegs and his followers agreed to emigrate, there still remained somewhere between 100 and 200 Indians left in Florida.⁵⁰ So with the situation seemingly relatively unchanged, the question that must be asked is: Why did the federal government and the white citizens of Florida consider the matter sufficiently resolved? Perhaps it was because members of Bowlegs’ band were primarily responsible for the conflicts with the region’s whites. Or, perhaps Bowlegs and his followers had reasons of their own to consider removal a better option than remaining in Florida. During the years of negotiation attempts in between the Second and Third Wars, Bowlegs was often the only chief willing to consider the government’s offers, while other chiefs such as Sam Jones, Ismahtee, and Chipco either shunned contact with white officials, or were ignored by them. Bowlegs’ open-mindedness may simply be attributed to his personal friendship with Agent Casey, but further consideration highlights other factors that may have affected his willingness to leave Florida.

The relatively large financial sum offered to Bowlegs by the U. S. government was the most obvious material incentive for him and his band to consider removal. When the chief and his followers left Florida in May 1858, Bowlegs was given \$6,500, his four sub-chiefs, \$1000 each, warriors, \$500 each, and each woman and child was given \$100, with the total cost of their

⁴⁸ Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, 159.

⁴⁹ Covington, “An Episode in the Third Seminole War,” 48.

⁵⁰ Covington, *The Seminoles of Florida*, 143.

emigration coming to \$70,352.⁵¹ In addition, Bowlegs and his band had many family members and allies in the West who hoped “to be re-united in one nation with their relatives by blood.”⁵² Furthermore, as a nephew of former Chief Micanopy, Bowlegs also had a strong hereditary claim to become Head Chief of the Seminole tribe once he arrived in Indian Territory.⁵³ Bowlegs seemed to enjoy his prestige and high standing within the tribe, and he also was well familiar with the inner-workings of the U.S. diplomatic and military systems.

Another consideration is the lifestyle and personality of Bowlegs himself. Without definitive documentary evidence, we have to consider what we do know about the Seminole chief. In the years prior to the war, Bowlegs was known to have frequently visited trading posts, the homes of white settlers, and army camps and forts. He spoke English fluently, was on good terms with the Spanish fishing villages, drove cattle to sell to Cuban contacts, embarked on wide-ranging hunting expeditions across the state, kept up a regular open communication with Casey, and diligently tried to maintain peaceful relations with his white neighbors. In addition, Bowlegs’ towns and villages were quite large, with a multitude of livestock and large areas of cultivated land, and their secrecy was difficult to maintain. In contrast, the other Florida Indian chiefs, such as Chipco and Sam Jones, apparently lived in reclusive isolation, and continued to do so until the late nineteenth century. The measures passed by Florida’s law-makers that restricted the Seminoles’ ability to trade, hunt beyond their reserve boundaries, and visit the coastlines would be detrimental to Bowlegs’ customary lifestyle. While a full assessment of Bowlegs is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis, the few points raised here in this brief analysis

⁵¹ Coe, *Red Patriots*, 218-219.

⁵² Duval to Lea, October 25, 1851, *Annual Report 1851*, 146.

⁵³ *Ibid.* See also Mulroy, *The Seminole Freedmen*, 159.

suggest that, when all considerations were taken into account, he may very well have preferred a move to Indian Territory, as long as he had certain guarantees, such as a satisfactory new treaty. At the very least, scholars should begin to consider this possibility.

Conclusion

When attempting to examine the Seminoles' motivations for engaging in the Third Seminole War, the nature of available evidence dictates that definitive interpretations are difficult to produce. Nevertheless, valuable insight may still be gleaned, and must be strived for in order to provide more balanced accounts of this historical period. Writing about the Second Creek War, historian John Ellisor reminds his readers that "the great majority of our source materials come from the points of view of the white males who won the struggle." Ellisor goes on to note that despite this drawback, "there is an abundance of research material, and a very careful analysis of this material, employing the techniques of deconstruction and ethnohistory, along with the application of common sense in reading between the lines, can give us a meaningful interpretation of events, if not a completely full and accurate picture of what happened during this important period in U.S. history."⁵⁴ The same can certainly be said of the Third Seminole War.

⁵⁴ John T. Ellisor, *The Second Creek War: Interethnic Conflict and Collusion on a Collapsing Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 7-8.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS: RESTORING AGENCY

In order to better understand the Florida Seminoles' decision to attack American soldiers and begin the Third Seminole War it is necessary to explore evidence found beyond the borders of Florida, outside the time-frame of the actual conflict (1855-1858), and beyond the overly-simplified and anecdotal banana garden interpretation. Although the war is commonly portrayed to be of minor significance, it is vital to our understanding of Seminole history and the attempt to comprehend the Seminoles' motivations requires the consideration of a broad range of contextual factors. While a few historians have refuted or omitted mention of Canova's banana garden account, none have provided viable alternative explanations for the Seminoles' choice to wage war. In addition to the analysis of the timing and impact of Canova's account, this study demonstrates that any examination of the beginning of the Third Seminole War must take into consideration the unresolved situation surrounding the end of the Second Seminole War, the years of tension and incidents in Florida between the Second and Third wars, and the most neglected aspect of the period, which is the circumstances that unfolded in Indian Territory as the Seminoles struggled to survive and gain their independence, and how this influenced the Florida Seminoles' decision to fight another war against the United States military.

The lack of primary source material from the mid-nineteenth century that represents the direct perspective of the Florida Seminoles is quite clearly the largest obstacle that faces historians of the period. The white-authored sources, however, are numerous, and because of this the Florida Seminoles are usually depicted as reactionary and short-sighted as they responded to the activities of white Americans. This viewpoint of the Florida Seminoles denies them the ability to influence their own circumstances by their actions while it also reinforces the

assumption of an inevitable triumph of white civilization over the savage barbarism of Native Americans. Since the exact motivations and strategies of the Seminoles can never be fully known through written evidence alone, scholars must analyze more deeply their actions, behaviors, and cultural customs in order to provide more meaningful and balanced interpretations. For too long the lack of Seminole sources has been used as an excuse to continue the reliance on Canova's banana plant account to explain the opening of the Third Seminole War.

Another key point regarding Canova's interpretation is the timing of his book's publication, as well as the works of Coe and Moore-Willson. The shift in popular opinions towards Native Americans that occurred in the late nineteenth century is evident in the first wave of literature on the Florida Seminoles, and the writings of Canova, Coe, and Moore-Willson provided the foundation for the period which included the Third Seminole War. Although sympathy and paternalism had begun to replace expressions of outright hatred, the attitudes of many white Americans still included a belief in the inherent inferiority and savagery of Native peoples, and the banana plant account complimented these perceptions perfectly.

The treatment of the Third Seminole War by historians and various other authors has lacked variation or originality, largely due to a dependence on previously published secondary literature. The failure of many writers to conduct their own primary research has made in-depth and meaningful interpretations extremely rare. Another reason for the substandard nature of the historiography is that many of the authors who have addressed the subject were not professionally trained historians. Beginning with the activism of Coe and Moore-Willson, books and articles have also been written by journalists, folk writers, archaeologists and anthropologists, and many self-made historians. With the exception of a handful of works by

recent historians, the variance of interpretations and the ebb and flow of scholarly debates that are so common to other controversial historical topics, are virtually absent in the literature on the Third Seminole War.

Regarding the preponderance of the banana garden account, it may be that the lack of a documentary “smoking gun” has made historians reluctant to challenge the status quo. But despite the hegemonic nature of the available evidence, “War is a two-sided affair,” as Watson has pointed out, “and we need to restore agency to the Seminoles in their war against American aggression.” Watson also implores future researchers to consider the Seminoles as “rational actors,” in order to “enhance our understanding of Indian actions beyond the level of tactical minutiae, to refocus on political intent.”¹ Indeed, the persistent reliance on Canova’s banana garden interpretation has greatly undermined the complexity of Seminole history and has served to obscure the context necessary to better understand the opening of the Third Seminole War.

On a broader level, the findings of this study have implications that are significant for the history profession at large. The United States’ interactions and battles with Native Americans during the nineteenth century, presumably similar to other relationships between ambitious expanding nations and indigenous groups, represented a vast power imbalance that was manifested in the first wave of literature on the subject in the form of over-simplifications and (perhaps unintentional) biases, and filtered through the perspective of white American authors. The social evolution that has occurred in the U.S. since that time necessitates the reexamination of some older historical interpretations by modern scholars with fresh world-outlooks who are unburdened by past prejudices and who are motivated to provide fair and balanced historical

¹ Watson, “Seminole Strategy, 1812-1858,” 172-174.

treatment of all their subjects. Historical accounts of conflicts with American Indians, and war-origin stories in general, are especially susceptible to sensationalized and simplistic explanations, but fuller interpretations will be possible if historians can demonstrate open-minded professionalism and a willingness to tackle complex historical issues with new methods and mindsets.

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