

Osceola Biography

Osceola

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Biography

The Seminole Indian war chief Osceola (ca. 1800-1838) led his tribe's fight against being removed from their lands in Florida.

Born about 1800 on the Tallapoosa River in the present state of Georgia, Osceola was a member of the Creek nation. His mother's second husband was William Powell, a Scottish trader, but Osceola, sometimes called Powell, was a full-blooded Creek.

In 1808 Osceola and his mother moved to Florida. They were associated with the Seminoles, and with them Osceola fought in the War of 1812 and in 1818 against American troops under Andrew Jackson. By 1832 Osceola was living near Ft. King in Florida. Apparently he was not hostile, for he was employed occasionally by the Indian agent to pacify restless tribesmen. Such activities gradually brought him to prominence among the Seminoles.

In 1832, however, the United States government was under pressure to move the Seminoles west of the Mississippi River. Some Seminole chiefs were persuaded to sign a treaty of removal. Osceola opposed this, as he did a similar agreement made in 1835. Most Seminole chiefs signified their disagreement by refusing to touch the pen; Osceola did so by plunging his knife into the paper. He was arrested for this defiance. To secure his release, he pretended that he would work for approval for the treaty. By now a Seminole war chief, once freed, he began gathering warriors for battle.

On Dec. 28, 1835, Osceola and his warriors brutally murdered the agent Wiley Thompson and Chief Charley Emathla, thereby precipitating the Second Seminole War. With Indian followers and fugitive slaves, Osceola overcame many enemies during the next 2 years.

The first of his major battles occurred when Osceola killed Maj. Francis L. Dade and 110 soldiers. Days later, with 200 followers, he fought against Gen. Duncan L. Clinch and 600 soldiers. Wounded, he was forced to retreat. On June 8, 1836, he was repelled at a fortified post, but on August 16 he almost overwhelmed Ft. Drane. Osceola's fight was so successful that it led to widespread public criticism of the U.S. Army, especially of Gen. Thomas S. Jesup, who ordered Osceola's arrest while under a flag of truce on Oct. 21, 1837.

The captured Seminole chief was imprisoned at Ft. Marion, Fla., then removed to Ft. Moultrie, S.C. He died there on Jan. 30, 1838, of unknown causes.