

## 2 Americans



For the young United States, dealing with the various Indian tribes was a vexing problem, but certainly not the most important one it faced. The formation of a stable government, paying off massive Revolutionary War debts, relations with sometimes hostile foreign nations, and the development of the vast territories west of the Appalachians were all matters of great concern. All too often, difficulties with the natives were ignored until they reached the crisis stage. With hundreds of thousands of Indians living in the undeveloped territories, it was a crisis that never went away. The tide of white immigration was a slow-moving, unstoppable flood, and whatever peace existed between settlers and Indians was only temporary. The natives were a proud people who had a strong sense of homeland; they were not going to simply disappear.

For high-minded Americans, steeped in the ideology of Jefferson, there were serious questions to be answered. The precise status of the Indian tribes was difficult to define. How did you deal with a sovereign nation residing within your own borders? In the history of civilized diplomacy, there was no precedent for the situation. The subsequent policies of the United States show the confusion and ambiguity. In the early years of the Republic, the Indian tribes were dealt with through the War Department, not the State Department. Normally, it would have been the province of the State Department to negotiate with sovereign nations, since the job of the War Department was exactly what its name implied. This policy indicates that the nation expected to have to fight for much of the continent.

Were the Indian nations actually hostile? It was a moral dilemma that many Americans felt uncomfortable with, for it was not until whites began to encroach upon Indian land that problems arose. The difficulties were multiplied by the character of many border-dwelling whites. Shifty

traders fleeced unsuspecting Indians, while greedy speculators laid claim to vast tracts of land that Indians had occupied for generations. Unprincipled squatters and certain criminal elements also pressed upon the Indian lands. Americans knew that if the Indians went on the war-path, white intrusion was often at the root of discord.

Capt. John T. Sprague, a participant in and the first historian of the Second Seminole War, understood the problem very well: "Upon this, as upon all Indian borders, there is a class of men destitute of property and employment, who for excitement and gain, would recklessly provoke the Indian to aggressions, and in the midst of which, escape detection and punishment, leaving the burden to fall upon the honest and industrious."<sup>1</sup>

Although this lawless element may not have been in the majority, enough of them existed to create continuous problems for both sides. When wrongs were committed against an Indian, violent retribution was often his only recourse. Sprague knew that equality under the law did not apply to the natives. "No rights were conceded to the Indians, and every act which interfered with the designs of individuals crowding within the Indian limits in all quarters, was regarded as the commencement of hostilities," he wrote. "Personal abuse was heaped upon them, their property and persons disregarded; no law shielded them, and no protection was given, other than that which was sought by the untiring exertions of the agent."<sup>2</sup>

The Indians were not simply facing an undisciplined horde of opportunists. In reality, they were up against a nation that was on "a mission from God." From the Pilgrims and Puritans onward, Americans had seen themselves as part of a providential grand plan. In the eyes of the early Americans, the New World was the Promised Land. God had provided it as a place where Christian reformers could establish the perfect society that had been so often prophesied. This new land was to be cultivated, built upon, and put to its most efficient use. It is an attitude that persists to this day. Only recently, with the birth of the environmental movement, have we begun to question the wisdom of such a policy.

To most early Americans, the Indians were not using the land in accordance with God's plan. Because the Indians did not practice intensive farming, because they did not build large cities or employ the latest technology, and because they did not seem to have the divinely inspired "purpose" the whites possessed, they were looked upon as not conforming to God's will. It was, in the end, all too easy for the colonists and their suc-

cessors to justify the taking of Indian land as a moral right endorsed with a heavenly stamp of approval.

Lewis Cass, who was secretary of war when the Second Seminole War began, held those same beliefs: "There can be no doubt . . . that the Creator intended the earth should be reclaimed from a state of nature and cultivated; that the human race should spread over it, procuring from it the means of comfortable subsistence, and of increase and improvement." Missouri senator Thomas Hart Benton, a strong proponent of Indian removal, believed that whites had a superior right to the land because they "used it according to the intentions of the Creator."<sup>3</sup>

A promised land requires a "chosen people." In general, early Americans were a deeply religious folk, convinced they had a decisive role to play in Christ's plan of redemption. Jonathan Edwards, a leader of the Great Awakening, remarked, "This work of God's Spirit, so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning or at least a prelude of that glorious work of God so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it shall renew the world of mankind." After the United States won its independence from England, Americans were convinced that God was on their side.<sup>4</sup>

The prominent theologian Ezra Stiles preached in 1783 that "this will be a great, a very great nation, nearly equal to half Europe. . . . Before the millennium the English settlements in America may become more numerous millions than that greatest dominion on earth, the Chinese Empire. Should this prove a future fact, how applicable would be . . . the text, when the Lord shall have made his American Israel 'high above all nations which he hath made,' in numbers, 'and in praise, and in name, and in honour.'"<sup>5</sup>

This feeling of "anointment" easily crossed from the ecclesiastic to the secular side of society. John Adams reflected in his diary, "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder, as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." In his inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson said, "I shall need . . . the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life." Jefferson also boasted that the "rising nation" was "advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye."<sup>6</sup>

There was, of course, the legal question of who actually owned the land the Indians had occupied for countless generations. The Indians had never faced that problem. Illiterate societies do not have deeds and titles. For them, occupation was synonymous with ownership. Creek land was land that was occupied or used by Creeks. If the Creeks abandoned a certain parcel and the Cherokee moved in, then it was Cherokee land. As has been the case throughout the history of both the Old World and the New, ownership of valuable land was usually determined militarily. Both the Indians and the white men understood the concept of conquest.

What really separated the two cultures were the issues of who owned *unoccupied* land and the concept of *individual* ownership. The Indians generally believed that if no group exercised control over a certain parcel, it was free to be used by whomever was willing to put forth the effort to use it. Unoccupied land belonged either to the Great Spirit or to no one at all. For white society, that was not an option. Since feudal times, European society had existed with the notion that *someone* had to own every piece of land, whether or not it was desirable land. If an individual or corporation did not own a particular parcel, then the government did. No spot of land, no matter how valueless, could be allowed to remain unowned.

This difference in cultural philosophy is apparent during the Seminole conflicts. When the Indians moved into Florida, the land they occupied had been abandoned by the aboriginal natives. As far as they were concerned, it was now Seminole land. White society did not agree. From a European point of view, the Seminoles had taken up residence in land that belonged to either the English or the Spanish. Throughout the Seminole Wars, Americans generally felt that the Seminoles were not as “native” to their lands as other Indian tribes. In a way, the Florida Indians were seen as “squatters” without a legal right to their land.

Equally as foreign to the Indians was the idea that an individual could somehow claim a portion of the earth as his personal property. A man might own a gun, a prized blanket, or even a slave, but the earth itself was beyond ownership. These were deep-seated philosophical differences the two cultures were never able to fully resolve.

After the United States had gained its independence, the Seminoles lived in comparative peace for the better part of thirty years. Viewed through

the distorted lens of history, thirty years may not seem like a long time. It was, however, long enough for a new generation of Seminoles to be raised. Many of the Indians who had been born in the Spanish colony were now in positions of leadership, and most Seminoles had ancestors who were buried in Florida. Enough time had passed for them to now consider Florida their home.

It was, at best, an unquiet peace between the Florida Indians and their white neighbors to the north. The Seminoles, not party to the Treaty of Paris, had little respect and no need for this imaginary line that ran between Spanish Florida and the United States. Several Seminole and Mikasuki towns were actually situated north of the line. Conversely, white squatters often set up housekeeping south of the border, perhaps unaware of exactly where the line was.

The relative stability of Indian life was broken by events that were largely out of their control. Since gaining its independence, the United States had coveted Florida. A quick glance at a map will explain why. For a nation that felt destined to rule the continent, this large foreign appendage on the southeast border was both an embarrassment and a liability. Many people felt that Florida belonged to the United States simply because it was physically attached to Georgia. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 only intensified those feelings.

There were practical reasons for wanting Florida as well. The most outstanding motivation was an economic one. The areas that are now Alabama and southern Georgia, as well as parts of Tennessee and Mississippi, were all drained by rivers that emptied into the Gulf of Mexico through West Florida. Therefore, Spain controlled, to some extent, the commerce of the South. For the southern states, this was an intolerable situation. Another reason the United States coveted Florida was one of national security. With its long coastline and deep harbors, Florida was vulnerable to invasion by foreign armies. What was to stop a large British or French force from landing at St. Augustine, then working its way into the southern states? For a young nation just free of European domination, this was a very real fear.

By 1810, the Madison administration was ready to acquire Florida. Unfortunately, as a “civilized” nation, the United States was bound by certain rules. An armed seizure of Florida would be a serious violation of international law. Spain would certainly consider such a thing an act of war, as might Great Britain, Spain’s ally. If, however, the residents of Florida were to stage a “revolution,” set up their own government, then ask to

be incorporated into the American nation, the United States could, with questionable justification, honor that request.

Complicating the situation were a pair of major disputes. The first dealt with the matter of who owned the territory west of the Perdido River near Pensacola. The United States claimed that it had been included with the Louisiana Purchase. Spain and France, who had done the selling, insisted that Spanish West Florida extended all the way to the Mississippi. The second dispute centered on exactly who ruled Spain. The Napoleonic Wars were raging throughout Europe, and the French had conquered the Iberian Peninsula, setting up their own puppet government. The legitimate king was backed by the English, who were attempting to oust the French. In the New World, Spanish officials supported their legitimate rulers but were more or less left to their own devices. Caught in the middle of all this were the Seminoles, no doubt very interested, but no doubt very confused by it all.

At first, the American plan to seize Florida proceeded better than expected. Residents in and around Baton Rouge held a convention, formed their own government, and easily took control of the neglected Spanish fort. A plea went out for U.S. protection, and President Madison quickly issued a proclamation that annexed the area to the Louisiana Territory.<sup>7</sup>

The government then cast its eye toward the remainder of West Florida. Feeling the pressure and perhaps miffed at the lack of support from the his superiors in Havana, West Florida Governor Vicente Folch sent a letter to Washington stating that he would hand over the colony if he did not receive aid from Havana. Elated, President Madison appointed former Georgia governor George Mathews as an agent to deal with Folch. By the time Mathews reached Pensacola, Folch had rescinded the offer. Evidently Folch had made his point in Havana.<sup>8</sup>

Mathews then headed to the East Coast, where he hoped to convince the locals to stage a “revolution” similar to the one that had taken place in Baton Rouge. The people of East Florida would have none of it. Engaged in the lucrative business of smuggling slaves and embargoed goods into the United States, they had no desire to upset the status quo. Mathews would not give up. If the real local residents would not stage a revolution, he would import his own revolutionaries. In response to promises of free land, volunteers from Georgia were recruited, forming a force known as the Patriots. To make the force somewhat legitimate, John McIntosh, a Georgian who owned land in Florida, was placed at the head of the group.

By March 1812, the Patriots had formed a government and were ready to start their “revolution.” With the aid of several U.S. Navy gunboats, the Patriots quickly took the town of Fernandina then headed for St. Augustine. The Spaniards, secure within the stone walls of Castillo de San Marcos, refused to surrender. In Washington, President Madison was becoming distracted by other matters, primarily the upcoming war with England. Mathews was recalled.<sup>9</sup>

Mathews, unaware of his removal, had spoken with the Seminoles and refused their aid. He also told them to stay out of the conflict. Perhaps the sight of black warriors had made him uneasy. The Spaniards, on good terms with the Seminoles, were not above asking for assistance. Late in July, the Indians began to attack the Patriot army, their supply lines, and the homes of their supporters. The Patriot War, as it came to be known, soon ended.

Aiding the Spaniards did the Seminoles little good. In the eyes of the Georgians, the Indians had gone from annoyance to menace. In addition, black Seminoles had fought against the Americans and had reignited an old fear. If blacks banded together, they might mount an invasion of the southern United States, destroying countless plantations and freeing thousands of slaves. There was little proof on which to base these worries, but for those who had designs on Florida, it was a fear that could be easily exploited.

In September 1812, a company of Georgia volunteers under Col. Daniel Newnan moved against the Seminole heartland in the Alachua prairie, but were driven back. Five months later, a larger force again invaded Florida, once again striking the Alachua region. This time, the invaders were able to drive the Seminoles from their villages. Before returning to the United States, the Americans destroyed hundreds of Seminole homes, killed or confiscated thousands of their cattle, and destroyed whatever supplies they could find. The cross-border animosity was quickly turning to hatred.

The War of 1812 helped stop the American advance on Florida, but only temporarily. In the summer of 1814, English forces arrived in Pensacola and elsewhere in West Florida. The Spanish governor, caught between two powerful antagonists, could do nothing to prevent the intrusion. In full control of the situation, the British occupied several Spanish installations and began to recruit Indian allies. Not far to the west, in Mobile, the U.S. Army took notice and was preparing for action. The American gen-

eral had little love for the British, the Spanish, or the Indians. He was Andrew Jackson.

Most Americans now assume that Andrew Jackson came to national prominence following his victory over the English at New Orleans. In truth, it was an earlier triumph that had made him a national hero. In the early months of 1813, the Creek Nation was on the verge of civil war. The Lower Creeks of Georgia had come under the influence of the whites, while the Upper Creeks of Alabama were growing increasingly resentful of that same power. The more militant of the Upper Creeks, known as Red Sticks, began to call for a return to a more traditional way of life. They had heard the call of the great Shawnee leader Tecumseh and had been inspired by the message of his brother, the "Prophet." Harsh words eventually led to escalating bloodshed, which culminated in the massacre of about 350 whites and Lower Creeks at Fort Mims, Alabama, on August 30, 1813. What started out as an internal Creek problem became a serious concern for southern Americans.<sup>10</sup>

The governor of Tennessee, fearing a spread in Indian hostilities, dispatched Maj. Gen. Andrew Jackson of the Tennessee Militia to deal with the Indians. After several sharp battles that were costly to the Red Sticks but failed to conclude the conflict, Jackson came upon approximately 1,200 Red Sticks at a curve in the Tallapoosa River known as Horseshoe Bend. It was a location the Indians had chosen specifically for the purpose of making a stand. The meander of the river had formed a wide peninsula with a relatively narrow neck. Believing the river would serve as a protective moat, the Creeks completed their defenses by erecting a double barricade that zig-zagged across the neck of the peninsula. To them, their position seemed impregnable.

On March 27, 1814, Jackson proved them wrong. By the end of the day, Jackson's force of approximately 5,000 men had crossed the river and breached the wall. In terrible close conflict, the soldiers came over the top or tore down the wall. The Indians, surrounded, would not give up. At first they fought bravely against the overwhelming odds. Almost 600 fell on the battlefield. Those who sought to escape fared no better. More than 250 died in the river, victims of snipers stationed along the opposite shore. Very few of the warriors survived, and only darkness put an end to the slaughter. In the morning, 350 prisoners were counted, almost all of them women and children. Officially, the Creek civil war was over. In truth, it would move farther south, into Florida, where the Seminoles would become involved.<sup>11</sup>

The Lower Creeks, with the aid of the Americans, may have won the civil war, but in the process, they lost most of their land. Jackson, as a reward for his victory, was made a major general in the regular army and given command of the Southern District. He was also given authority to negotiate a new treaty with the entire Creek Nation. In the resulting Treaty of Fort Jackson, more than half the Creek territory, both Upper and Lower, was taken. Encompassing more than 20 million acres, the ceded territory included the bottom third of Georgia and the eastern half of Alabama.<sup>12</sup>

There were several reasons for taking such a large amount of territory. First, there was the matter of national security. By taking all the Creek land along the Florida border, Jackson hoped to remove the Indians from foreign influence. Second, there was the matter of simple greed. White southerners wanted the Creek land, and Jackson had gained the opportunity to seize the best of it with one quick stroke of the pen. Third, Jackson knew the terms of the treaty would drive many Creeks, both Upper and Lower, into Florida. Trouble would soon follow, thus giving the United States an excuse to invade Florida and take it under American control. Jackson, pointing out the significance of the transaction, said the cession “will secure to the U.S. a free settlement from Georgia to Mobile and cuts off (as soon as settled) all foreign influence from the Indians and gives to the U.S. perfect security.” He also considered it “the best unsettled country in America.”<sup>13</sup>

The stunned Lower Creeks had no choice but to accept the provisions of the treaty. They had seen the ruthless manner in which Jackson waged war. They had thrown their lot in with the Americans and were now paying the price. One of the more immediate results of the Creek civil war was an influx of Creek immigrants to Florida. They understood that it was useless to argue or to ask for more lenient terms. With Andrew Jackson as the negotiator, there would be no compromise.

Jackson’s decisive, merciless victory over the Creek Indians at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend created the image of a “hard-bitten Indian hater.” “Indian hater” may be too harsh a term for Jackson. It implies that all his venom was reserved for Indians and no one else. In truth, he seems to have hated anyone who did not hold the same values he did. Whites, be they British, Spanish, or conservative Americans, were equally despised. Anyone, of any ethnic background, who crossed Andrew Jackson found themselves saddled with an enemy for life.<sup>14</sup>



FIGURE I.  
Andrew Jackson,  
Governor of the  
Territories of East  
and West Florida,  
by McHenry.  
By permission of the  
Florida State Archives.  
Image #PT00185,  
DBCN#AAI-7027.

Like most Americans, Jackson seems to have been sympathetic to the Indians only when it was convenient. In general, as long as the Indians did what whites thought they ought to, their presence was tolerated. When violence erupted, however, the best of friends could easily turn into the worst of enemies. In this respect, Jackson was no different from his contemporaries. When on the warpath, the Indians became the enemy, and Jackson always dealt harshly with enemies. Yet the same Andrew Jackson raised an orphaned Indian as his own son and became infuriated when the Georgia militia attacked Chehaw, a Creek village that had been friendly to Jackson. As with most people, especially those who are touched by a certain greatness, Jackson was much more complex than his legend would lead us to believe.<sup>15</sup>

Andrew Jackson's victory at Horseshoe Bend had a profound effect upon American history in general and Seminole history in particular. Most notably, the victory destroyed Creek power and, by extension, helped to reduce all Indian power in the Southeast. Because of his tri-

umph and subsequent promotion, Jackson was put in charge of the defense of New Orleans, which led to his becoming the prominent political figure of the period. For the Seminoles the results were not as immediate, but no less telling. Jackson, more than anyone else, proved to be the Seminole's greatest enemy.

As the Creek conflict was winding down, British plans for the Gulf Coast were beginning to come into place. In May 1814, Capt. George Woodbine of the Royal Marines landed at the mouth of the Apalachicola River and began to distribute arms to the local Seminoles, refugee Creeks, and runaway slaves. He also began the construction of a fort farther upriver at Prospect Bluff. In August, Maj. Edward Nicholls arrived, stepping up the effort to recruit the natives into a force that would hopefully attack the southern United States. He also moved his base of operations to Pensacola, disregarding the muted complaints of the Spanish governor.

In September, the British and their Indian allies moved against Mobile. The small American force at Fort Bowyer was ready, having been warned of the attack by disgruntled British traders. In the subsequent battle, the English were beaten back and suffered the loss of one of their ships. Mobile was saved.

As the fall of 1814 progressed, Jackson gathered his forces. In early November, he crossed the Perdido River and advanced upon Pensacola. The British, outnumbered and unsure of their Indian allies, quickly boarded ship and departed the city, destroying its defenses as they left. On November 7, Pensacola surrendered. A few days later Jackson received belated instructions from Washington ordering him not to invade Spanish territory. Having no further use for the Spanish town, Jackson gave it back to its rightful owners and headed for New Orleans and his place in history.

For the Seminoles of Florida it was a time of excitement, stress, and change. The Creek civil war had forced hundreds of new immigrants into their midst, all of whom held a fierce animosity toward the Americans. British encouragements had also lured runaway slaves into the Florida territory. The genesis of the Seminole Nation was nearing its conclusion. At the same time, Andrew Jackson, the nemesis of the Seminole Nation, was impatiently awaiting the day when he could finish the task he had started at Horseshoe Bend and Pensacola.

The War of 1812 is sometimes called the Second War for American Independence. For the nation, the war had been a rite of passage. Amer-

ica had been tested, and it had survived. The nation's institutions had remained intact, despite the capture and destruction of Washington. The navy had done well, bettering the "invincible" Royal Navy on several occasions. After a number of miserable attempts to invade Canada, the army, under the command of a new generation of officers like Winfield Scott, Edmund Gaines, and Alexander Macomb, had scored several brilliant victories along the northern border. Jackson's stunning triumph at New Orleans ended the conflict on an especially high note. America had proven something to itself and the world. No, the United States was not yet a world power, but it could no longer be considered an infant nation incapable of taking care of itself. People on both sides of the Atlantic came to realize that the United States and its "experimental" form of government were here to stay.

The end of the war signaled the beginning of what came to be known as the Era of Good Feeling. The future seemed limitless. More than ever, Americans felt compelled to continue work on "God's Plan." If the British were unable to stop the United States, who could? Once again, it was not difficult to see the hand of Providence at work. Americans felt that sooner or later, the entire continent would be theirs. Americans were also aware that a large portion of the continent remained in the hands of England and Spain. Considering the outcome of the late war, not much could be done with respect to Canada. Spanish North America, however, was another matter. To the west were Texas, New Mexico, and California, sparsely populated and chafing under colonial rule. Closer to home was Florida—another Spanish possession, no better explored than the land beyond the Mississippi, and to many Americans as intriguing as California.

The situations that had prompted the attempts to annex Florida before the War of 1812 had not changed. Spanish governors still controlled the waterways that drained the South. Slaves continued to flee to the freedom Florida offered. Foreign control over a territory so close to the nation's heartland still made Americans nervous. There was also the problem of the Indians. They had aided the British during the War of 1812 and were still causing trouble. The war was over, but the English influence had not completely disappeared.

In the latter months of the war the British had completed the fortification at Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River. At war's end the British departed, all except for Royal Marine major Edward Nicholls. Under

Nicholls's direction, British warships offloaded cannon, muskets, and ammunition aplenty at Prospect Bluff. Nicholls also stirred up the Indians with reports that the Treaty of Ghent had guaranteed that the United States would return all Indian lands taken during the war, including those lost as a result of the Creek civil war.<sup>16</sup>

By the summer of 1815, Nicholls was ready to leave Florida, but only temporarily. Boarding a British naval vessel, he headed for London, accompanied by Josiah Francis, a Red Stick who, like Tecumseh's brother, was known as the "Prophet." Their mission was to secure English aid and support for the Indians, both militarily and diplomatically. They failed. The British Foreign Office, having less need of the Seminoles than of peace with the United States, turned a deaf ear. The Florida natives would be on their own.

In truth, the British had left the Seminoles a considerable amount of aid at Prospect Bluff. Thousands of muskets were available, along with the powder and lead necessary for their use. The fort itself was no meager gift. Well armed with artillery, it was a formidable structure indeed. Unfortunately, the Seminoles had little use for a fort. Their security would be better served by fleeing an invader, rather than fighting one. The lesson of Horseshoe Bend was not easily forgotten.

Runaway blacks were of a differing opinion. They saw strength in numbers and the fort as a gathering place for others in the same situation. As the Seminoles began to return to their villages, blacks, at the urging of Major Nicholls, moved into the fort. Nervous whites to the north soon began to refer to the installation as the "Negro Fort." As news of the fort spread throughout the plantation houses of the South, word also filtered down to the fields and the slave quarters. For those slaves inclined to run away, the all-important question of *where* to run had been answered.

The presence of the Negro Fort served to heighten the fear of a slave insurrection. The famous English actress Fannie Kemble, finding herself the mistress of a large Georgia plantation during the years of the Second Seminole War, commented upon the fears of southern slave holders, "I know that the southern men are apt to deny that they do live under an habitual sense of danger, but a slave population, coerced into obedience, though unarmed and half-fed, *is* a threatening source of constant insecurity, and every southern *woman* to whom I have spoken on the subject, has admitted to me that they live in terror of their slaves."<sup>17</sup>

The combined fears of economic loss and a slave revolt caused south-

erners to push for the elimination of the Negro Fort. There was, however, one serious complication: the fort was in Spanish territory. Because *Spanish* slaves were also fleeing to the Negro Fort, the governor of West Florida would have liked to have destroyed the fort himself. Unfortunately, the forces at his disposal were insufficient for the task. The governor was also aware that the United States might use the presence of the Negro Fort as cause to invade and take over the colony. Sadly, there was little the Spanish governor could do about it.

The problem of dealing with the Negro Fort was taken up by the one man who was most anxious to do something about it: Andrew Jackson. As major general in charge of the Southern Division of the army, Jackson was the man whose responsibility it was to protect the southern frontier. Without any specific orders from Washington, he began to plot the fort's destruction. To lead the effort, Jackson chose his loyal supporter and second in command, Brig. Gen. Edmund Pendleton Gaines.

For Secretary of War William Crawford, things were progressing faster than he would have liked. Concerned about the growing strength of the fort, he wrote to Jackson, "The Negro Fort . . . has been strengthened . . . and now occupied by between two hundred and fifty and three hundred blacks, who are well armed, clothed, and disciplined. Secret practices to inveigle negroes from the frontiers of Georgia, as well as from the Cherokee and Creek nations are still continued by the negroes and hostile Creeks. This is a state of things which cannot fail to produce much injury to the neighboring settlements, and excite irritations which may ultimately endanger the peace of the nation." Possibly fearing Jackson's impetuosity, Crawford then reminded the general that the Negro Fort was, in the first place, a Spanish responsibility, and failing that, it was up to President Madison to decide what course of action to take.<sup>18</sup>

Jackson, as was his lifelong habit, paid little or no attention to his civilian superiors. Although a staunch defender of the Constitution, Jackson would repeatedly ignore the parts of that document that gave Congress the sole authority to declare war and the State Department the responsibility to handle foreign policy. In those early days of the Republic, even the most fundamental aspects of governmental authority were open to question. Two centuries later, we still have not determined where to draw the line between "war" and "police action" or between "self-defense" and "aggression." Ironically, having the "Father of the Constitution" sitting in the president's chair seems to have made little difference. At any rate, Jackson was not the sort of man to be bothered by technicalities.

In April 1816, Jackson dispatched an aide to the Spanish capitol at Pensacola. In a letter to the governor, Jackson announced that if the Spaniards did not eliminate the Negro Fort, the United States would. The governor responded that he could do nothing without aid or authority from Havana.<sup>19</sup>

It was the responsibility of General Gaines to devise a plan to destroy the fort and up to Col. Duncan Clinch to actually accomplish the feat. Gaines's plan was innovative, in the sense that it allowed the United States to claim, for political purposes, that it had been acting in self defense. Gaines had ordered Clinch to erect Fort Scott along the Flint River, just north of the Florida border. Gaines then announced that the fort would be supplied from New Orleans, which meant bringing supplies up the Apalachicola, past the Negro Fort. Writing to Jackson, he remarked that "if such an intercourse could be opened down the Apalachicola, it would enable us to keep an eye upon the Seminoles, and the Negro Fort. The negro establishment is (I think justly) considered as likely to produce much evil among the blacks of Georgia, and the eastern part of the Mississippi territory." If the Negro Fort fired upon the supply convoy, it would provide the excuse needed to destroy the fort.<sup>20</sup>

The exact purpose of the planned action was masked by continued references to the "Indian menace." Clinch reported that the Seminoles were preparing for war and planning attacks upon white positions in Georgia. Considering the number of American soldiers moving into the vicinity, the Seminoles may very well have been preparing for hostilities. It would have been the prudent thing to do. Clinch wrote to a fellow officer that the objective was to "capture the negroes within the fort, and restore them to their proper owners." Once again, the Seminoles were being caught up in something with which they had little concern.<sup>21</sup>

On July 10, 1816, a small fleet of supply ships arrived at the mouth of the Apalachicola. The convoy consisted of two supply schooners and two navy gunboats under the command of Sailing Master Jarius Loomis. Under orders to await word from Clinch, Loomis anchored his vessels and waited. A week later, Loomis sent a small boat ashore to locate some fresh water. The boat never returned. Later in the day, the dead body of one of the sailors was found, and later still, a lone survivor was found stranded on a sand bar. He reported that two others had been killed and a third taken prisoner.<sup>22</sup>

Clinch, meanwhile, had left Fort Scott with more than 100 men. He soon caught up with a force of 150 friendly Creek warriors also headed

toward the Negro Fort. The combined army arrived in the vicinity of the Negro Fort on the twentieth, where Clinch immediately dispatched Indian messengers to Loomis. The naval officer, perhaps suspicious after the loss of four men, requested a squad of soldiers be sent down to guide him up the river. Clinch complied, and on the morning of July 27, the two gunboats tied up opposite the fortification.<sup>23</sup>

Without the navy, Clinch could have done very little. Having no artillery of his own, he could not respond to the occasional volley fired from the fort. Other than surrounding the fort to prevent any escape, he was almost powerless. Against his force of less than 300 were an almost equal number of defenders, but most of them were women and children. Also within the fort were a small number of Choctaw Indians. The defenders, well armed and secure within their fort, had no intention of surrendering. They were no doubt aware of the fact that any survivors of the assault would be immediately returned to slavery. Many of them had risked everything to reach the Negro Fort. For such people, freedom meant more than life itself.<sup>24</sup>

Afterward, Clinch described the fort to a friend: "It stood on the east side of the river, about twenty-five miles from the bay. . . . The parapet was about fifteen feet high and eighteen thick, and defended by one thirty two [pound cannon], three twenty fours, two nines, two sixes, and an elegant five and an half-inch howitzer. It was situated on a beautiful and commanding bluff, with the river in front, a large creek just below, a swamp in the rear, and a small creek just above, which rendered it difficult to be approached by artillery."<sup>25</sup>

One might have thought that the small naval vessels would have been sitting ducks, but such was not the case. In order to hit a sitting duck, one must know how to shoot. While no doubt brave and determined men, the gunners of the Negro Fort were not trained artillerymen. What did they know of elevations and of powder charges? The blacks fired but did no real damage.

Loomis's sailors, on the other hand, were experienced at their craft. Some may have fought against the Royal Navy during the War of 1812. With calm professionalism, they began to fire on the fort, refining their aim with each shot. By the eighth round, they had found the mark. The ninth round was something different. It was a "hot shot," a cannonball that had been placed in a fire to make it red hot when loaded into the gun. The glowing ball, fired by Sailing Master Basset of gunboat number 154, landed squarely in the fort's powder magazine. In one massive explo-

sion, heard more than 100 miles away in Pensacola, the Negro Fort was leveled.<sup>26</sup>

The carnage was appalling, even to hardened veterans. One soldier wrote to his father, telling him that bodies were “stretched upon the plain, buried in the sand and rubbish, or suspended from the tops of the surrounding pines. . . . Here lay an innocent babe, there a helpless mother, on the other side a sturdy warrior, on the other a bleeding squaw.” Clinch saw a higher purpose to his victory: “The war yells of the Indians, the cries and lamentations of the wounded, compelled the soldier to pause in the midst of victory, to drop a tear for the sufferings of his fellow beings, and to acknowledge that the great Ruler of the Universe must have used us as instruments in chastising the blood-thirsty and murderous wretches that defended the fort.”<sup>27</sup>

Like Colonel Clinch, many Americans, already convinced of their “chosen” status, could easily believe that God had guided the hot shot to its mark. The logical inference was that God had intended the Americans to occupy Florida and that slaves were not meant to be free. Some Indians may also have seen the hand of a higher power at work. If so, it must have given the Seminoles reason to worry. Why would the Great Spirit have done such a thing? What was He trying to say?

There had been perhaps 320 people within the fort. Over 250 died instantly, their dismembered bodies blown in every direction. Others soon died of their wounds, despite the best efforts of Clinch’s staff surgeon, Dr. Buck, and the ordinary soldiers who did what they could to relieve the suffering. The few surviving blacks were bound and guarded, soon to return to a life of slavery. To Clinch’s dismay, few of the surviving blacks were the property of white Americans. Most were either escaped Spanish slaves or the property of Creeks from Georgia and Alabama. Most of the blacks belonging to white southerners had fled the area, making for villages located farther south, hopefully out of the reach of the U.S. Army. For southerners expecting an end to the black refuge in Florida, the destruction of the Negro Fort would prove somewhat meaningless.<sup>28</sup>

As the smoke cleared, the looting began. Despite the destruction, there was plenty of valuable property left undamaged. Most of it consisted of rifles, pistols, gunpowder, and swords. As payment for their services, Clinch had promised his Creek allies the lion’s share of the booty. After the Indians had taken what they wanted, the army selected its own spoils. Loomis’s sailors, who had done all the work, were left with

the scraps. Today, the site of the Negro Fort is preserved as part of the Apalachicola National Forest.

The shock wave from the Negro Fort served to quiet the frontier for some time. No doubt fearing a similar fate, the Seminoles wisely restrained themselves. Blacks who had not been at the fort fled the area, most of them going to villages along the Suwannee River.

The army, having done its duty, was ordered away from the Florida-Georgia border, and into the newly created Alabama Territory. There, as settlers rushed into ceded Creek lands that had yet to be vacated, the army was needed to keep the peace. Along the Florida border, unrestrained squatters and outlaws raided into Spanish territory, killing Indians, stealing slaves, and rustling cattle. There was, in truth, no one to stop them. The army was gone, the Spanish were too weak, and the Indians were too few and scattered. The destruction of the Negro Fort brought about an uneasy peace that would soon be shattered.