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Dade's Battle
(Also known as "Dade's Massacre")
Dec. 28, 1835

Summary

On December 23, 1835, a U.S. military expedition led by Brevet Major Francis L. Dade – “eight officers, ninety-eight men, an interpreter, a small cannon and a supply wagon”¹ – left Fort Brooke (present-day Tampa) and headed north toward Fort King (present-day Ocala) with the purpose of reinforcing the Indian Agency near there. On the morning of December 28, a party of 180 Seminole warriors led by Micanopy, Alligator, and Jumper ambushed the marching column. Maj. Dade and several officers fell immediately. A 45-minute interval followed the first attack, during which the besieged U.S. troops built a triangular breastwork of logs defended by a six-pounder cannon. Their position proved indefensible.

Over the course of the day, the Seminoles killed more than 100 U.S. soldiers, including Maj. Dade and his officers. Of the known survivors, only three – Pvts. Ransom Clarke, John Thomas, and Joseph Sprague – made it back to Fort Brooke alive. Clark, who suffered severe wounds to the head and body, provided a vivid first-person account of the battle in subsequent interviews and public lectures. Dade's enslaved African American interpreter-guide, Luis Fatio Pacheco, was taken prisoner by the Seminoles; he, too, survived, and many years later gave interviews describing his experience. News reports of the “Dade Massacre,” as the battle became known, generated wide public outrage and calls for swift military reprisal against the Seminoles. The seven-year military conflict that followed, which cost more than 1,400 U.S. lives, ended in stalemate and defeat for the U.S. military. Dade's Battle (Dec. 28, 1835) and the ceremonial reinterment of the dead at St. Augustine (Aug. 15, 1842) mark the beginning and end, respectively, of the Second Seminole War.

Background and Context

U.S. government efforts to remove native tribes from their Florida homelands and expand the boundaries of white American settlement produced a series of military conflicts known collectively as the Seminole Wars (1817-1858).

The First Seminole War (1817-1818) arose out of intensifying conflicts between Seminoles in East Florida and U.S. military forces seeking to secure slavery's southern border and open the region to white settlement. Spain, which had maintained a light military presence in the colony, agreed to sell Florida to the U.S. in 1821. American settlers flocked to the newly acquired territory with the purpose of establishing cotton and sugar plantations, thereby introducing slavery as the region's primary economic engine. The Seminole tribes' willingness to harbor

¹ Frank Laumer, “The Incredible Adventures of Ransom Clark,” *Tampa Bay History* (Fall/Winter 1981): 6.

fugitive slaves aggravated the region's planters, who agitated for the return of slave "property" and pressured the U.S. government to take the remaining Seminole-owned lands, thus clearing the area for future settlement.²

The U.S. government, led by President Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), adopted an increasingly forceful policy of Indian removal, pressuring Florida's Seminoles and other Eastern tribes to move to U.S.-owned territory west of the Mississippi River. In 1830, President Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which legally facilitated the forced expulsion. The Treaty of Payne's Landing (1832) gave the Seminoles three years to leave Florida.³ According to the terms of the treaty, a tribal council of seven chiefs would inspect the assigned territories and determine whether the lands were suitable for relocation. Jumper, one of the Seminole council leaders who visited the territory and participated in the inspection, disputed the validity of the treaty:

When we saw the land, we said nothing: but the agents of the United States made us sign our hands to a paper, which you say signified our consent to remove; but we considered we did no more than say we liked the land, and when we returned, the nation would decide. We had not authority to do more.⁴

Increasing Seminole resistance and open hostility toward the U.S. policy of forced removal produced a series of localized conflicts and skirmishes as the deadline for relocation approached.⁵

Dade's Battle

On December 23, 1835, Maj. Francis L. Dade led a detachment soldiers on a march from Fort Brooke to Fort King on a replenishment and reinforcement mission. The detachment consisted of seven officers, an assistant surgeon, 100 enlisted men, and an enslaved African American interpreter, Luis Fatio Pacheco.⁶ On the morning of December 28, five miles east of the Wahoo Swamp, the Seminoles ambushed Major Dade's detachment.⁷

Clark gave the following narrative account of the battle in an interview with the *Boston Post*, published June 6, 1837.

² The Seminoles obtained temporary permission to occupy the Big Swamp area of Florida in 1826. In an extensive letter, President John Quincy Adams listed some unresolved issues with the Seminoles, referring to runaway slaves, education, and the offer of new lands in Oklahoma. *Pensacola Gazette*, August 4, 1826, p. 1.

³ George M. Brown, *Ponce de Leon Land and Florida War Record*, (St. Augustine, Fla.: The Record Printing Co., 1902.): 99-100.

⁴ John and Mary Lou Missall, *In Their Own Words. Selected Seminole "Talks," 1817-1842* (Dade City: Seminole Wars Foundation, Inc. Pamphlet Series, Vol. I, No. 5, 2009): 15.

⁵ The same day as Dade's Battle, Osceola, the legendary Seminole leader, attacked and killed Wiley Thompson, the Indian Agent at Fort King. Several days later, another clash took place at Withlacoochee River, involving the forces commanded by General Duncan L. Clinch. See Tom Knotts, "History of the Blockhouse on the Withlacoochee," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49 (1971): 245-54. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30140411>

⁶ The entire detachment consisted of eight officers, 102 enlisted men, an assistant surgeon, and the enslaved African American interpreter-guide, Luis Fatio Pacheco. See John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1848): 530, and Frank Laumer, *Massacre!* (Gainesville, Fl.: University of Florida Press, 1968): 177-180.

⁷ Sprague, *Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 90.

Our detachment, consisting of 117 [sic] men, under command of Major Dade, started from Fort Brook, Tampa Bay, on the 23rd of December and arrived at the scene of action about 8 o'clock, on the morning of the 28th. It was on the edge of a pond, three miles from the spot where we had bivouacked on the night previous. The pond was surrounded by tall grass brush, and small trees. A moment before we were surprised, Maj. Dade said to us – ‘We have now got through all the danger – keep up good heart, and when we get to Fort King, I’ll give you three days for Christmas.’

At this time we were in a path, or trail, on the border of the pond, and the first notice that we received of the presence of the enemy, was the discharge of a rifle, by their Chief⁸, as a signal to commence their attack. The pond was on our right, and the Indians were scattered round, in a semicircle, on our left, in the rear, and in advance -- reaching at the two latter points to the edge of the pond; but leaving an opening for our entrance on the path and a similar opening on the other extremity, for the egress of our advanced guard, which was permitted to pass through without been fired on, and of course unconscious of the ambuscade though which they had marched. At the time of the attack this guard was about a quarter of a mile in advance, the main body following in column two deep. The Chief’s rifle was followed by a general discharge from his men, and Major Dade, Capt. Frazier and Lieut. Mudge, together with several non-commissioned officers and privates, were brought down by the first volley. Our rear guard had a six pounder, which, as soon as possible was hauled up, and brought to bear upon the ground occupied by the unseen enemy, secreted among the grass, bush, and trees. The discharge of the cannon checked, and made them fall back, for about half an hour.⁹

During the brief lull between Seminole attacks, Clark joined a small detachment of soldiers who “brought in our wounded, and their arms, leaving the dead.” The rest, under the command of Lt. Gardiner and Lt. Bassinger, “commenced throwing up a small triangular breast-work of logs.”

[B]ut just as we had raised it about two feet, the Indians returned and renewed the engagement. A part of our troops fought within the breast-work, and a part outside. I remained outside till I received a ball in my right arm, and another near my right temple, which came out at the top of my head. I next received a shot in my thigh, which brought me down on my side, and I then got into the breast-work. ...

The battle lasted till about four in the afternoon, and I was about the last one who handled a gun, while laying on my side. At the close, I received a shot in my right shoulder, which passed into my lungs – the blood gushed out of my mouth in a stream, and, dropping my musket, I rolled over on my face. The Indians then entered the breast-work, but found not one man standing to defend it. They secured the arms, ammunition, and the cannon, and despatched such of our fallen soldiers as they supposed to be still alive.¹⁰

⁸ Micanopy was the main Seminole leader. During the Conference of Indians after the Battle of Withlacoochee, he stated that his bullet killed Major Dade. *Black Rock Advocate*, April 2, 1836, p. 3.

⁹ “Narrative of Ransom Clark,” *Boston Post*, June 6, 1837, p. 2.

¹⁰ “Narrative of Ransom Clark,” *Boston Post*, June 6, 1837, p. 2.

Historian Frank Laumer describes the U.S. defense mounted under the command of Lts. Gardiner and Bassinger.

Gardiner directed the disposition of those men able-bodied enough to take positions of defense—Clark, DeCourcy, Wilson, Sprague, at best no more than forty men, many of them already wounded. Another crew was put together for the six-pounder. With Basinger they took up their positions outside, around the gun. Gardiner made it clear that if the Seminoles should return the gun would be kept firing as long as there was ammunition and a man on his feet to fire it. As men were wounded, others were to take their places.¹¹

Alligator, one of the chiefs who led the initial ambush along with Micanopy and Jumper, described the ambush from the vantage point of the Seminoles.

Just as the day was breaking we moved out of the swamp into the pine barren. I counted, by direction of Jumper, one hundred and eighty warriors. Upon approaching the road, each man chose his position on the west side; opposite, on the east side, there was a pond. Everywhere warrior was protected by a tree, or secreted in the high palmettoes. About nine o'clock in the morning the command approached. ... So soon all the soldiers were opposite between us and the pond, perhaps twenty yards off. Jumper gave the whoop, Micanopy fired the first rifle, the signal agreed upon, when every Indian rose and fired., which laid upon the ground, dead, more than half the white men. The cannon was discharged several times, but the men who loaded it were shot down as soon as the smoke cleared away; the balls passed over our heads....

As we were returning to the swamp supposing all were dead, an Indian came up and said the white men were building a fort of logs. Jumper and myself, with ten warriors, returned. As we approached, we saw six men behind two logs placed one above another, with the cannon a short distance off. This they discharged at us several times, but we avoided it by dodging behind the trees just as they applied the fire. We soon came near, as the balls went over us. They had guns, but no powder; we looked in the boxes afterwards and found they were empty.¹²

When the battle ended, all but three or four of the U.S. soldiers who began the march under Major Dade's command lay dead. That evening, as the severely wounded Pvt. Clark crawled over the bodies, he discovered another survivor, Pvt. Edwin DeCoursey (aka DeCourcy). Together they traveled through the night, hoping they might find assistance on their way back to Fort Brooke. Instead, the following morning, they encountered a Seminole warrior on horseback, loading his rifle. Clark went to one side of the road, DeCoursey the other. As Clark later recalled:

The Indian took after DeCoursey, and I heard the discharge of his rifle. This gave me time to crawl into a *hommock*, and hide away. The Indian soon returned, with his arms and legs covered with blood, having, no doubt, according to custom, cut DeCoursey to

¹¹ Laumer, *Dade's Last Command*, 198.

¹² "Statement of Alligator," in W.S. Steele, "Last Command: The Dade Massacre," *Tequesta* 46 (1986): 14.

pieces after bringing him down with his rifle. The Indian came riding through the brush in pursuit of me – and approached within ten feet; but gave up the search.

I then resumed my route back to Fort Brook – crawled and limped through the nights and forenoons, and slept in the brush during the middle of the day, with no other nourishment, than cold water. I got to Fort Brook on the evening of the Fifth day; and in five months afterwards was discharged as a pensioner at Eight Dollars per month. The doctor attributes my not dying of my wounds, to the circumstance, that I bled a great deal, and did not partake of any solid food during the five first days.

Clark named two other soldiers from Dade’s Command who, to his knowledge, had survived the battle: Pvt. John Thomas and Pvt. Joseph Sprague. Clark reported that these men had “ascended a tree” and “escaped the enemy on the eve of the battle,” and that both “came in” to Fort Brooke “sometime afterward.” Although Thomas and Sprague survived the initial fight, Clark observed, they too could be considered casualties of the battle. They “joined an expedition, two months later, but before their wounds were healed, and soon died of them.”¹³ Subsequent research indicates that Thomas may not have participated in the battle as previously thought. According to one source, he “injured his back pulling the cannon from the Big Hillsborough” river and – unable to continue – “was forced to make his own way back the 15 miles to Fort Brooke.”¹⁴ Other research suggests that Thomas did indeed participate in the battle.¹⁵ Records confirm that Sprague did participate yet – unlike Clark – he “left no accounts of the battle.”¹⁶

After the Battle

The command’s defeat profoundly impacted U.S. public opinion, spurring calls to expel the “lawless bands” of Seminoles from the Florida territory. In an editorial titled “Horrid Massacre,” the Huntsville, Alabama, newspaper called for the “total annihilation” of the “troublesome tribe.”

Such unprovoked hostility from these lawless bands, call loudly for the most energetic measures by the government. The Seminoles have long been a most troublesome tribe on our borders -- they have from time to time committed depredations on our citizens, whose blood they have shed in great profusion; & were severely chastised many years ago by Gen. Jackson, for their outrages on the whites. But this last aggression should and we hope will be a prelude to their total annihilation.¹⁷

Two months after the battle, Gen. Edmund Gaines and his men arrived at the Dade battlefield to assess the scene and bury the dead. Second Lt. James Duncan described the scene: “The first indication of our proximity [to the battlefield] were soldiers’ shoes and clothing, soon after a skeleton then another! then another! Soon we came upon the scene in all its horrors. The vultures

¹³ “Narrative of Ransom Clark,” *Boston Post*, June 6, 1837, p. 2

¹⁴ W.S. Steele, “Last Command: The Dade Massacre,” *Tequesta* 46 (1986), p. 11, 17.

¹⁵ James E. Marshall, “Private John Thomas of Dade’s Massacre,” rough draft, July 15, 2016, courtesy of Steven Rinck, President, Seminole Wars Foundation.

¹⁶ Steele, “Last Command,” *Tequesta*, 17. For a privately published biography of Sprague, see Nathan W. White, *Private Joseph Sprague of Vermont, The Last Soldier-Survivor of Dade’s Massacre in Florida, 28 December 1835* (Ft. Lauderdale: N.W. White, 1981).

¹⁷ “Horrid Massacre,” *The Democrat (Huntsville, Alabama)*, Jan. 27, 1836, p. 3.

rose in clouds as the approach of the column drove them for their prey, the very breastwork was black with them.”¹⁸

On June 13, 1842, as a prelude to the formal ending of the Second Seminole War, Col. William Worth announced that the remains “of the officers and soldiers who fell with Major Dade” and “of other officers who may have been killed in battle, or died on this service,” would be gathered and reinterred “with proper ceremonies” in the burial ground next to the St. Francis Barracks in St. Augustine. The bodies would be buried in vaults, covered by “durable slabs” listing the “names, ranks, and corps of the individuals, and the occasion, if in battle, in which they perished.” Gen. Worth asked that “each officer and soldier serving with corps now in Florida, consent to set apart one day’s pay” to cover the cost of an “unostentatious” memorial.¹⁹

A “grand and imposing” ceremony of reinterment, honoring those who fought and died under Dade’s Command and some 1,400 others known to have perished in the war, took place at the St. Francis Barracks burial ground on August 15, 1842. The bodies of Dade and his men were interred with others in three massive vaults, each covered by an ornamental pyramid constructed of native coquina stone. *The New York Post*, citing the *St. Augustine Herald*, reported as follows:

The ceremonies were performed in a very imposing manner. At half-past ten in the forenoon, a gun announced that the remains, with their escort, had arrived in the vicinity, and were moving into the city. These remains were contained in eight wagons, each covered with an American flag as a pall, and drawn by five elegant mules. The escort was composed of two companies of the 3d Artillery and two companies of the 8th Infantry. They were met by other companies of the army, by the city authorities and military of St. Augustine, the clergy, &c.

The burial service of the church was read, and the remains were deposited in the vaults prepared for their reception, and the usual three rounds of musketry concluded the ceremonies. Meanwhile minute guns had been fired, and after the conclusion, half hour guns were fired until sun-set.²⁰

Two years later, in 1844, a granite obelisk was erected next to the pyramids. The inscription on each side reads as follows:

North side: “Sacred to the memory of the officers and soldiers killed in battle and died in service during the Florida War.”

South side: “A minute record of the officers who perished and are here or elsewhere deposited, as also a portion of the soldiers, has been prepared and placed in the office of the adjutant of the post, where it is hoped it will be carefully and perpetually preserved.”

¹⁸ Laumer, *Dade's Last Command*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Sprague, *Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 521-522.

²⁰ *The Evening Post* (New York, N.Y.), Aug. 30, 1842, p. 2.

East side: “This monument has been erected in token of respectful and affectionate remembrance by their comrades of all grades, and is committed to the care and preservation of the garrison of St. Augustine.”

West side: “The conflict in which so many perished in battle and by disease commenced on the 25th of December 1835, and terminated on the 14th August, 1842.”²¹

The St. Francis Barracks burial ground was designated as St. Augustine National Cemetery in 1881.²² The so-called “Dade Pyramids” and memorial obelisk are believed to be among the oldest public monuments (excluding headstones) in the national cemetery system.

Dade’s Battle Summary

Date:	28 Dec 1835
Location:	On road from Fort Brooke to Fort King, about 7 miles from Withlacoochie River
Result:	Decisive Seminole Victory
Commanders and Leaders:	<u>American:</u> - Brvt. Maj. Francis L. Dade <u>Seminole:</u> - Micanopy - Jumper - Alligator
Strength:	<u>American:</u> 108 <u>Seminole:</u> 180
Casualties and Losses:	<u>United States:</u> - Killed: 104 - Wounded: 3 - Captured: 1 (interpreter) <u>Seminole:</u> - Killed: 3 - Wounded: 5

Suggested Reading:

Amos, Alcione M. *The Life of Luis Fatio Pacheco: Last Survivor of Dade's Battle*. Dade City, FL : Seminole Wars Historic Foundation, 2006.

Laumer, Frank. *Massacre!* Gainesville, Fl.: University of Florida Press, 1968.

Laumer, Frank. *Dade’s Last Command*. Gainesville, Fl.: University of Florida Press, 1995.

²¹ Sprague, *Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 525.

²² “Saint Augustine National Cemetery,” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs - National Cemetery Administration website. <https://www.cem.va.gov/cems/nchp/staugustine.asp>

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