

Battle of the Withlacoochee

Summary¹

The Battle of Withlacoochee was fought on December 31, 1835, between Seminole Indians, led by Osceola and Alligator, the U.S. Army, led by Bvt. Brig. General Duncan Lamont Clinch and the Florida Militia, led by General Richard Keith Call. The conflict was fought at the ford of the Withlacoochee River near present day Citrus County, Florida and resulted in between 60 and 63 casualties —4 killed and 56 to 59 injured.² The battle fueled more aggressive measures against the Seminoles, resulting in Congress' appropriation of funds towards a full-scale war.



Map 1: Withlacoochee River

Background

After the United States acquired and took possession of Florida from Spain in 1821, American settlers in the state began pressuring the government for Seminole removal. These actions led various Seminoles to move to reservations where many led poverty-stricken lives. During this time, Seminoles and white settlers had physical disputes. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 resulted in the further displacement of Florida Seminoles, forcing their move to Indian Territory.

As hostilities escalated in the later part of 1835, a full-scale war became apparent after internal tribal struggles resulted in Osceola killing Chief Charley Emaltha. Emaltha had decided against engaging in conflict with the United States, opting to move to the Indian territory with his followers. Osceola viewed Emaltha's actions as treason, executing him in November 1835.³

Seminole offense continued on December 28, 1835 with an attack on Erastus Rogers' home, a sutler—a civilian who sold provisions to soldiers— at Camp King, resulting in five

¹ Washington Hood, *Map Of The Seat Of War In Florida. Compiled By Order Of The Hon. Joel R. Poinsett, Secretary Of War, under the Direction of Col J.J. Abert U.S. Top. Engineer, from the reconnaissances of the Officers of the U.S. Army, by Wash: Hood. Bureau of U.S. Topographical Engineers Washington City 1838. W.J. Stone Sc. Washn. City.* [PDF map] 1838, Scale ca. 1: 715,000, Bureau of U.S. Topographical Engineers, Washington D.C., David Rumsey Map Collection, accessed April 10, 2019, <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps5142.html>.

² The discrepancy in the number of casualties is based on information from two sources. Eaton, Lt. Col. J. H. "Returns of the Killed and Wounded of United States Troops- Regulars and Volunteers, during the War with the Seminole Indians in Florida. From Eaton, Lt. Col. J. H. "Returns of the Killed and Wounded of United States Troops- Regulars and Volunteers, during the War with the Seminole Indians in Florida. From June 1835 to august 1842." in *Returns of Killed and Wounded in Battles or Engagements with Indians, British, and Mexican Troops, compiled 1850-1851, documenting the period 1790-1848* (1851), p. 5; *The Evening Post*, January 19, 1836, p. 2.

³ John and Mary Lou Missall, *The Seminole Wars: America's Longest Indian Conflict* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004) p. 91.

deaths, including General Wiley Thompson, an Indian agent.⁴ The hostilities culminated with the infamous Dade Battle, during which 107 casualties were reported— 104 killed, including Major Dade, and 3 injured.⁵

Unaware of Dade’s defeat on December 28th, General Clinch set out from Camp Lang Syne, later renamed Fort Drane with roughly 750 men, leading the troops to Indian settlements in the southwest side of the Withlacoochee River known as “the Cove.” General Clinch faced the limitation of losing the Florida volunteers, which made up about two-thirds of his force, whose service would end at the start of the new year.⁶

Participants

United States	Florida Seminoles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Bvt. Brig. General Duncan Lamont Clinch <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ United States Army <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Company C, 1st Artillery ▪ Company D, 2nd Artillery ▪ Company F, 2nd Artillery ▪ Company C, 3rd Artillery ▪ Company H, 3rd Artillery ▪ Company D, 4th Infantry ❖ General Richard Keith Call <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Florida Militia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 1st Regiment ▪ 2nd Regiment ▪ Volunteer Staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Osceola ❖ Alligator
Total: Unknown— 227 participated in battle.⁷	Total: Unknown

Description of Battle

After arriving at the Withlacoochee on the morning of the 31st, Clinch and his troops realized they could not cross due to the depth and harsh flow of the river. The Indians’ guides had led the American troops to a ford they believed would be waist deep but were surprised to find deeper waters due to flooding. General Clinch ferried his men in groups of 4-5 in a canoe found on the opposite bank. By midday, all of the regular troops and about 50 militiamen had crossed the river. Two or three Indians swam and took about three hundred horses across the river.

The details of Dade’s battle had not reached Clinch, who did not know about the initiation of total warfare. He proceeded, believing the Seminoles would not attack such a large group of soldiers. After the regular soldiers successfully crossed the river, gunshots and war calls

⁴ *The Evening Post*, January 19, 1836, p. 2.

⁵ Eaton, “Returns of the Killed and Wounded,” p. 3.

⁶ Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, p. 97-98.

⁷ *The Evening Post*, January 19, 1836, p. 2.

were heard. By the time the Seminoles attacked, some militiamen had crossed the river and were waiting with the horses and provisions.⁸ The Indians, led by Osceola at the front, advanced against the U.S. troops. According to Lt. Col. W.J. Mills of the Florida militia's account of the battle:

Colonel [John] Warren and myself immediately formed and extended our line from the river out through the swamp to the pine barren and saw the regular troops on our right boldly engaged with at least three hundred Indians, who were ordered to remain stationary, and prevent the Indians entering our lines. After repeated solicitations on the part of Col. Warren and myself, we took the responsibility on ourselves, and Col. Warren led the right to the left of the regulars, and I was stationed on the left of our own line, when a charge was made, which, after about ten minutes more of sharp fighting, forced them to retreat and the battle ended.

In the same account, Mills claims there were about eighty Seminole casualties—a rough estimate as he states, “the precise amount we cannot tell as they carried them off.”⁹

The battle was fought between 25-35 miles from Fort Drane at the ford of the Withlacoochee River. The engagement occurred within a few miles of the Indian warrior Osceola's (Powell) town, an Indian settlement.¹⁰ After the battle ended, General Clinch and General Call led their forces to Camp Lang Syne, or Fort Drane.

While one third of Clinch and Call's troops had been injured in the battle, they were able to successfully force the Seminoles to retreat. Once they crossed the Withlacoochee, Clinch and his remaining troops marched back to Fort Drane, where at least one regular soldier died of injuries sustained in battle.¹¹ The Seminoles saw the battle as a success as they were able to safeguard their homes. Clinch saw the battle of Withlacoochee as a successful demonstration of bravery, with his troops effectively evading total annihilation by the Seminoles.¹²

Casualties

Regiment	Killed	Wounded
Company C, 1st Artillery		4 wounded (4 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates)
Company D, 2d Artillery	1 killed (1 Non-Commissioned Officer, Artificer, and Private)	14 wounded (1 Lieutenant, 13 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates)
Company F, 2d Artillery	1 killed (1 Non-Commissioned Officer, Artificer, and Private)	

⁸ *Niles' Weekly Register*, January 30, 1836, 366. See also the Tallahassee Floridian, February 20, 1836; Williams, The Territory of Florida, 222-23; George C. Bittle, “The Florida Militia's Role in the Battle of Withlacoochee,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (April 1966) p. 304.

⁹ *The Evening Post*, January 19, 1836, p. 2.

¹⁰ *The Pittsburgh Gazette*, January 22, 1836, p. 2.

¹¹ *The Evening Post*, January 19, 1836, p. 2.

¹² Missall, *The Seminole Wars*, p. 100.

Company C, 3d Artillery	1 killed (1 Non-Commissioned Officer, Artificer, and Private)	4 wounded (4 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates)
Company H, 3d Artillery	1 killed (1 Non-Commissioned Officer, Artificer, and Private)	15 Wounded (1 Lieutenant, 14 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates)
Company D, 4th Infantry		8 wounded (1 Captain, 7 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates)
1st Regt. Florida Volunteers		5 wounded (1 Colonel, 1 Major, 1 Captain, 2 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates)
2d Regt. Florida Volunteers		2 wounded (2 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates)
Volunteer Staff		1 wounded (1 Colonel)
Aggregate	4 (4 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates) ¹³	56/*59 (2 Colonels, 1 Major, 1 Captain, 3 Lieutenants, 49 Non-Commissioned Officers, Artificers, and Privates) ¹⁴

Officers Wounded in Battle¹⁵
Col. Jno. Warren, 1st Regt. Fla. Volrs.
Col. Leigh Reid, Insp. Gen'l, Fla. Mil.
Maj. James G. Cooper, 1st Regt, Fla. Volrs.
Capt. Wm. M. Graham, 4th Infantry
1st Lieut. Campbell Graham, 3d Arty
2d Lieut. T.P. Ridgeley, 2d Arty

¹³ This number was rectified. Eaton's original document aggregates the number of killed at five but appears to be a misprint. The document lists only four deaths and other sources support this number. Eaton, "Returns of the Killed and Wounded," p. 5; *The Evening Post*, January 19, 1836, p. 2.

¹⁴ Sources list two different numbers. Eaton, "Returns of the Killed and Wounded," p. 5; *The Evening Post*, January 19, 1836, p. 2.

¹⁵ Eaton, "Returns of the Killed and Wounded," p. 5

Significance and Aftermath

Along with Dade's battle on December 28th, the Battle of Withlacoochee created an impetus for further action against the Indians in Florida. After the new year began, congress appropriated six-hundred thousand dollars to the war effort.¹⁶

The Battle of Withlacoochee was the first large-scale battle of the Second Seminole War to engage the Florida militia. The relationship between volunteers and regular soldiers was strained due to differences in battle tactics. General Call of the Florida militia preferred a surprise attack on the Indian villages, while General Clinch wanted his troops to travel with a heavy baggage train, including dogs, making a surprise attack difficult.¹⁷

The role of the Florida militia came under scrutiny as Clinch claimed the majority resisted his call and refused to help the regular troops at the time of the battle. Clinch admitted the militia who joined in battle — those with Lt. Col. W.J. Mills and Col. John Warren — fought bravely and helped prevent the regulars from retreating.¹⁸

Call attributed his actions (or lack of) on the battlefield to his enlisted men whose service would be ending in a few days' time at the start of the new year. News of the controversy spread years later when an 1837 issue of *The Floridian* published letters written by General Clinch. In one, Clinch claimed that several militiamen had been ordered not to cross the river by Call.¹⁹ Call countered these claims by noting the difficulty of transporting the Florida Militia across the river in twenty-five minutes during the peak of the battle, when it had taken all morning to get Clinch's men across.²⁰

Honors

Participants received brevets for their participation in the battle of Withlacoochee and their conduct during their service against the Florida Indians.²¹

¹⁶ George Rollie Adams, *General William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001) p. 59.

¹⁷ Richard Keith Call, *The Journal of Governor Richard Keith Call*, transcript, Florida Memory: State Library and Archives of Florida, p. 352, https://www.floridamemory.com/fpc/memory/collections/rkcall/rkcall_journal_transcript.pdf; George C. Bittle, "The Florida Militia's Role in the Battle of Withlacoochee," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (April, 1966) p. 303.

¹⁸ General Duncan L. Clinch Papers. Henceforth referred to as the Clinch Papers. Microfilm copy in the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, Gainesville; *Niles' Weekly Register*, January 30, 1836, 366; R. K. Call to John H. Eaton, January 8, 1836, *House Documents*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 78, 324; *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 7 vols. (Washington, 1832-1861), VII, 220; Bittle, "The Florida Militia's Role in the Battle of Withlacoochee," p. 306.

¹⁹ *The Floridian*, July 22, 1837.

²⁰ *Niles' Weekly Register*, August 19, 1837, 395-96.

²¹ John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War to which is appended a record of officers, non-commissioned officers, musicians, and privates of the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, who were killed in battle or died of disease as also the names of officers who were distinguished by brevets, and the names of others recommended together with the orders for collecting the remains of the dead in Florida, and the ceremony of the internment at St. Augustine, East Florida on the fourteenth day of August 1842* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1848) p. 551-553.

No. and Date of Order	Name	Rank, Reg., or Corps.	Born	Former Brevets	Brevet Rank	Remarks
Gen'l Order No. 19 March 6, 1836	Fanning, A.C.W.	Lieut. Col 2d Artillery	Massachusetts		Colonel Dec. 31, 1835	For highly distinguished conduct in the battle of Withlacoochie.
Gen'l Order No. 69 October 15, 1836	Graham, William M.	Captain 4th Infantry	Virginia		Major Dec. 31, 1835	For gallantry and good conduct in the affair of the Withlacoochie.
Gen'l Order No. 69 October 15, 1836	Campbell, Graham	1st Lieut. 3d Artillery	Virginia		Captain Dec. 31, 1835	For gallantry and good conduct in the affair of the Withlacoochie.
Gen'l Order No. 69 October 15, 1836	Maitland, W.S.	1st Lieut. 3d Artillery			Captain Dec. 31, 1835	For gallantry and good conduct in the affair of the Withlacoochie.
Gen'l Order No. 19 March 6, 1843	Talcott, George H.	1st Lieut. Ordnance	New York	Sept. 15, 1836	1st Lieut. Dec. 31, 1835	For gallant conduct on several occasion in the war ag'nst the Fla. Ind.
Gen'l Order No. 19 March 6, 1843	Brooks, Horace	1st Lieut. 2d Artillery	Massachusetts	Feb. 8, 1837	1st. Lieut. Dec. 31, 1835	For gallantry and good conduct in the war against the Fla. Ind.

Further Reading

Adams, George Rollie. *General William S. Harney: Prince of Dragoons*. University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

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https://www.floridamemory.com/fpc/memory/collections/rkcall/rkcall_journal_transcript.pdf.

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Sprague, John T. *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War to which is appended a record of officers, non-commissioned officers, musicians, and privates of the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, who were killed in battle or died of disease as also the names of officers who were distinguished by brevets, and the names of others recommended together with the orders for collecting the remains of the dead in Florida, and the ceremony of the internment at St. Augustine, East Florida on the fourteenth day of August 1842*. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1848.