



By Kevin Hemstock

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The War Continues Over Old Battle Sites

In a race to see which one becomes a national or state historic park, the latter might win. In Okeechobee it is the same old story of development vs. preservation. As with the rest of the state, more and more people are moving into the area. Land is needed for housing, stores, factories, roads, gas stations and attorney's offices. The pressure is on to develop every drop of land.

Property owners in the city by the lake were poised to finish off the site of the 1837 Battle of Okeechobee. They wanted to build 300 homes on 145 acres. Much of the rest of the 600-acre battle site is already built on. For this last bit, preservationists have taken on the task of fighting for a portion to commemorate the battle. They may be meeting with some success.

Let's digress. Most people don't know very much about the battle of Okeechobee. That's because most people don't know much about the Second Seminole War, of which the battle was a major component.

The war started in earnest in 1835, when Seminoles massacred a force of 108 soldiers under the command of Maj. Francis Dade. The massacre was an excuse to pursue by force, under legislative mandate of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the unambiguous U.S. policy to get rid of the Seminole Indians. The Indians were a nuisance to the government, because they were helping to harbor escaped slaves and to some extent absorb them into their culture.

From the get go, then, the war represented the manifestation of two very ugly policies of the United States at that time: support for establishment of slavery and support for the policy of ethnic cleansing. Additionally, the government wanted the land the Indians claimed, and the most common way for the government to get Indian land was to lie, cheat or steal it from them, and failing that, take it by force. It's just the way things were done back then.

The war was significant. It consumed a tremendous amount of the resources of the fledgling United States. It involved a substantially large portion of the country's military might. And, it was an unpopular war that created and included political ramifications that developed into the personalities and policies of the second war over slavery - which everyone thinks was the first war over slavery - the Civil War.

The battle of Okeechobee took place on Christmas Day, 1837. On that day, about 800 men of



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the United States, under the command of future president Col. Zachary Taylor, fought a pitched battle against about 380 Seminole Indians. Using Missouri volunteer militia as cannon fodder, by putting them up in front of the regular "hardened" troops, Taylor attacked across the open swamp a well-entrenched, dry, tree-covered Seminole position. The U.S. forces lost 26 killed and 112 wounded. The popular commander of the militia, Richard Gentry, was one of the fatalities. The Indians slipped away into the swamp, which the U.S. soldiers called a retreat. To the Indians, it was a part of a strategy that any good outnumbered guerrilla fighters would have had. They lost 11 men killed and 14 wounded.

The battle was declared a great victory by the United States and Taylor, who had directed the fight from a safe position as far from the thwish of fired musket balls as possible, was declared a hero. He was promoted to general. Today's accounts call it a great victory with Taylor still depicted as a hero or a great defeat with Taylor a coward. Take your pick. American history doesn't like the Seminole War, and never will. It was an ugly little war, in what then was an ugly little place that nobody really wanted. It was a Vietnam-like quagmire for all the same reasons that Vietnam was a quagmire - it was hot, it was squishy, nobody wanted to be there, it made no sense to let men die there, and the cost of winning was vastly greater than the value of the spoils of victory.

Even Gen. Thomas Jessup, the military commander in Florida, had doubts, on moral grounds, about pursuing the war, which he once referred to as "an unholy cause." He wrote to the secretary of war: "In regard to the Seminoles, we have committed the error of attempting to remove them when their lands were not required for agricultural purposes; when they were not in the way of white inhabitants; when the greater portion of their country was an unexplored wilderness, of the interior of which we were as ignorant as the interior of China." But, the government ordered the fight continued.

All of that is why you don't read about the Battle of Okeechobee, or of the other little battle, the Battle of the Loxahatchee that took place a month later in the west end of what is now Jupiter. You don't see stories about them on PBS, and you won't find Mel Gibson starring the lead role in a multi-million-dollar movie about these battles. The effort to write it out of the history books began before the Civil War and was largely complete by the time this country grew a conscience. All of that adds to the significance of the Second Seminole War, and the Battle of Okeechobee and that other one, in our neighborhood. Last month, the National Trust for Historic Preservation declared the site of the Battle of Okeechobee as one of 11 places, in the whole country, on a list they call America's Most Endangered Historic Places 2000.



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There are two sites of battles, from the Second Seminole War, that have become a preservation issue. One, in Jupiter, is in public ownership; the other, in Okeechobee, is privately owned.

Commentary by Managing Editor Kevin Hemstock

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The list doesn't come with any money. It doesn't guarantee that anything will be done about it. It's just a list, so that those who can do something about it know of the urgency. For some or all of the land to be preserved, someone with deep pockets has to come forward, such as the state or the federal government. Archaeologist Bob Carr, of Miami Circle fame, who held a press conference at the battle site June 26, has been working to preserve the Okeechobee battle site for years. Last Saturday, he was optimistic that a portion of it would be preserved. "We have some willing sellers ... and a willing buyer - the public," he said. "We're definitely on our way to a national battlefield park or a state battlefield park."

As much as 200 to 300 acres, "enough to interpret it," is being hoped for, he said. But, it's not a done deal. "Legal reality is that the developer has a permit application with the (U.S.) Corps (of Engineers)," he said. Carr is encouraging people to flex their "email muscle" by contacting state and national representatives to support the purchase of the Okeechobee land for preservation. "These questions are always resolved politically. When there's political will for these things to be accomplished, they will be," he said. Ironically, there seems to be more of a political will to preserve and set up a management plan for the battle site by the lake, on land that is currently in private ownership, than for the battle site right in our back yard, where the Indians from Okeechobee fought U.S. forces again a month later in what is now Riverbend Park, which has been in public ownership for years.

The Battle of the Loxahatchee - really two battles that took place on Jan. 15, 1838, and Jan. 24, 1838 - is of similar significance, because it precipitated the "final roundup" of the bulk of the Seminole tribe for mandatory removal to the Oklahoma reservations. Riverbend Park, operated by Palm Beach County, is closed. It has had a management plan in the works for years, but objections to aspects of the plan that would impact the battlefield caused it to be put on hold. Seemingly, indefinitely. Gobs of money were spent on the original plan. Now a revised plan is in the works. For those who ask, updates of the status of the revised plan keep being touted, but never seem to materialize.



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An update on the plan was on the agenda for last month's meeting of the Loxahatchee River Management Coordinating Council, but was, again, not given. "We are on the verge of creating a (national) park (in Okeechobee)," Carr said. "Why is this not happening in (Riverbend Park)?" The people involved in Okeechobee "have the right kind of vision," he said, adding that there needs to be political leadership in Palm Beach County to open up the Loxahatchee battlefield.

The fact is, many think that once a property is set aside for preservation, it ceases to exist for any other purpose. However, a historic site adds status to a nearby community, it attracts visitors who spend money, and increases the value of nearby property by making it a better place to live. Palm Beach County, which went to a great effort and expense to put a visitor's center at the turnpike and Indiantown Road, is missing a marvelous opportunity by not marketing a potential historic site it owns only a mile to the west. Of course, measured on the scale of body count, neither the Okeechobee battlefield nor the Loxahatchee battlefield come close to say, a Gettysburg.

Both lack the glamour of a Custer's last stand. But, in the perspective of the genesis of later U.S. policy, both had a Gettysburg-like impact, and both were more important than Custer's battle by a long musket shot.