

History & Nature

Escaped slaves had long found refuge in Spanish Florida since before the Revolutionary War. But in the early 1800s, Spain was losing its hold on Florida. Seeing an opportunity to advance its own interests on the continent, Britain took advantage of Spain's weak defenses. Unchallenged, British Co. Edward Nicolls and Captain George Woodbine established a stronghold called "British Fort" on the Apalachicola River and, by offering land and freedom in the British West Indies for service, recruited more slaves from Louisiana, Mobile, Pensacola, Georgia and the Lower Creek Nation.

Nicholls constructed the fort in 1814 at a small company storehouse and settlement called "Prospect Bluff," and in the early summer of 1815, he sailed for England with prominent members of the Nation in order to negotiate an agreement with the Creek Nation. Ample artillery and military supplies were left behind and a black military leader named Garcon took command. Before leaving, the British had trained and armed about 3,000 Indian and 300 black soldiers to protect the fort, which safeguarded families, fields and pastures extending 50 miles along the Apalachicola River. Sometimes known as the "Negro Fort", the post earned a reputation as a threat to supply vessels that traveled the Apalachicola River between the United States and the Gulf of Mexico. In response, the United States ordered that the fort be destroyed.

Alerted to the impending attack, black families and Choctaw, Upper Creek and Seminole women and children took refuge in the fort. Others hid in the surrounding forests. On July 17, 1816, Col. Duncan Clinch left Fort Scott at the junction of the Flint and Chattahoochee Rivers in Georgia and traveled down the Apalachicola River with 116 men. Clinch and his men combined forces with Maj. William McIntosh and his company of 150 Lower Creek Indians.

They surrounded the British Fort that flew the Union Jack flag. Though they had been met with threats that any American vessel attempting to pass would be sunk, Clinch ordered his men to move up. Around 5 a.m. on July 27, their advance was accompanied by shots from gunboats.

Early in the battle, a heated shot, glowing red, landed in the magazine of the fort, literally blowing it to pieces. Clinch later reported that, "the explosion was awful and the scene horrible beyond description." Of the 300 people, about 200 women and children and 100 men, who took refuge in the fort at the time of the attack, only 33 survived the blast. The defending leaders, Garson and a chief of the Choctaw nation, were two of the survivors. When the Americans learned that Edward Daniels, who had earlier been taken captive, had been tarred and burned alive, Garson and the Choctaw chief were turned over to McIntosh's Creeks, who sentenced them to death. Survivors that were once slaves were eventually returned to their owners.

American soldiers burned what was left of the fort and all the surrounding settlements. The fort had been well stocked with weapons, much better than the Americans had suspected. To encourage support, the Americans had promised McIntosh's Lower Creeks they could have whatever weapons were taken after destroying the fort, and it proved to be a surprisingly fortunate acquisition.

The pace of destruction and bloodshed increased over the next 2 years for everyone along the Apalachicola River on the American border. Settlers were killed, plantations raided, livestock and slaves seized. Ft. Scott was evacuated in the fall of 1816 after the destruction of British Fort, leaving custody of the buildings to a Creek ally named Perryman.

In April 1818, Andrew Jackson led a force down the Apalachicola River to destroy Seminole and allied Upper Creek villages in what is called the First Seminole War. Impressed by the strategic location of the old fort, Jackson instructed Lt. James Gadsden to build a new fortification upon the site as a supply base. Inspired by the lieutenant's zeal, Jackson named the fort in Gadsden's honor.

Jackson seized St. Marks in April 1818. Later the same month, under Jackson's direction, a court-martial sentenced a Scottish trader and a former British Lieutenant to death, for supplying blacks, Seminoles and their allies with weapons and powder. Jackson's extreme measures in Spanish Florida exceeded orders from the War Department and almost led to war with Spain and England.

Jackson's actions decisively ended Spanish and British interests in Florida. Survivors of British Fort fought later in the Seminole Wars on both sides. Some black descendants left for Texas and played major roles in the Mexican American War, some adapted to a life within Native American societies. Seminoles eventually joined their kin and allies in southern Florida or settled in Oklahoma during Indian Removal of the early 1930s. The Choctaw and Upper Creek survivors either joined the Seminole or dispersed with family elsewhere, some also settling in Oklahoma.

Gadsden, later known for the famed Gadsden Purchase of 1853, maintained the fort until Spain ceded Florida to the United States in 1821. The fort was virtually forgotten until 1862, when the Confederate Army realized that Apalachicola was the largest exporting and importing route in the region, and that the river led to plantations in Florida, Georgia, and Alabama. Confederate troops actually occupied the fort until July of 1863, when malaria forced them to move from the lowlands along the river.