

History

Native Americans have been living in Alabama, Georgia, and Florida for at least 12,000 years. Other Native Americans from as far away as present-day Michigan, Illinois, and Indiana began visiting the Big Bend about 6,000 years ago during the cold winter months—the first Florida tourists. Many centuries before the Spanish came, the Apalachee Indians were dominant around the Big Bend. The Apalachee may have had a population of 100,000 when the Spanish arrived. Apalachee braves were warlike and skilled at guerrilla fighting. Primarily due to the explorers' diseases, the Apalachee population (as well as other Native American populations) was decimated to one quarter of its size in only 80 years. And 100 years later, by the early 1700s, the Apalachee were all but extinct. Today we have one large untamed bay—Apalachee Bay, right in the heart of the Big Bend, between Alligator Harbor and the Fenholloway River—to remind us of the rich Apalachees' past.

At the time of the arrival of the Spanish, other parts of Florida were inhabited by the Calusa and Timucan Indians. The Timucans were primarily in the northern and eastern parts of the state. The Calusa Indians lived along Florida's Gulf Coast, south of the Apalachee region, possibly from about the Homosassa River all the way down to and in the Florida Keys. In Charlotte Harbor, it was a Calusa Indian arrow that mortally wounded Ponce de León. The Ochese Creek Indians (the named was later shortened to "Creek") lived peaceably in many areas of present-day Georgia and Alabama during and

before the 1500s. The Creeks were primarily farmers and had a stronger bond with the land. During the Trail of Tears roundup, when the Creeks were forcibly removed in 1836, one very classy Creek chief near Eufaula, Alabama, sincerely stated, "I see the Indian fires will soon be cold as I leave the graves of my fathers," and he continued to bid "the great people of Alabama" a touching good-bye as he and his people were shipped west.

There is sound speculation that, between 1502 and 1507, no less than four Europeans visited Florida before Ponce de León. But in 1513, it was Ponce de León who was officially recognized as the "discoverer" of Florida. In any event, Florida was visited by Europeans more than a hundred years before the English Pilgrims ever landed at Plymouth Rock. De León arrived somewhere between Cape Canaveral and St. Augustine during Easter week and named this "new" land La Florida for the feast of flowers. He was looking for gold, not that romantic fountain of youth.

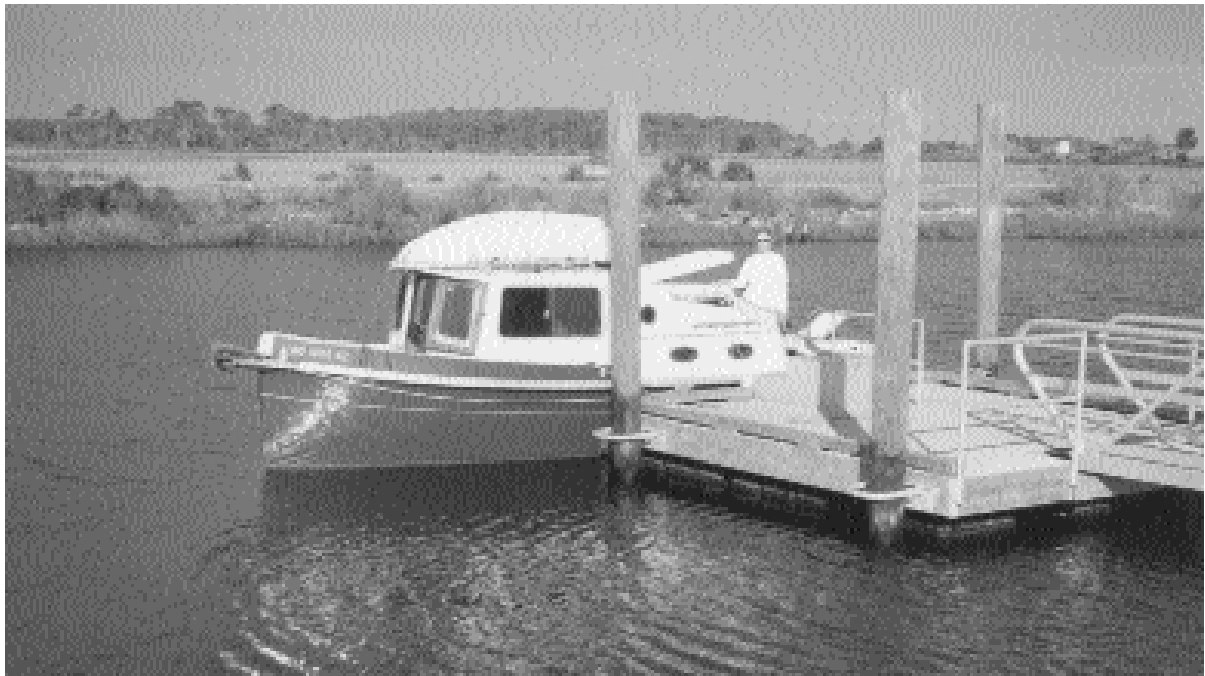
De León first arrived in the New World even earlier than 1513. He was aboard the second Christopher Columbus expedition in 1493 when Puerto Rico was "discovered." Later, on a subsequent voyage to Florida's west coast in 1521, more than half of de León's troops were killed or wounded in an encounter with the fierce Calusa Indians in Charlotte Harbor. In this battle, de León was mortally wounded by an arrow that severed his femoral artery. In the early 1500s, the first contacts between the Spaniards and the Native Americans were generally

friendly on the part of the natives. But subsequent contacts were much more hostile. On good reports, it has been stated that, during those first contacts, the “civilized” Spaniards conducted themselves in such ways as to offend native cultures (demanding food and women and carrying off many Indians to be “specimens” or slaves). Furthermore, some Caribbean slaves who had escaped to Florida years earlier had forewarned the Calusas, Timucans, and possibly even the Apalachee of the Spanish treachery.

Within seven years after de León first landed, a handful of Spaniards sailed into the Gulf of Mexico, but they seldom disembarked far from their vessels. The most noteworthy may have been Alvarez de Pineda. In 1519, Pineda was tasked to find a route to the Pacific Ocean and

became the first European to circumnavigate the Gulf of Mexico. He was also the first to correctly determine that Florida was a peninsula. (Previously, Florida was thought to be a large island—even by “discoverer” Ponce de León.) During his nine-month voyage, Pineda discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River, the Yucatán Peninsula, and he also discovered that there was NO water route to the Pacific Ocean. Most of these early Florida expeditions were launched from Spanish Cuba.

In 1528 the one-eyed and red-bearded Pánfilo de Narváez landed near Tampa. The first overland expedition searching for gold in the direction of New Spain (present-day Mexico) had begun. By the time Narváez’s 300 men reached present-day St. Marks, illnesses and nearly impassable swamps thwarted them.



Salt marshes near the St. Marks River

Narváez and his men sustained themselves by eating their horses. In St. Marks, the Spaniards built five rafts, most likely the first ships built by Europeans in the New World. Narváez's men had changed their plans and hoped to travel the rest of the way to New Spain by sea and aboard their newly constructed vessels. But this expedition ended in disaster. All but two men were either swept out into the Gulf of Mexico and drowned or taken captive and killed by Native Americans along the shore.

Conquistador Hernando De Soto explored Florida's Gulf Coast in 1539. But prior to this trip, De Soto spent four years with deceitful and extremely murderous Francisco Pizarro, looting the Inca civilization in what is now Ecuador and Peru. With his ill-gotten fame and wealth, stolen from the Incas, De Soto was able to position himself to command another expedition to the New World. The Spanish crown chartered De Soto to conquer and govern La Florida. De Soto landed in Tampa Bay with an army of about 600 and marched north. It took his men four months to reach the Aucilla River, and they were constantly harried by the fierce Apalachee warriors. De Soto built a winter encampment near present-day downtown Tallahassee and celebrated the first Christmas Mass in this new land.

De Soto also was an exceptionally cruel conquistador. While in Tallahassee, he supposedly cut off the noses of 50 Indians before executing the newly disfigured. He would typically burn Indians alive at the stake, trying to extract information. After five months in Tallahassee, De Soto and his force departed the Apalachee territory and headed northwest to present-day Bainbridge, Georgia. By 1540, his army was soon commencing northeast, searching for gold in the present-day Carolinas. After the Carolinas, the inland expedi-

tion turned west and crossed the Mississippi River. Instead of heading down the Mississippi River, the army tried heading overland southwest, toward New Spain. This force reached well into present-day Texas but was beginning to starve because there were very few native crops to sustain them along this arid route. In 1542, they retreated back to the Mississippi River where De Soto died of a fever. The remainder of the expedition built boats and rowed down the mighty Mississippi. In 1543, and more than four years after they arrived in Tampa Bay, only 311 survivors of the De Soto expedition (about one-half of the original force) reached safe haven on the Gulf of Mexico near present-day Tampico, Mexico. In early Florida, most, if not all, of the Spanish conquistadors met the same fate before Florida was wrested from the Native Americans.

Finally in 1565, on Florida's east coast, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés established a permanent European settlement at St. Augustine. By 1639, waterborne commercial traffic aboard a Spanish frigate connected St. Augustine to the Port of Apalachee (later to be known as St. Marks). In 1680, the first fort on the Gulf of Mexico was constructed at St. Marks. A series of Franciscan missions, about 20 miles apart, also helped Spain maintain loose-knit control along the Gulf Coast. Spain ruled Florida as two provinces, with the seat of government for East Florida in St. Augustine and the seat of government for West Florida in Pensacola. The boundary between these two provinces was the Apalachicola River. St. Marks was the only major Spanish fortification between these two seats. The Spanish influence lasted for about two centuries. But from the west and the Louisiana Territory, the French also had their fingers on the Gulf Coast, with settlements in Mobile, Biloxi, and later Pensacola,



St. Marks Lighthouse, the sentinel of Apalachee Bay

which they took from the Spanish in 1719. This coastal area changed hands between the French and the Spanish several times. And there were convoluted Indian alliances on all sides.

In the meantime, the British were also gradually forcing the Creek Indians, who lived in Georgia and Alabama, to move farther and farther south. The Seminole Indians were an offshoot—and a rebellious, nomadic branch—of the more principled Creek. The word *seminole* means “runaway or broken off.” The Seminoles were relative newcomers to Florida but they too were being gradually forced to move farther south. By the 1700s, and about two centuries after the Apalachee Indians, the Seminoles were inhabiting many areas of Florida’s Big Bend. Runaway African slaves also entered and blended into Seminole culture. Three wars took place between the Seminole people and the United States.

By the mid-1700s, Great Britain was gradually wresting control of Florida from Spain and France. The British often had Native American help against the Spanish, because of the previous record of Spanish depredation against the Indians. By 1763, when Spain was defeated in the Seven Years’ War, Britain gained control of East and West Florida. But the British occupation was short-lived and all but gone by 1769. In 1783, after the American Revolution and the Treaty of Paris, Florida was handed back to Spain. But soon, the Creek and Seminole Indians were harassing the Spanish in Florida, with encouragement from the leftover British. For about a month in 1800, the Indians actually took the fort at St. Marks from the Spanish.

After the War of 1812, there was mayhem and disarray in south Georgia and north Florida. Meanwhile white American settlers were pouring into Native American lands. The weakened

Spanish were mired in one revolution after another in Central and South America. Closer to home, Spanish colonists, runaway slaves, and more Seminole Indians were finding their way to this no-man’s land of north Florida. New alliances were being formed between the Spanish and the Seminoles. The Seminoles needed guns, blankets, and other manufactured goods, while the Spanish required a military force.

Tasked to champion the white American newcomers streaming into north Florida, U.S. general Andrew Jackson waged war against the Indians. In 1817, the first Seminole war was underway. Jackson, though of American heritage, was much like earlier Spanish conquistadors in his ruthless defeat of the Indians. Jackson didn’t mind stepping all over the British and Spanish, too. Along with the needless killings of many Indians, Jackson summarily executed two British citizens suspected of trading goods with the Indians. This incident almost started a third war with Britain.

In 1819, Spain ceded Florida to the United States. About two years later, Florida became a U.S. territory, and the heavy-handed Andrew Jackson became the first territorial governor. Later, in 1830, with President Jackson’s tyrannical and strong pressure, the shameful Trail of Tears removal plan was legislated. Many of the Native Americans who were subject to this ignominious blotch on our history had adopted some very civilized mores (especially the Cherokee). The Native Americans did have a handful of supporters in Washington—congressman and former president John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Sam Houston, and Davy Crockett. But the supporters lost, and the relocation proponents, spearheaded by Pres. Andrew Jackson—the man whose countenance now graces our twenty dollar bill—won the decade of



Old Cotton Warehouse in Apalachicola

the 1830s. All the Native Americans east of the Mississippi River were to be forcibly shipped west to the Oklahoma Territory. A horrific number of Native Americans died during this march. There are even allegations that the Native Americans were provided with small-pox-tainted blankets during their commanded relocation.

One Seminole chief, Osceola, was enraged. Prior to the 1830s many Seminoles had been living in “the green swamp” east of Florida’s Withlacoochee River. The second Seminole war was soon underway. For a time, 3,000 to 5,000 Seminole warriors, using guerrilla tactics, stood off many more thousands of American troops and several unsuccessful generals.

Gens. Winfield Scott, Edmund Gaines, Duncan Clinch, Richard Call, and Thomas Jesup each drove the war against Osceola and the Seminoles. In 1837, the deceptive Jesup captured Osceola under a truce flag and threw the brave warrior into prison. Osceola soon died there and was posthumously beheaded. But the spirit of the Seminoles was not so easily subdued, and other generals followed Jesup, including another president-to-be, Zachary Taylor. More Seminole chiefs were hoodwinked and captured under truce flags. Eventually much, but not all, of the Seminole contingent was shipped west to Oklahoma. In 1842, a nominal end to hostilities arrived, but the Seminoles never signed a peace treaty

with the Americans, and a few Seminoles still remained in Florida.

Thirteen years later, in 1855, the third Seminole war broke out. Once again, newcomer white settlers were pressuring the remaining Seminoles off “their” land. Under the leadership of Chief Billy Bowlegs, the Seminoles fought back. Eventually Bowlegs had to retreat deep into the Florida Everglades. He and his Seminoles never surrendered, although their numbers in Florida were as small as 200 by 1858. Thankfully, a few Seminoles are still in Florida to this day. Although the Seminoles arrived in Florida relatively late (about two centuries after the Spanish conquistadors), their heritage remains indelible.

Today’s Seminoles are much associated with Florida. Interestingly, many of those strange-sounding names in or near the Big Bend region are of Seminole origin (e.g., Chhattahoochee, Econfina, Fenholloway, Tallahassee, Chassahowitzka, Weeki Wachee, and others). Most place names ending in *sassa* and *hatchee* are of Seminole origin.

Forewarning: This book contains more unpronounceable names and tongue twisters than you can shake a stick at (e.g., Pithlachascotee, Wewahitchka, Waccasassa, Withlacoochee, Homosassa, Hatcheehubee, Ochlockonee, Eufaula, Chewalla, and many others). We recommend—and it will read much faster—you try not to read this book aloud.



Shrimp fleet on the Withlacoochee River

