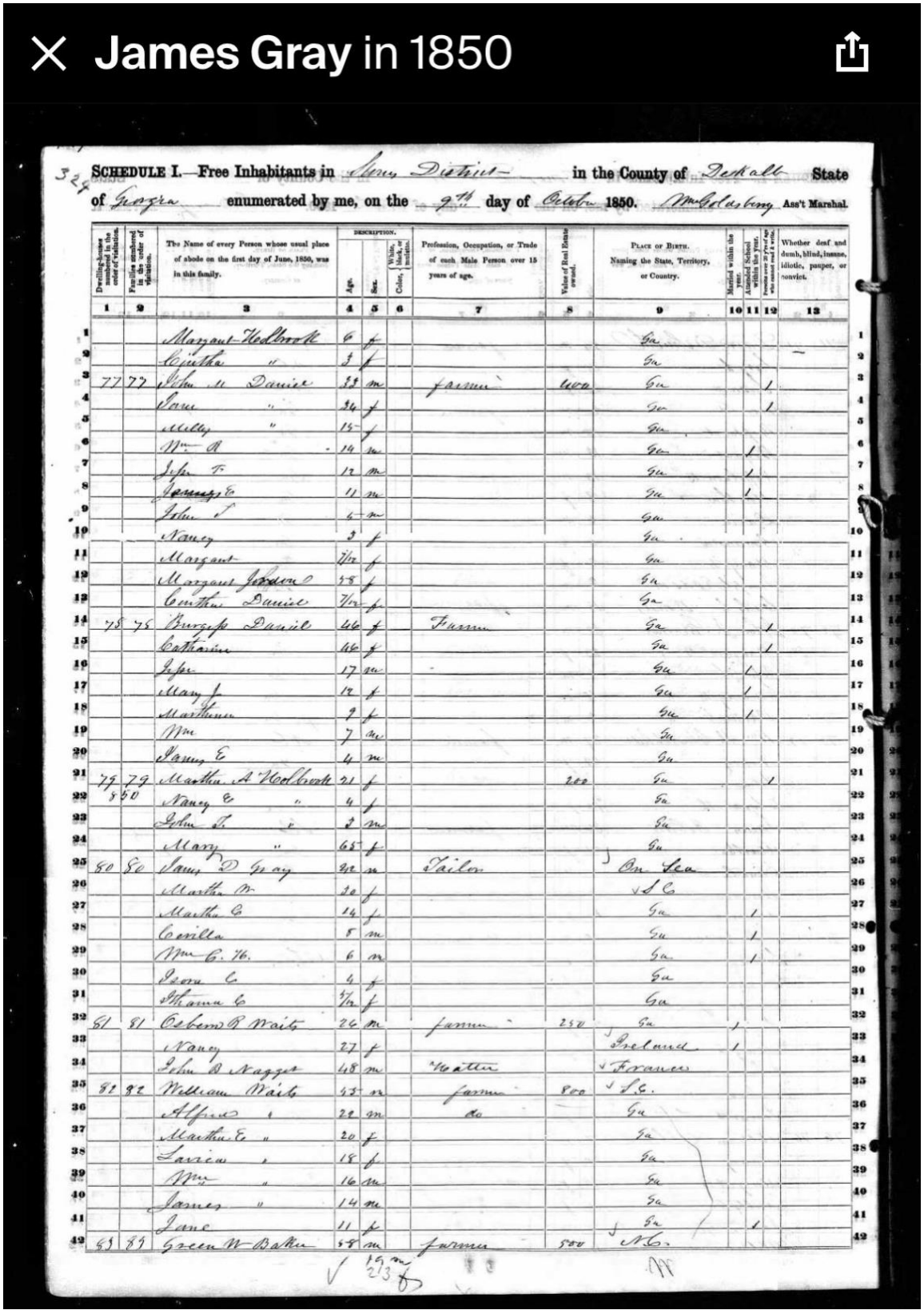
James D. Gray

A Georgia tailor, a militia volunteer, and a letter written as the Second Seminole War began

Historical and genealogical research summary | Prepared October 17, 2026

Working reconstruction, not a proven biography. This account carefully distinguishes documents from plausible family connections.

James Gray in 1850



SCHEDULE I.—Free Inhabitants in Sims District— in the County of DeKalb State of Georgia enumerated by me, on the 9th day of October 1850. McElroy Asst Marshal

Dwelling-houses numbered in the order of visitation.	Families numbered in the order of visitation.	The Name of every Person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June, 1850, was in this family.	Description: Age.	Description: Sex.	Description: Color, (White, black, or mulatto.)	Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each Male Person over 15 years of age.	Value of Real Estate owned.	Place of Birth. Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Married within the year.	Attended School within the year.	Persons over 20 yrs of age who cannot read & write.	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict.	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	
		Margaret Holbrook	6	f				Ga					1
		Ejietha "	3	f				Ga					2
77	77	John M Daniel	28	m		farmer	400	Ga			1		3
		Sarah "	24	f				Ga			1		4
		Milly "	15	f				Ga					5
		Wm R	14	m				Ga		1			6
		Jefferson	12	m				Ga		1			7
		James E	11	m				Ga		1			8
		John F	4	m				Ga					9
		Nancy	3	f				Ga					10
		Margaret	7/12	f				Ga					11
		Margaret Jordan	58	f				Ga					12
		Cinthia Daniel	7/12	f				Ga					13
78	78	Burgess Daniel	46	f		Farmer		Ga			1		14
		Catharine	46	f				Ga			1		15
		Jesse	17	m				Ga		1			16
		Mary J	12	f				Ga		1			17
		Matthew	9	f				Ga		1			18
		Wm	7	m				Ga					19
		James E	4	m				Ga					20
79	79	Martha A Holbrook	21	f			200	Ga			1		21
850		Nancy E "	4	f				Ga					22
		John R "	2	m				Ga					23
		Mary "	65	f				Ga					24
80	80	James D Gray	32	m		Tailor		On Sea					25
		Martha M	30	f				S C					26
		Martha C	14	f				Ga		1			27
		Camilla	8	m				Ga		1			28
		Wm C. H.	6	m				Ga		1			29
		Dixon C	4	f				Ga					30
		Hanna C	7/12	f				Ga					31
81	81	Osborn R Waits	24	m		farmer	250	Ga	1				32
		Nancy	27	f				Ireland	1				33
		John B Naggs	48	m		Waiter		France					34
82	82	William Waits	43	m		farmer	800	S C.					35
		Alfred "	22	m		do		Ga					36
		Martha E "	20	f				Ga					37
		Larcia "	18	f				Ga					38
		Mary "	16	m				Ga					39
		James "	14	m				Ga					40
		Jane "	11	f				Ga		1			41
83	83	Green W Baker	58	m		farmer	500	N C.					42

Family-provided image of the 1850 census; use the original record to verify ambiguous names and handwriting.

James D. Gray: the best-supported account

James D. Gray appears by name on an 1836 roster of Captain Thomas Wilson's Butts County Cavalry, and a surviving letter he wrote from Jackson, Georgia, on February 29, 1836 describes his dilemma over obtaining a horse for the anticipated Florida expedition. A man named James D. Gray, age approximately 42, is listed as a tailor and born "on sea" in the 1850 DeKalb County census supplied by the family. The exact identity connection between the 1836 militia volunteer and the 1850 tailor remains a strong working hypothesis, not yet independently proven.

A compiled Ancestry marriage entry reports James D. Gray marrying Martha W. McArthur around 1835. That report has not been traced to a contemporary marriage certificate or register. The family's suggested Scottish migration scenario is plausible, given the unusual "born at sea" notation, but it is not documented by passenger or parental records. Maternal-side Scottish DNA ethnicity alone cannot establish which ancestral branch supplied that ancestry.

The 1836 letter: a personal encounter with the militia system

The original four-leaf manuscript is preserved at the Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, in the Telamon Cuyler collection, box 50, folder 05, document 09. The Digital Library of Georgia provides page images and a transcription.

Gray said the local regiment initially needed 52 men. Promised community contributions totaling approximately $874 helped persuade him and other men with limited means to volunteer. He was assured he would receive a horse for the cavalry, but the promise was not kept. Captain Wilson could offer no aid and expected marching orders soon. Gray feared that failing to report would cause him to be treated as a deserter.

"for I am a poor man, have my family to support by the sweat of my brow"

He asked Governor William Schley whether the government could furnish a horse or explain what he should do. The letter demonstrates willingness to serve, fear for his community reputation, and economic pressure on a man supporting a family. It does not verify that he ultimately received a horse, marched, or fought in Florida.

Original letter and full archival transcription https://dlg.usg.edu/record/dlg_zlna_tcc568

Why Georgia volunteers were called to Florida

The Second Seminole War (1835–1842) grew from the federal government's attempt to remove Seminole communities from Florida under disputed removal treaties and the wider policy of Indian removal. Seminole and Black Seminole resistance defended homes, autonomy, and freedom from forced relocation. The December 28, 1835 destruction of Major Francis Dade's U.S. Army column intensified the call for reinforcements across the Southeast.

Florida officials requested Georgia troops; their letters to Governor Schley show fears about raids, vulnerable borders, and the need to mobilize before conditions deteriorated. In spring 1836 General Winfield Scott attempted a large coordinated campaign in central Florida, but difficult supply lines, rivers, wetlands, heat, disease, and Seminole tactics frustrated U.S. plans.

Captain Wilson's Butts County Cavalry

A roster reproduced in a November 21, 1940 Jackson Progress-Argus historical article lists Captain Thomas Wilson, other officers, and Private James D. Gray, with the company associated with the 59th Regiment and dated February 12, 1836. The same account says the company reportedly spent time at Hawkinsville, Georgia, but that the researcher did not find a marching order. Thus even the unit's Florida deployment has not been verified.

An accompanying aggregate military census lists one tailor and one person born in Scotland, but does not name the individuals in those categories. It is tempting to identify these with James; the available summary does not justify doing so.

Butts County Cavalry roster and historical account https://thegagenweb.com/gabutts/military/1836Cavalry.html

A chronology of records and uncertainties

Date	Record or event	Confidence
c. 1808	James's birth "on sea," per 1850 census	Reported in census
1830	Elizabeth Gray is indexed as a Butts County household head	Family connection unproved
c. 1835	Marriage to Martha W. McArthur in compiled database	Unverified original
Feb. 12, 1836	James D. Gray on Butts County Cavalry roster	Historical roster reproduction
Feb. 29, 1836	Letter to Gov. Schley about a cavalry horse	Original document
1836	Company reportedly stationed at Hawkinsville	Later historical account
1850	James D. Gray, tailor, age about 42, in DeKalb County	Census image; 1836 link unproven

Historical paintings and maps: illustrated-source gallery

The public-domain artworks referenced in our earlier discussion are listed below with direct image pages. Their original image files were not accessible for embedding during preparation, so these links preserve the exact historical sources without substituting modern artwork.

Osceola — George Catlin, oil portrait, 1838

A portrait painted after the start of the war; not a depiction of James Gray.

View historical artwork https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Osceola,_George_Catlin,_1838.JPG

Death of Major Dade — historical engraving, 1836

A contemporary-style illustration of the December 1835 battle.

View historical artwork https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Death_of_Major_Dade.png

Camp Izard — campaign map, 1836

A period depiction of central Florida military geography.

View historical artwork https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1836_Map_of_Camp_Izard.jpg

Florida volunteer broadside, June 1836

A wartime recruiting appeal signed by Florida governor Richard K. Call.

View historical artwork https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Second_Seminole_War_Broadside,_1836.jpg

What remains unresolved—and where to look

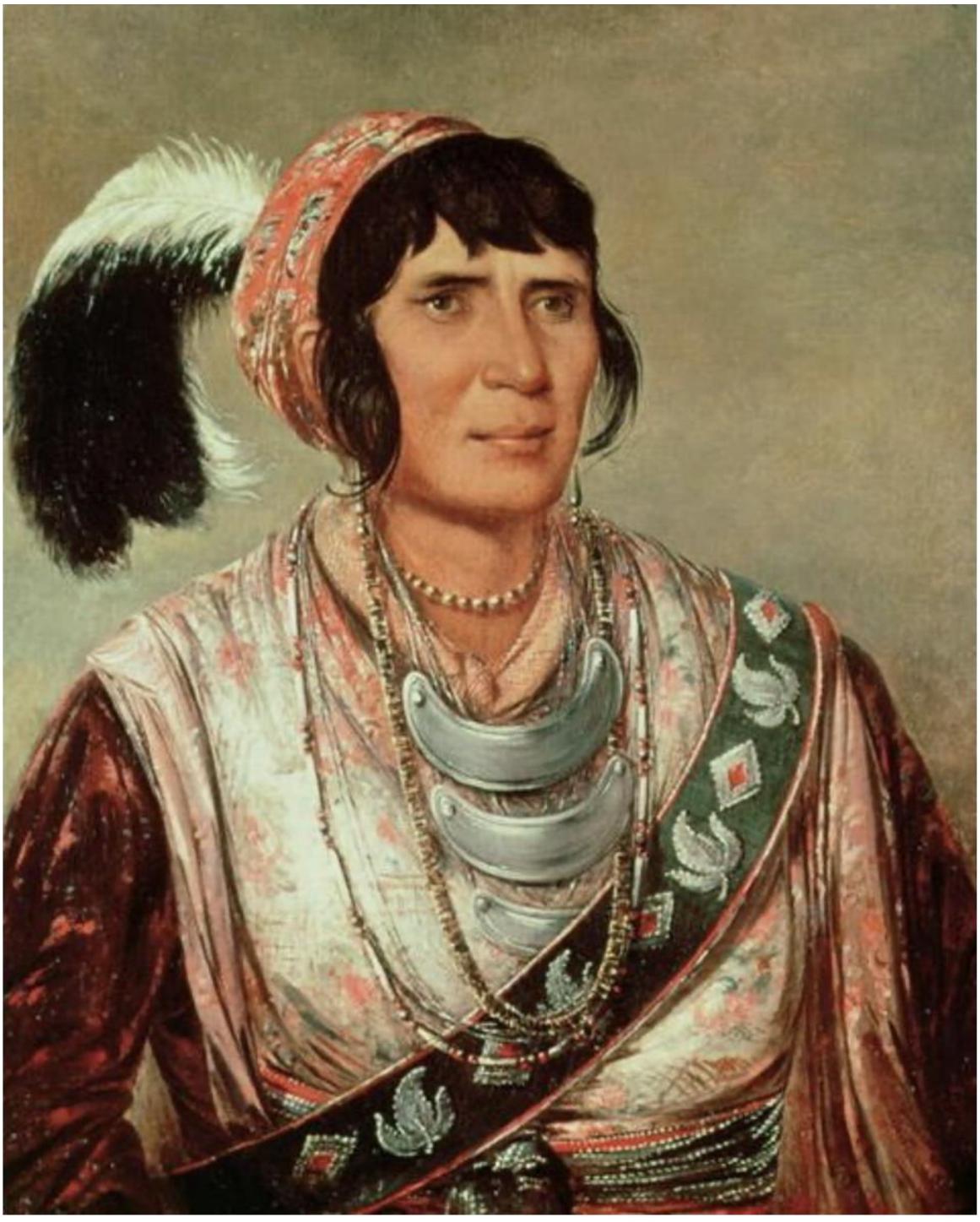
- Whether the letter writer and the DeKalb County tailor are one person. Look for tax, land, family, and occupational records bridging Butts and DeKalb counties.
- Whether Martha W. McArthur was James's spouse and whether they married in 1835. Seek an original Georgia or South Carolina marriage record, church source, or family Bible.
- Whether either parent was Scottish and whether James was born on an Atlantic crossing. Search probate, passenger, and linked DNA-match family trees, not ethnicity estimates alone.
- Whether James marched with Captain Wilson. Request subsequent muster rolls, pay vouchers, discharge or absence records, and any governor's response to the letter.

Archive lead: Georgia Archives, Georgia Militia Muster Rolls, 1836 (DOC 2195, series 022-01-068). Ask also about the Butts County miscellaneous records described in the 1940 article, and state compensation materials following 1836 militia legislation.

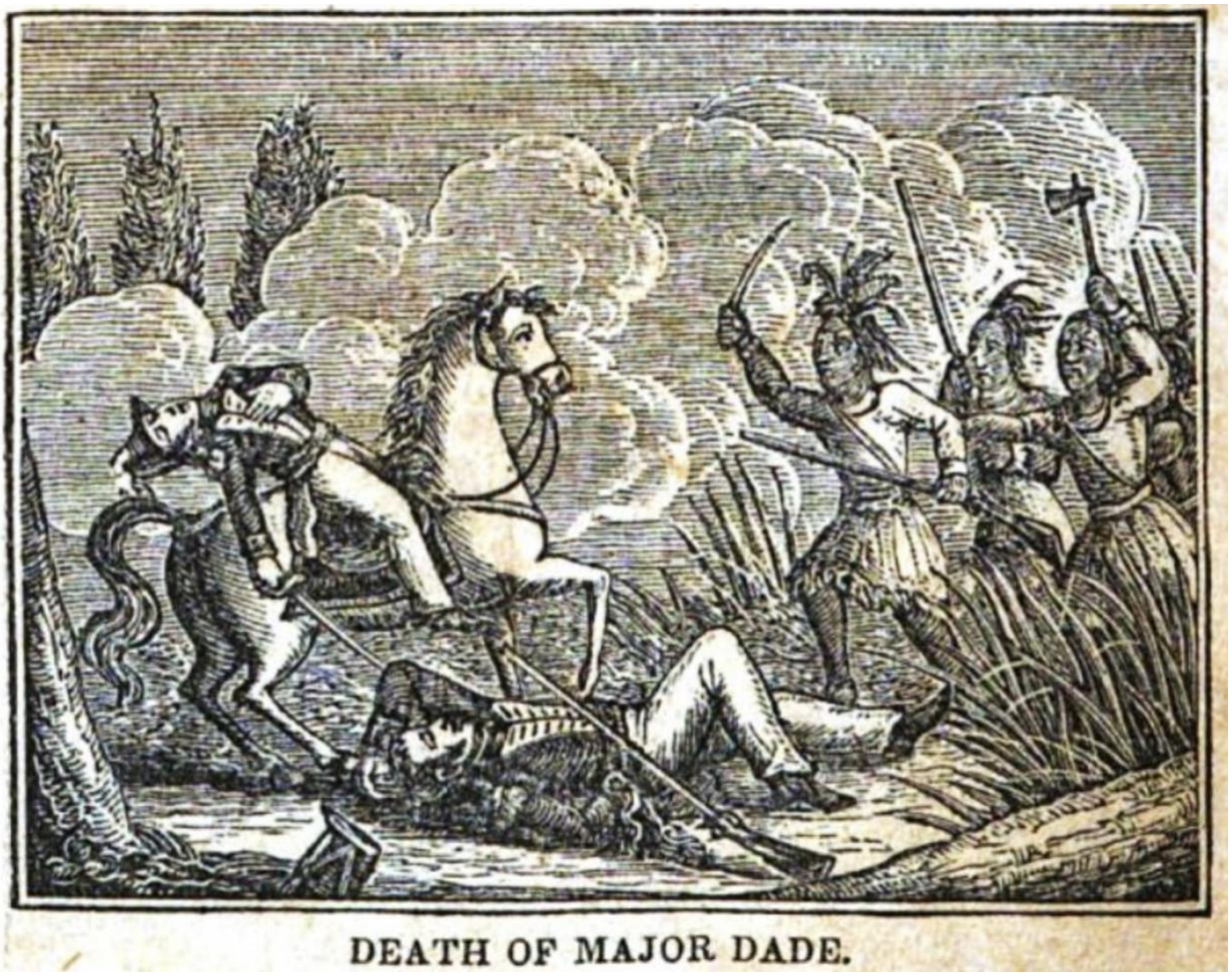
Georgia Archives research inquiry https://www.georgiaarchives.org/research/archivist_form

Sources and use notes

Primary source: James D. Gray to Governor William Schley, February 29, 1836, Digital Library of Georgia, tcc568. Secondary roster: "1836 Cavalry," transcription of Jackson Progress-Argus, November 21, 1940, Butts County GA GenWeb. Family evidence: user-supplied 1850 census image and Ancestry compiled marriage screenshot. Illustrations: Wikimedia Commons historical reproductions linked above. All conclusions are tentative where the original records do not directly identify family relationships or military movements.

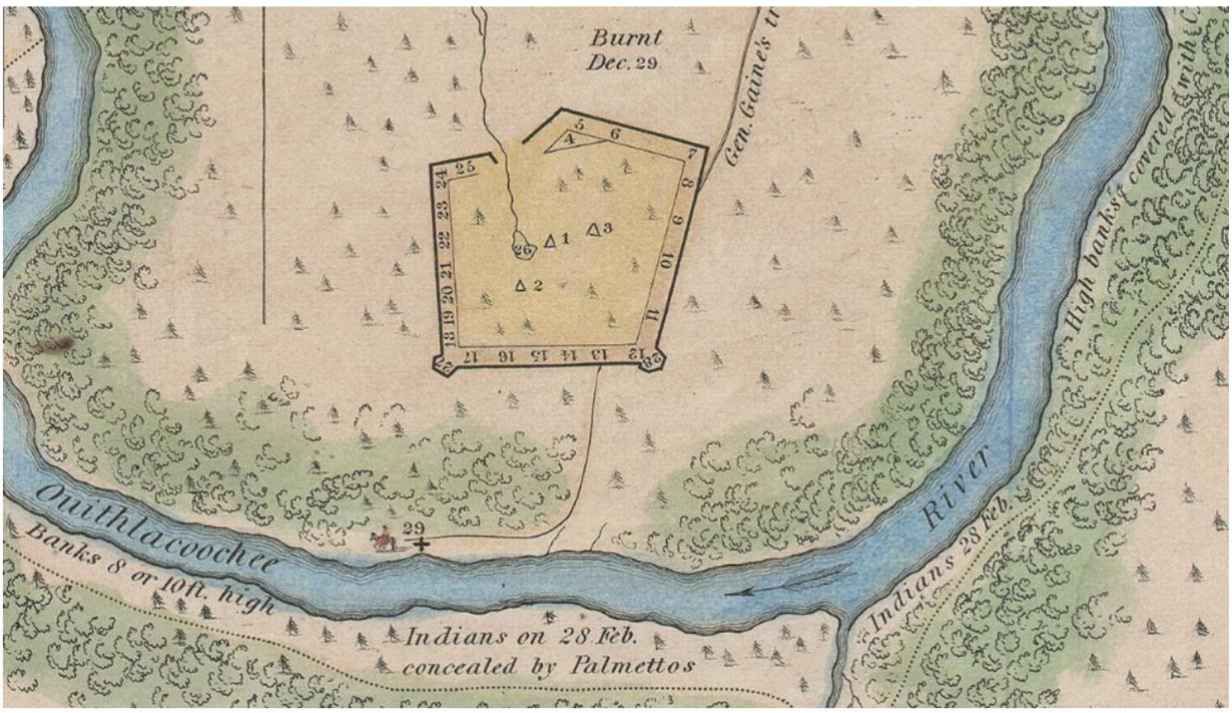


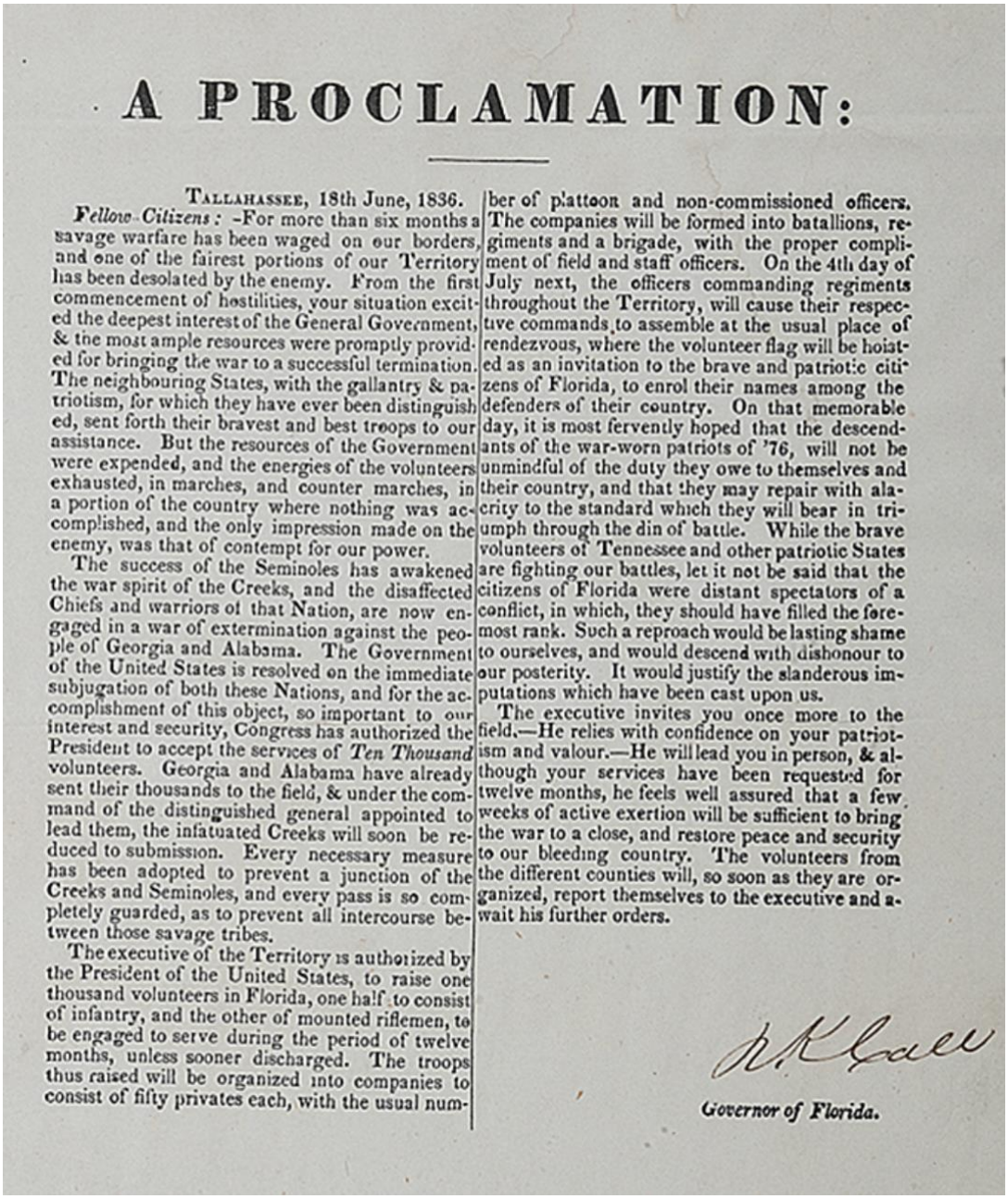
Portrait of Osceola, by George Catlin (d. 1872), oil on canvas, 1838



File:1836 Map of Camp Izard.jpg

File Discussion Read





A PROCLAMATION:

TALLAHASSEE, 18th June, 1836.

Fellow-Citizens: -For more than six months a savage warfare has been waged on our borders, and one of the fairest portions of our Territory has been desolated by the enemy. From the first commencement of hostilities, your situation excited the deepest interest of the General Government, & the most ample resources were promptly provided for bringing the war to a successful termination. The neighbouring States, with the gallantry & patriotism, for which they have ever been distinguished, sent forth their bravest and best troops to our assistance. But the resources of the Government were expended, and the energies of the volunteers exhausted, in marches, and counter marches, in a portion of the country where nothing was accomplished, and the only impression made on the enemy, was that of contempt for our power.

The success of the Seminoles has awakened the war spirit of the Creeks, and the disaffected Chiefs and warriors of that Nation, are now engaged in a war of extermination against the people of Georgia and Alabama. The Government of the United States is resolved on the immediate subjugation of both these Nations, and for the accomplishment of this object, so important to our interest and security, Congress has authorized the President to accept the services of *Ten Thousand* volunteers. Georgia and Alabama have already sent their thousands to the field, & under the command of the distinguished general appointed to lead them, the infatuated Creeks will soon be reduced to submission. Every necessary measure has been adopted to prevent a junction of the Creeks and Seminoles, and every pass is so completely guarded, as to prevent all intercourse between those savage tribes.

The executive of the Territory is authorized by the President of the United States, to raise one thousand volunteers in Florida, one half to consist of infantry, and the other of mounted riflemen, to be engaged to serve during the period of twelve months, unless sooner discharged. The troops thus raised will be organized into companies to consist of fifty privates each, with the usual number of platoon and non-commissioned officers. The companies will be formed into batallions, regiments and a brigade, with the proper compliment of field and staff officers. On the 4th day of July next, the officers commanding regiments throughout the Territory, will cause their respective commands to assemble at the usual place of rendezvous, where the volunteer flag will be hoisted as an invitation to the brave and patriotic citizens of Florida, to enrol their names among the defenders of their country. On that memorable day, it is most fervently hoped that the descendants of the war-worn patriots of '76, will not be unmindful of the duty they owe to themselves and their country, and that they may repair with alacrity to the standard which they will bear in triumph through the din of battle. While the brave volunteers of Tennessee and other patriotic States are fighting our battles, let it not be said that the citizens of Florida were distant spectators of a conflict, in which, they should have filled the foremost rank. Such a reproach would be lasting shame to ourselves, and would descend with dishonour to our posterity. It would justify the slanderous imputations which have been cast upon us.

The executive invites you once more to the field.—He relies with confidence on your patriotism and valour.—He will lead you in person, & although your services have been requested for twelve months, he feels well assured that a few weeks of active exertion will be sufficient to bring the war to a close, and restore peace and security to our bleeding country. The volunteers from the different counties will, so soon as they are organized, report themselves to the executive and await his further orders.

R. K. Call

Governor of Florida.

Third and Fifth Territorial Governor of Florida. Printed broadside, approx. 5 x 6 in., two-column format, on larger sheet. Signed at bottom, "R.K. Call" as Governor of Florida. Tallahassee, June 18, 1836. Gov. Call notes that because of the attacks of the Seminoles, and the unrest spreading to the Creeks, it had become necessary to enlist 10,000 volunteers, approved by Andrew Jackson, President, to put down the Indian uprisings once and for all. 1,000 of these new volunteers were to come from Florida. The initial push would be to keep the Seminoles and Creeks from joining forces, although some Creeks had already moved to what is today the Florida panhandle after their defeat by Jackson in 1814 (Treaty of Fort Jackson). 18 June 1836