

Sam Jones Trail: An academic perspective

SUBMITTED BY DAVID BROWNELL
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In 1837, following the Battle of Okeechobee, Sam Jones reportedly “went around the east side of the lake, or to the land known as Hungry Land, then to Miami River. They then went to the Big Cypress where he staid [sic] until he died.” This information, relayed to historian Albert DeVane by Billy Bowlegs III during a visit to the Brighton Reservation, is a rare record of what happened between the battle and the next verifiable account of Sam Jones’ whereabouts as reported by the Tampa Tribune in 1955 by Sampson Forrester, who lived with the Seminoles between 1839 and 1841:

“In the center of the swamp is the council ground. South of this, within 2 miles, is the village of Sam Jones ... No trail [whatsoever] is visible outside the swamp, as such would guide their pursuers. Within the swamp are many pine-islands, upon which the villages are located.”

In his book “The Seminoles of Florida,” historian James W. Covington wrote that Sam Jones’ “headquarters” would “appear to have been the ruins of Sam Jones’ Old Town on a pine ridge 14 miles south of Lake Okeechobee, where councils and other meetings were held.”

The account goes on to describe the Seminoles’ reliance on agriculture for subsistence, which also lends support to the theory of the Devil’s Garden being an area under cultivation by Sam Jones himself, or his band.

Oral traditions still in circulation among contemporary Seminoles give an interesting account for the area’s name. They state that during the Third Seminole War troops made their way into a large hammock and were so overwhelmed by the abundance of cultivated crops that it distracted them from their main purpose of apprehending Seminoles. This was all the opportunity Sam Jones needed to give them the slip, and thus the soldiers named the hammock the Devil’s Garden, said Chairman James E. Billie.

Though there is no accounting for this tale in the historic record, there are some important clues that lean toward its credibility. By this period, the Seminoles’ tenuous relationship with Anglo-American

settlers and military had led them to cultivating agricultural fields within the bounds of hammocks so that they were disguised from view.

In addition, maps from this period – including an 1856 map from U.S. Lt. J.C. Ives – note several locations associated with Sam Jones, including a “Sam Jones Town” in the area of the southern portion of the Big Cypress Reservation, a “Sam Jones Town” or “Sam Jones Island” on the east coast associated with what is now known as Long Key in Broward County, and a “Sam Jones Old Town” to the northeast of the current Big Cypress Reservation; with the exception of Long Key, all Sam Jones Towns were located immediately adjacent to these trails.

The “Sam Jones Old Town” was located at the eastern tumulus of a branch of the Sam Jones Trail and was marked by D. Graham Copeland, though the marker no longer exists. In addition to the fact that there are multiple Sam Jones Towns noted on the map, there are a number of ambiguous “Indian Camps” noted on the maps, including two in the area now known as Devil’s Garden which are located adjacent to the same trail that leads into Big Cypress.

These camps are possibly the same camps as those described in 1889 in the Fort Myers Press as a Miccosukee-speaking camp described as a “semi-circle fronting on a ‘slue’ as they call it (we would call it a canal). This camp consisted of three huts, built square and roofed with palmetto fans, four upright pineposts [sic], planked in roughly ... The other two shanties were simply covered with canvas stretched over four straight oak poles,” Covington wrote.

The camp was located in Devil’s Garden and contained what was purported to be the larger portion of Miccosukee-speaking Seminoles in the area at the time. More historic evidence supports Seminole occupation of the Devil’s Garden area into the early 20th century, including an entry in Lucien Spencer’s 1913 Seminole Census of one “Tom Devil’s Garden.” It was not uncommon for Seminoles to include geographical features in their names pertaining to where the individual lived, Covington wrote.

By the late 1920s, white hunters and trappers “controlled the hunting area for

alligator, otter and raccoon between LaBelle and the Devil’s Garden, but the Seminoles held their own in the Big Cypress Swamp south of the Devil’s Garden,” Covington reported. Soon, however, additional pressure from cattle ranchers and continual encroachments by white hunters into the area “exerted enough pressure to initiate a Seminole withdrawal from the Devil’s Garden area into the Big Cypress Swamp.”

The Sam Jones Trail led northwest out of Big Cypress, loosely following the path of today’s County Road 846 until it splits about 2 miles south of the County Road 833 – County Road 846 junction today, or just north of the “Point of Cypress” noted on Copeland’s Map of Collier County.

One branch of the trail continued west by southwest, eventually ending in the area of Immokalee. The Sam Jones Trail turned due north, running from Devil’s Garden up to the Caloosahatchee River, following the line of CR 833 almost directly north. This trail headed almost directly north, about 10 miles east of the Okaloacoochee Slough.

Once north of the “Point of Cypress,” the trail threaded its way across a large expanse of wet march interspersed with small prairies, and it appears that most of this route would have been traversed by canoe, as it follows shallow pounds and small sloughs as much as possible.

Approximately 5 miles north of “Point of Cypress,” the trail was joined by another trail from the southwest that still exists as the entrance road to the Dinner Island Ranch on the west side of CR 833. From there the trail continued another 6 miles north until it reached a junction of several trails approximately 10 miles south of the Caloosahatchee, in the area of Hilliard Grove Road. The trail continued north across the river; however, it is difficult to determine the exact route from this point, as the entire area was a large slough.

This same junction of trails a few miles south of the Caloosahatchee is also represented on the Ives’ Map, and there are symbols representing “Indian Camps” located around and at this junction.

After crossing the river in the area between the former Lake Flirt and Lake Hicpochee, the trail continued north following the western edge of Lake Okeechobee north to the area of today’s Brighton Reservation.

♦ SAM JONES

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In the formal proposal, Brownell wrote: “It is proposed to the Florida Department of Transportation that the 20 miles of CR 833, from its intersection with SR 80, south to where CR 833 crosses the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation Line, be named in honor of Abiaki (Sam Jones), a medicine man and major leader of the Seminole Tribe of Florida through the three Seminole Wars.

“The uniqueness of the Sam Jones Trail is twofold. The trail is positioned to connect four watersheds that were crucial to the survival of the Seminoles and connected the different coasts of Florida: the Okaloacoochee Slough to the west, the Caloosahatchee River to the north, the Everglades watershed to the east and the Big Cypress Swamp to the south. In addition, the Devil’s Garden locale was so remote that the trail remained in its native, unpaved state far into the 20th century, used by Seminoles to move between camps and hunting areas, long after many other trails had been destroyed or forgotten by modern development.

“Naming CR 833 the Sam Jones Trail will help represent a continuum of this narrative of historical usage into the modern era and recognize those who made the trail, and Florida, what it is today.”

Brownell said that the Sam Jones Trail and CR 833 both transverse the Devil’s Garden area of Hendry County.

“There are many historic references to Sam Jones in many places, never more than a mile or so from today’s road,” Brownell said. “It’s remarkable how closely the road

matches the trail when we overlay their maps.”

History provides several different accounts regarding the naming of Devil’s Garden and its connection to Abiaki. A popular tale passed down through time credits U.S. soldiers who, frightened by the eerie sounds that came from the area at night, called it Devil’s Garden. Legend also says that fruits and vegetables planted there grew in abundance in the area’s dark muck. Sam Jones’ innate ability to appear and disappear quickly – even eluding soldiers who were distracted by the abundant food crops – earned the Seminole leader the Devil nickname.

Though the military was sure Abiaki hid in Devil’s Garden, he was never captured. He died a free man in a Big Cypress camp, reportedly well

over 100 years old.

“Sam Jones was the only person that I know from the extensive research I’ve undertaken, to whom the term ‘devil’ was applied in the historic literature, songs, poems, etc. of the Seminole War period,” historian Patsy West wrote in an e-mail to THPO research coordinator Mary Beth Rosebrough.

“As the Devil’s Garden section of the Big Cypress was solidly Jones’ domain, it could be assumed by deduction why the name originated ... I would have to assume that the name was coined after the Seminole War period, when more cattle interests and farmers entered this fertile area,” wrote West.

“All it would have taken was one individual who was intimate or even somewhat familiar with the previous wars and Jones’ pivotal role in them to have come up with such an appropriate name for the region,” concluded West, who is writing a book about Sam Jones.



Painting of Sam Jones by Guy LaBree.

Hah-pong-ke: Ann Thomas

BY PETER B. GALLAGHER
Special Projects Reporter

LAKE WALES — Professional librarian Ann Thomas, raised in Lakeland and musical partner for 58 years to Florida folk songwriter Frank Thomas, was a musical wordsmith in her own right. One of her proudest compositions was her haunting song-story about one of the most important and controversial American Indian battles in U.S. history.

The Christmas Day, 1837 Battle of Okeechobee pitted an estimated 380 to 480 Seminole Indians, led by Abiaki (Sam Jones), Alligator, Coacoochee (Wild Cat) and Billy Bowlegs, against 800 troops of the 1st, 4th, and 6th infantry regiments and 132 Missouri Volunteers under the command of Col. Zachary Taylor. Though the Indians bested the soldiers, Taylor boasted to President Martin Van Buren that his troops had won. The falsely reported exploit earned Taylor a promotion to Brig. Gen. and the nickname “Ol’ Rough and Ready,” a moniker which helped carry him into office 12 years later as the U.S. president.

During the 150th anniversary of the battle in 1987, noted archaeologist and battlefield expert Bob Carr asked Frank and Ann if they would write a Florida folk song about the battle that could be performed at the celebration. They took the assignment.

Born in Clay County, Frank had ancestors who came to Florida to farm in the late 18th century. Members of his family fought in the Second Seminole

War and in the Civil War. A veteran songwriter with more than 400 songs about Florida history, people and places, Frank was only able to come up with a melody. No words.

Three days before the anniversary celebration, Ann decided to give it a try, and “with her nose to the grindstone,” Frank said, came up with a poetic account of a complicated battle.

Everything is in there: the Seminoles setting up their battle areas by cutting the “sawgrass low for seeing” and “notched trees to steady firearms;” the battle beginning with Taylor sending the Volunteers “ahead to take the worst” on a direct charge at the waiting Indians; the death of Col. Richard Gentry who cried “Charge on!” as he fell; and the final battle count: “One hundred twelve soldiers were wounded in the battle. Twenty-seven bled to death there on that day.” Meanwhile, the Seminoles “only left ten dead that day. And knew they earned a victory, not defeat.”

The song is featured on the Thomas’ “Rainbows and Rivers” album.

For decades, Ann and Frank performed their music throughout the state at schools, festivals, folk clubs and concert stages. They hosted a weekly Florida folk music show on the radio, and Frank continues to perform, though Ann passed away in 2004.

“Man, she was very proud of writing that song,” Frank said from his home in Lake Wales. “Until the day Ann died, she was very proud of her words in ‘The Battle of Okeechobee.’”

‘The Battle of Okeechobee’

For two years the Seminole and Miccosukee had retreated,
From the white man, to the shores of Okeechobee.
Now at the winter solstice, Sam Jones and Alligator,
Planned a battle with the firebrand, Coacoochee.

On the north shore of Big Water, Lake Okeechobee,
To a marsh where no white men ever went;
There they planned the strategies of the land’s rightful denizens,
Against invaders whom the government had sent.

They cut trails to a hammock,
Surrounded on all sides, by danger they prepared to make a stand;
Cut saw grass low, for seeing; notched tree’s to steady firearms;
Waiting for the soldiers to invade their land.

Chorus:
The white man said Sam Jones, the Prophet, was just a crazy old Indian,
But, his medicine was the strongest of all men.
He made some warriors invisible and others invulnerable,
To the bullets that the white man would send.

Alligator was the strategist, who led three-hundred warriors,
United them and led them to the fray;
When Taylor’s eight-hundred regulars and Gentry’s hundred volunteers,
Engaged them on that fateful Christmas day.

Zachary Taylor sent the volunteers ahead to take the worst,
Of the Seminole and Miccosukee lead;
Gentry, with his sword in hand, led his men and fell when wounded,
Rose again, and led them onward as he bled.

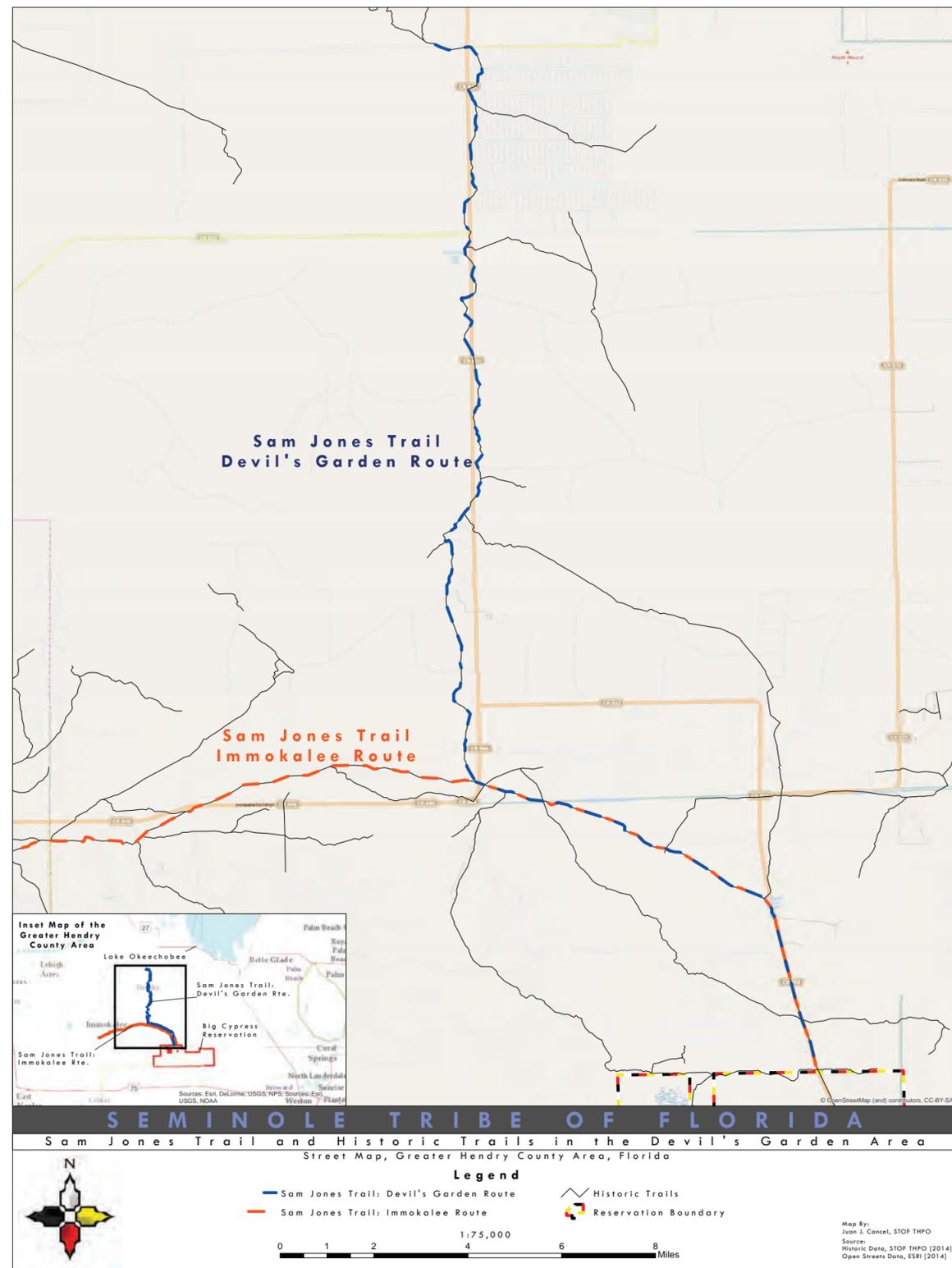
Shot again, Gentry fell, but cried, “Charge on!”
And the Missourians drew fire from foe and from their backs.
Crying, bleeding, dying, they stained the foreign waters;
But pressed on, they’d come so far to fight with Zach.

Chorus
The battle nearly over, Zachary Taylor sent the regulars in;
The Indians were frantic, so hard-pressed;
Foe to North, lake to South, they must break through to Hungry Land;
They couldn’t dare dense hammock to the West.

One-hundred and twelve soldiers were wounded in the battle;
Twenty-seven bled to death there on that day;
Zachary Taylor, ever after, would be called “Old-Rough-and-Ready,”
And he boasted that the battle went his way.

But the warriors had rejoined their wives and children in the scrub,
When the smoke cleared, freed by that retreat;
To fight another time; they only left ten dead that day,
And knew they’d earned a victory, not defeat.

Final Chorus:
And it’s the cries of Coacoochee you confuse with the wind,
And the night birds, and coming of the rain;
They call across more than a century to celebrate that victory,
On the shores of Okeechobee once again.
On the shores of Okeechobee once again.
On the shores of Okeechobee once again.



Sam Jones Trail splits just south of the current County Road 833/County Road 846 junction. The branch marked in red, which continues west, is the Immokalee route. The branch marked in blue is the Devil's Garden route, which closely overlaps the CR 833 route as it heads due north to where it intersects with State Road 80 south of Moore Haven.

Map courtesy of THPO