

# COACOOCHEE AND THE ESCAPE FROM FORT MARION

On the last day of November in 1837, soldiers stationed at Fort Marion went to check on the twenty two Seminole held prisoner there. They had been betrayed and captured under the flag of truce the previous month, and included the war leaders Coacoochee (Wild Cat), Asi-Yahola (Osceola), and John Civallo.<sup>1</sup> Only one, Osceola who was too sick to stand unaided, remained in the locked cell. The rest had, seemingly impossibly, escaped a locked prison where the only way out was a barred window five feet wide but only eight inches tall, fifteen feet above the cell floor. Coacoochee led the escape after a week of planning, and hoping Osceola would recover. Osceola convinced his childhood friend to go without him.

The captain in charge of Fort Marion convened a review board to determine how the escape could have happened. Their official response was that the room had been secured and deemed inescapable. They determined that no soldier could be blamed. They had no idea how the Seminole had gotten through the window, removed the bar, or where they got a line to climb down with.<sup>2</sup>

To this day it's not known how Coacoochee engineered the escape. Some credit a group fast so everyone could slim down to fit through the eight inch gap, others credit medicine<sup>3</sup> that Coacoochee used. The escape would lead to Osceola being taken from Florida to Fort Moultrie in South Carolina, where he soon died. Those who escaped returned to the Tribe, and Coacoochee would go on to be a leader and key strategist in the battles of Okeechobee and Loxahatchee.



#### References Cited

1. Monaco, C.S. 2018. *The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
2. Capt. Gould to Capt. Brown. Fort Marion, St. Augustine, Florida. November 30, 1837
3. Seminole Oral Histories
4. Engraving of Coacoochee from *The Exiles of Florida* by Joshua R. Giddings (Follet, Foster & Co., 1858) Public Domain

