

THE BATTLE OF OKEECHOBEE

On Christmas day of 1838, Colonel Zachary Taylor ordered his men to charge a fortified Seminole position on the outskirts of Lake Okeechobee. His forces were tired and poorly provisioned, having followed Seminole tracks for weeks into the wetlands. The charge did not go as he had planned.

The battlefield had been specifically chosen and prepared by Seminole strategists. They cut back sawgrass along a path that would lead the American troops into an open area, surrounded on three sides by cypress trees on higher ground, with fortified cover built up to hide and protect Seminole soldiers. When Taylor ordered the charge, his men found deeper water than expected, and sharpened cypress knees. Behind the tree line, men and women reloaded guns for the soldiers, treated the injured, and prepared canoes for the withdrawal. The trap had been laid and set off all according to the plans laid out by Coacoochee (Wildcat), Halpatter Tustenuggee (Alligator), and Abiaka (Sam Jones).

Initial reports led newspapers to declare the battle "disastrous news" in the National Intelligencer, and "one of the most disastrous battles that has yet been fought" in the New Orleans Picayune. The Seminole had lost roughly a dozen men, with fourteen wounded. More than two dozen American soldiers and militia men had been killed, with over 100 wounded.

Despite the disproportionate losses that came from Taylor's pursuit of the Seminole, the colonel showed his political talent by rebranding the battle as a total victory, claiming that he had run the Seminole off, even though his goal was capture. With its record costs in men and money, the Seminole War was already deeply unpopular with the American public. Needing good news, the military ran with the Colonel's account. Despite the Seminole victory, Zachary Taylor was hailed as a hero, and his tales of his success carried him into the White House as the 12th President of the United States.



The Late Battle in Florida.
The first accounts of the disastrous battle in which our Florida troops were lately engaged, as published by us yesterday, were hard to be credited. Yesterday's mail, however, removed every doubt. The Mobile papers state that the



TO LEARN MORE

Read *The Second Seminole War and the Limits of American Aggression* by C.S. Monaco

And visit the Tribal Historic Preservation Office website at stofthpo.com or use the QR code for more Seminole history resources

