

THE SEMINOLE WAR: UNDER A FLAG OF TRUCE

The arrest of Osceola under a flag of truce quickly became one of the most infamous actions in American history. The breaking of the military code of honor damaged the United States' reputation, hampered diplomacy, and marked its top wartime general, William Jesup, as a villain. Osceola's death in captivity would only solidify the stain on the honor of the young nation.

In early September of 1837, acting on information from a prisoner, the US Army surrounded and took the camp of Emathla (King Phillip) by surprise. Emathla was not only a prominent war leader in his own right, but the father of Coacoochee (Wildcat), who the Army considered one of the most dangerous Seminole strategists. Jesup saw the opportunity to draw Coacoochee and Osceola into an ambush, demanding they meet to discuss Emathla's fate. Jesup declared the meeting would be a negotiation under the flag of truce. When the leaders arrived, there were formal greetings and handshakes.

When everyone was at ease, the US soldiers surrounded and captured the Seminole delegation.

The prisoners were taken to Fort Marion in St. Augustine but were only held there briefly. Coacoochee orchestrated an escape at night that freed most of the captives. Unfortunately Osceola, weakened by malaria, was unable to take part. After the escape, he was taken to Fort Moultrie in South Carolina and died in captivity weeks later. Emathla, likewise, had been ordered taken to Oklahoma, but died during the forced march.

The violation of the flag of truce further divided the United States on the already unpopular war. Jesup was called in front of Congress to defend himself. He believed the capture of Osceola was worth the price paid as most Americans wrongly believed Osceola to be the leader of the Seminole, and that resistance would crumble without him. Instead, the betrayal only intensified Seminole resolve.



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Above: A Wood Engraving depicting the capture of Osceola, October 21, 1837
For information on Coacoochee's escape from Fort Marion, see the story from January 2023
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