

SKIRMISH AT PINE ISLAND

An officer's letter and a Charleston newspaper article recount the legendary 1838 battle

Edited and introduced by Broward County Historian
Cooper Kirk

In March 1838 Broward County, then part of Dade County, was the scene of the largest concentration of United States troops and sailors south of Lake Okeechobee during the entire Second Seminole Indian War (1835-1842). At Pine Island in western Broward County on March 22, six-hundred military men under Lieutenant-Colonel James A. Bankhead, Third Artillery, United States Army, engaged in an intense, but indecisive battle with a reputed 50-100 Indian warriors under the leadership of the renown Micasukey Indian leader, Sam Jones.

Though the Indians escaped, the skirmish had several important results. Colonel Bankhead succeeded in driving the Seminoles deep into the Everglades. Indications are he pursued them half-way across the *terra incognita* known as "Pai-hai-o-kee" or "Everglades." He captured all their food processing equipment, canoes and ammunition, thus considerably weakening the Indians' ability to survive except in small, disorganized groups. The skirmish and Bankhead's pursuit proved to the Indians that the Americans had both the ability and determination to penetrate the Everglades. Until then, the Indians had taunted the military with the boast of their invincibility in the Everglades, a forbidden land which the military dared not penetrate.

The first account which follows is Colonel Bankhead's official account of the Pine Island skirmish, and his recommendations for further action and the disposition of the troops. He sent his despatch to Major-General Thomas S. Jesup, commander of all the military forces in Florida, then at Fort Jupiter, forty-five miles from New River.

The second account is from Captain N.B. Sisson of the schooner *Exit*. He apparently received his information from Army Lieutenant Edward C. Ross, a participant in the skirmish. It appeared in the *Charleston Courier*, April 16, 1838, and was subsequently reprinted in the *Army and Navy Chronicle*, Volume VI, pp. 268-269.

The map entitled "Chart of the S. Western Extremity of Florida" was drawn in 1841 by the United States military forces and reflects the extensive operations these forces had conducted in the Everglades up to that time.

Fort Lauderdale, Compte Hatchee
March 25, 1838

General,

In my last communication to you of the 20th instant, which I sent by the Indians who brought your dispatches of the 16th to me, and of which I now send a duplicate, I informed you that "I had sent my Indian runner out on the 18th instant to Coacoochee, Aligator, and the other chiefs to say that I would meet them at this post, and should expect to see them in the course of four days." On Tuesday afternoon the 20th instant my messenger returned, and reported to me that all the Indians had gone off, except two men whom he met, who informed him that the Indians had declined to come in, as they were unwilling to emigrate, and thought it useless to have any talk with me. Immediately upon receiving this intelligence I sent a reconnoitering party in boats up the north fork of this river, and a mounted party in this direction, from which I ascertained that a large trail from the north had crossed that fork, evidently leading from that swamp where I had supposed the Indians were.

Early on Wednesday morning I embarked all the troops on board the steamer Isis and the boats of Captain Powell's command, except one company of Volunteers which was left here for security of this post, and two mounted companies, which were sent round by the Ford, to meet me on the trail, and ascended the south fork of the river as far as the steamer could go, where I sent a few row boats on to see if the trail had crossed that fork. The row boats ascended to the Everglades without seeing any trail leading south. It was evident then that the Indians were either between the two forks of the river or had gone west. I therefore during the night had the boats of Captain Powell's command hauled about a mile over to the Everglades and at daylight on Thursday morning moved with all my command to follow that trail where ever it might lead to — at 10 o'clock A.M. we found the trail going into the Everglades in a northwestern direction; had the ammunition and accoutrements of the men placed in the boats, and their knapsacks deposited in a little cocoplum island, and plunged into the Everglades determined to pursue the enemy until they were overtaken, or as long as the troops could advance.

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After marching and pushing the boats along for some hours, with the men generally up to their waist in mud and water, with thick sawgrass frequently up to their armpits, and often so bogged as to require assistance to help them out, we approached an island called pine Island at 5 o'clock P.M. where from the smoke seen it was apparent that the Indians were, I halted in about five or six hundred yards of the north point of the island, when the men resumed their arms and accoutrements.

I then advanced a company commanded by Lt. Warnus towards the island to see if there were any Indians on it, and as they had professed an unwillingness to commit any act of hostility, and as the truce still existed as I supposed, I determined to offer peaceable terms to them, and showed the white flag, which they fired on and commenced yelling. Believing that all the Indians who had been in this vicinity were on this Island, with their women and children, I anticipated a complete victory, and made with all haste my arrangements to attack them. For this purpose I ordered the boats round with Captain Powell's command to the west side of the Hammock, which at the north point of the Island appeared dense and from which the Indians had fired; and a Battalion consisting of five companies of regular troops and two of Volunteers, under the command of Brevet Major Kirby, to the east side of the Island, with directions to advance until he could get into the rear of the Indians; and with two companies of the 4th Artillery as a reserve I advanced toward the Island to give aid to either portion of the forces on the east or west side that might require it. These detachments advanced very steadily and in good order, but with the utmost difficulty to move thro' the mud and high sawgrass encumbered with their arms and accoutrements. The enemy continued to fire at long distances without its

being returned as I directed, till it could be done with effect, and no gun from us was fired except a 4-pounder in one of the boats of the 1st Artillery in advance commanded by Lieut. Magruder, which was discharged four or five times, and dislodged the Indians from the tops of the trees from which positions they had been firing. As soon as Major Kirby had advanced so as to penetrate to the east and to flank the hammock he formed his men into line and charged to the island. And the boats moving up at the same time on the other side when the enemy broke and fled. They were pursued on the island by Kirby's Battalion for a mile or two, when further pursuit was stopped by the darkness of the night.

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We then occupied their camp by the fires they had kindled and found in their precipitate flight they had left everything but their rifles behind — All their provisions, cooking utensils, machines for making compte' (coonti), packs with their clothing, and cowskins were left — with also a quantity of lead, and several pounds of powder in cannisters. At daylight the next morning (yesterday) I pushed Kirby's Battalion forward on the Island and moved west with the boats until we reached the south end of it. The trails of the Indians from the Island were to the west. And after pursuing them for several hours, without the remotest probability of their being overtaken by our exhausted troops, I determined at 10 o'clock A.M. to retrace my steps from the position, certain that if I advanced any further, the troops would be unable to return or to find a place to rest upon, and we had only provisions for the day left, having taken four days rations in the Haversacks. We reached the steamboat which had remained up the river with provisions aboard and returned to this camp late last evening, with the troops completely exhausted. Several of the men who could not keep up with the column in marching from the everglade to the steamboat did not get in until near 4 o'clock this morning and just as I had ordered out a company of mounted men to go out to look for them.

Thus, General, I have executed the orders I received with all the energy and promptitude in my power. I have penetrated the Everglades for eighteen or twenty miles, and have performed a movement that would seem almost incredible to anyone who had any knowledge of the character of the everglades. I believe that I have driven all the hostile Indians from this section of the Territory, and that it now only remains for me to comply with the order I received from Brig.-General Eustis, in the words: "As soon as you have accomplished the object of these instructions you will proceed, with all convenient speed, to Black Creek, and there report to me for further orders."

It gives me pleasure to add that I have received prompt and efficient aid from Captain Powell and the officers of the Navy who have cooperated with me, and, under my orders, with cheerfulness and alacrity. The officers of the army have manifested the utmost anxiety to accomplish the object of the expedition entrusted to my direction, and I have never witnessed, under such exposure and fatigue, a better spirit and more patience than the soldiers manifested. The Tennessee Volunteers under Major Lauderdale have conducted themselves in the most satisfactory manner.

In the event of any necessity to maintain a post in this part of the Territory, I think that Cape Biscayne would be the most eligible position. It would be attended with great inconvenience to keep up this post. The difficulty of approach by water on the Bar would sometimes be insurmountable. That on the Miami would be useless with a post on the Cape, and the only object for a post there would be to give protection to the Lighthouse, which is important to the commerce of the country. There is no other interest in this quarter to protect, and to keep a force about here to prevent the Indians from preparing coonti, should they wish it, would be totally useless and unavailable during the summer.

There are a number of vessels lying at the Cape loaded with provisions and chartered at very extravagant prices — To load the cargoes in order to discharge the vessels, it would be necessary to build storehouses, which could not readily be done from the want of materials. If the cargoes are landed without secure shelters previously prepared, they would soon be damaged and unfit for use. And I should think that the provisions and forage could not be kept much longer on board the vessels without sustaining damage. I would therefore, with great deference to your better judgment, suggest that it might be advantageous to send the vessels to Black Creek and St. Augustine or Tampa Bay where there are already ample storehouses to receive their cargoes and forage which maybe required for use or kept securely. These vessels could also transport the troops now here to any point you might think proper without additional expense to the Government and without delay.

Captain Powell wishes to go on to the south and to his destination at Pensacola, and also wishes to take with him the two companies of the 1st Artillery which have been serving with him. As I do not see any advantage to the service from these companies remaining with him, they will not move until I have your instructions on the subject. It would remotely detach two companies from the Headquarters of this Regiment which might be attended with inconvenience. All the companies of the 1st Regiment are now on the Atlantic frontier of the Territory, and easily concentrated for any ulterior service. And in regard to these companies of the 4th Artillery, if you would permit me to take these two companies of the Regiment now here with me to Black Creek onto the Suwannee, they would all be in a line convenient for concentration for any service the Regiment might be required to perform.

Thus, General, I have executed the orders I received with all the energy and promptitude in my power. I have penetrated the Everglades for eighteen or twenty miles, and have performed a movement that would seem almost incredible to anyone who had any knowledge of the character of the everglades.

In referring to the services of the command of Captain Powell, I did not name Joseph Johnston, Esq., late of the army, and it is due to him to say that since he has been with the force of Captain Powell under my command as a volunteer, he has been, as he always was heretofore, among the foremost in activity and danger.

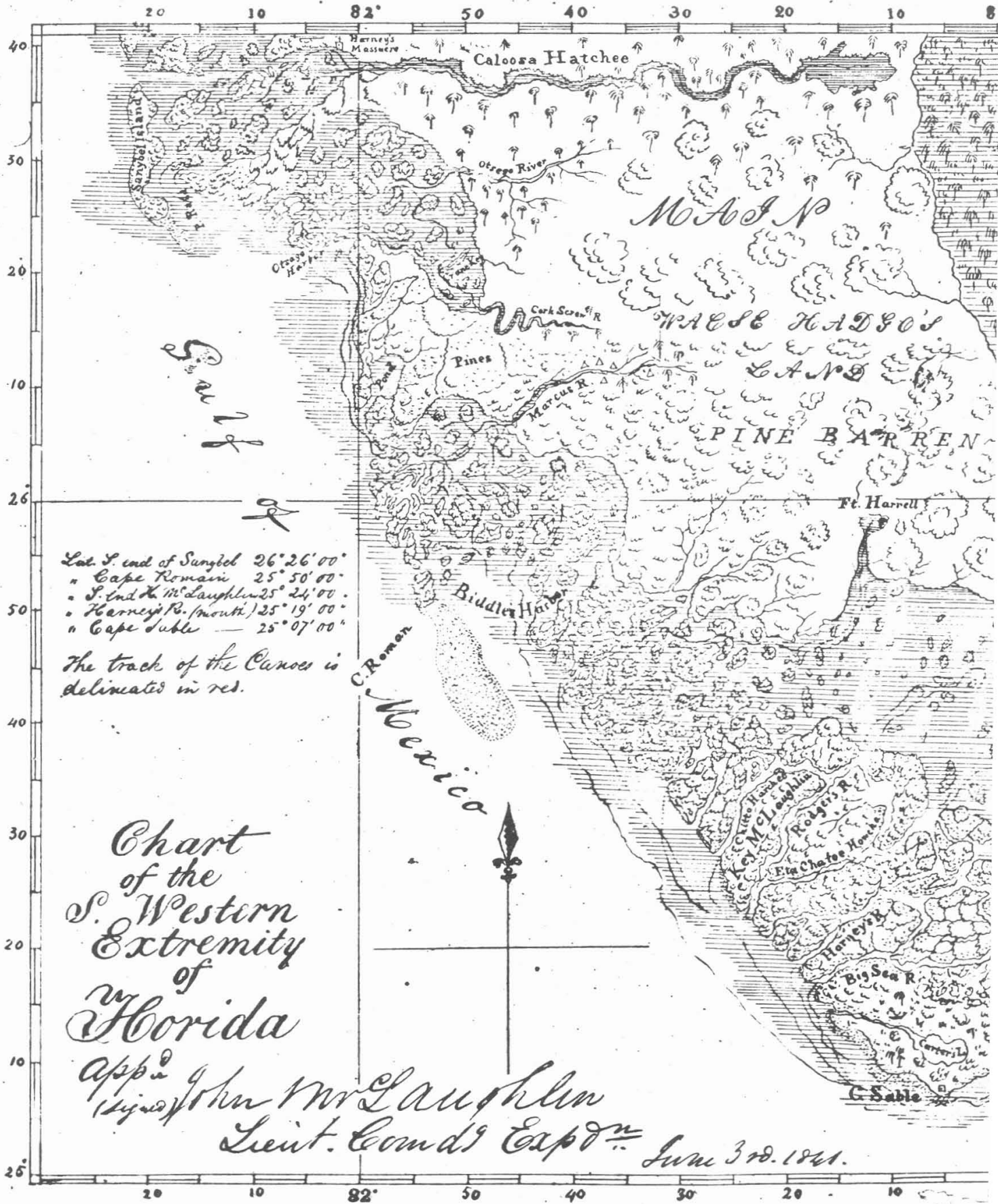
Should you deem it proper, I would direct Major Lauderdale of the Tennessee Volunteers to move with his command, and the company of the Third Artillery, from this to Fort Jupiter. There maybe some few straggling Indians of Tuskegee's people between us to be picked up.

I should have mentioned to you in the earlier part of this letter that I captured 3 Indians the day I set out from this post, who were sent back here for safekeeping, one of whom escaped from the guard of Volunteers who had charge of him. The other two I shall send to Fort Jupiter by the first conveyance; or else when as you may direct. They say they belong to Haleck Hadgoe's Party — two of them have been in at camp at Fort Jupiter.

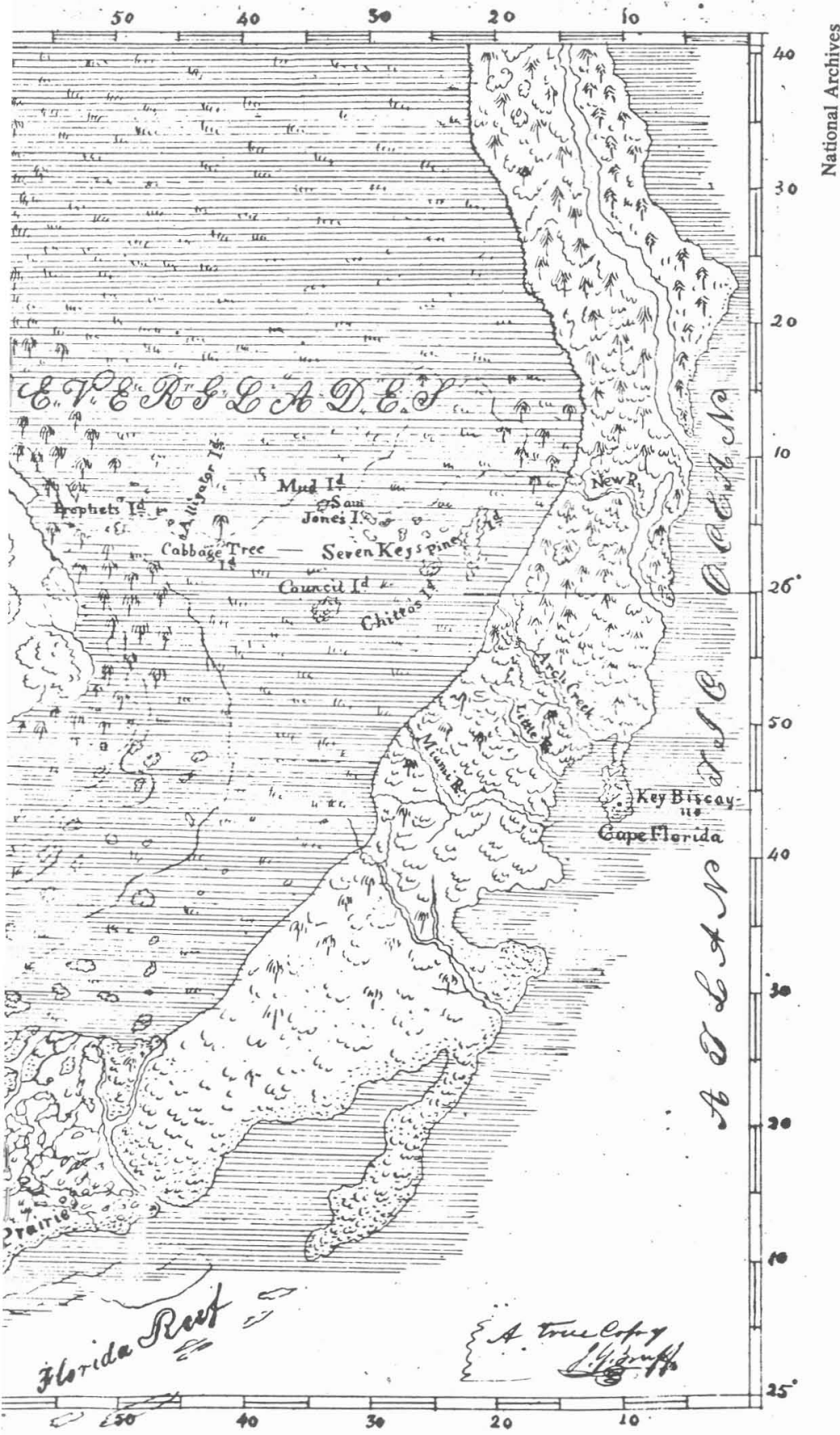
With the hope, General, of soon hearing from you, I have the honor to be,

Very Respectfully,
Your Most Obedient Servant.
James A. Bankhead [sig]
Lt.-Col. 4th Artillery
Commanding

Major General T.S. Jesup
Commander-in-Chief
Army of the South



with Memoir on file in case in room 16 use



National Archives

Southern Florida was a largely unsettled wilderness when this map was drawn during the Second Seminole Indian War. At far right, the New River, site of Fort Lauderdale, winds its way into the Everglades toward the "Islands of Sam Jones", names after the famous Indian chief. Pine Island, the location of the 1838 skirmish between the Seminoles and the U.S. Army, is the eastern-most of these islands.

over head of "Florida." Sept. 1837.

Charleston Courier

April 16, 1838

I have received the following information from an officer attached to Col. Bankhead's command.

Col. Bankhead, we are informed, has been operating ever since 12th of March in the vicinity of New River and Cape Florida with a command of almost 600 men, consisting of 10 companies of artillery, a battalion of Tennessee Volunteers, and the sailors of Lieutenant Powell's command.

The Colonel proceeded from Camp Lauderdale (on New River) on the 22nd March, with a force of about 350 men, and penetrated the Everglades in boats to a distance of 14 miles. His route was directed by a large Indian trail, over which it was presumed that Sam Jones and Alligator, with a party of at least 300, had recently passed. It seems "the Everglades" is a lake of immense extent, the water of which does not, at this dry season, average more than 2½ feet, and being almost entirely overgrown with a saw grass of about 7 feet high, and studded with numerous little wooded islands, it presents to view in every direction an interminable series of beautiful glades.

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The difficulties encountered in this march are said to have surpassed anything that has yet been met with, even in Florida. It was impossible to proceed in this region except in boats, as the water, although as averaging not more than 2½ feet, was in many places so deep as to reach the necks of the men. The high saw grass and mud rendered it impossible to propel the boats by oars so that the only alternative was to push and drag them along, which was done with infinite labor, but without a murmur — the men wading through water, and, in many places, struggling through mud above their hips, besides being impeded, at almost every step, by sharp saw grass, which frequently inflicted severe wounds.

After having proceeded about 15 miles, in the manner here described, the trail was perceived to lead to a dry pine island (the many little islands which form the Everglades are covered with cocoa, plumb, and cypress trees, and are so swampy, even the Indians cannot reside on them), of about 3

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miles in length and ¼ mile in breadth; the north end of this hammock is covered by a dense hammock, from the center of which several smokes were seen to rise, and as the troops approached some 8 or 10 warriors were discovered about its margin. As night was fast approaching, it being within one hour of sunset, and as there still existed a sort of indefinite truce with the Indians, Colonel Bankhead thought it due, both to policy and justice, to offer them the white flag before he made any hostile demonstration, accordingly a small party proceeded within 200 yards of the hammock with this emblem of peace floating above their heads; but to the great surprise and indignation of all, they had been scarcely 2 minutes at their station when several rifle balls were heard to whiz around their ears, one of which wounded the hand of the man who held the flag.

The Colonel then lost not a moment in disposing his men for action; and this he did in a manner which was entirely new to the Indians, and which, no doubt, interfered with their previous arrangements. Instead of following the trail, and charging the hammock in front, as the Indians from all previous experience had reason to expect, and for which emergency they were doubtlessly well prepared, the Colonel posted in front of the hammock, in extended line, so as to completely cover it, two companies of the 4th Artillery, under the command of Lieutenant Ross, while he despatched on the left of the island (where the water was not more than 2 feet deep), Major Kirby with 4 companies of the 1st Artillery, one of the 3rd Artillery, and two Tennessee Volunteers, with orders to flank the enemy, and land part of his force in the rear of the hammock. On the right of the island, (where the

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water was too deep to wade) Lieutenant Powell was sent with the boats, sailors, and two companies of the 1st Artillery, with orders to form a junction with Major Kirby. The enemy at first opened a fire on the boats as they proceeded within gun shot of the hammock, but as soon as they discovered the plan of attack, and saw that if they attempted to hold their positions they would soon be completely surrounded, they retreated with great precipitation, and had barely time to escape, as Major Kirby and Lieutenant Powell closed in their rear. Night had now fallen, and the saw grass in which they took refuge afforded them such complete concealment, that further pursuit would have been useless. The Indians were obliged in their precipitate flight to abandon every thing except their women and children, most of whom, it is probable, they had transported before they fired on the white flag.

Whole sacks of contee, cooking utensils of every description, powder, lead, clothing, and about 20 skin canoes were found in their camp. Orders were given to pursue the enemy at daylight the next morning, but it was discovered, after a *wade* of a few miles, that the trail led to another pine island, (it is said that there are but three pine islands altogether in the Everglades), so remote, that it would have been impossible for the troops now completely exhausted, and short of provisions, to continue the pursuit so great a distance.

The moral effect of this movement in the everglades will doubtless, be very great in the whole Seminole nation; their last asylum has been invaded, and they are convinced that that place to which they have so frequently boasted "no white man could go," no longer affords them protection. The probability is, that they will never again resort to the everglades, for they can there be completely cut off when the water rises to its usual height — and even as it is, their chance of escape is much less than in the great cypress swamps of the mainland.

In a few days after this expedition to the everglades, 44 Indians surrendered to Colonel Bankhead in the vicinity of Camp Lauderdale. Among them were 13 warriors who gave up their rifles — the rest were women and children. Whether these people were influenced by the movement in the everglades it is impossible to say, but the time and place which they surrendered, make the inference extremely probable.

(Editor's note: In hopes of bringing to its readers the "taste" and "flavor" of historical events, Broward Legacy plans to make edited documents a regular feature. Is there a period or person which you wish to see highlighted? Write us and we will attempt to assemble a documentary article on the subject.)