

Seminole

"Seminole" means "pioneer" or "runaway," possibly from the Spanish *cimarrón* ("wild"). The Seminoles, known as such by 1775, formed in the 18th century from members of other Indian peoples, mainly Creeks, but also Oconeas, Yamasees, and others. The Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Cherokees, and Seminoles were known by non-Natives in the 19th century as the Five Civilized Tribes.



Until 1962, the Miccosukee Indians were part of the Seminoles. According to their traditions, they were descended from Chiaha Indians. The name "Miccosukee" means "Red Person." Located in north Florida in the early 18th century, the Seminoles and Miccosukees were forced southward into the swamps and westward to Oklahoma from the mid-19th century on. Seminoles spoke two mutually unintelligible Muskogean languages: Hitchiti, spoken by Oconee Indians and today mostly by Miccosukees, and Muskogee.

The Seminoles considered themselves children of the sun. They observed the Green Corn ceremony as early as May or June. This ritual helped to unify the tribe after the wars. Seminoles believed that a person's soul exited the body when he or she slept. Illness occurred when the soul failed to return, in which case a priest was called to coax the soul back.

Before the wars, Seminole towns had chiefs and councils of elders. Afterward, there were three bands, based on language (two Miccosukee and one Creek). Each had its own chief and council of elders. Matrilineal clans helped provide cultural continuity among widely scattered bands after the wars. There was also a dual division among the people. Particularly after 1817, the Seminoles lived in small extended families.

Owing to a fairly mobile and decentralized existence, the early towns were much less organized than were those of the Creeks. For example, there were no yards for chunky (a variety of hoop-and-pole in which an arrow was shot through a loop) and only a vague public square. People living in these towns generally owned a longhouse, divided by mats into a kitchen, dining area, and sleeping area, and another, smaller house of two stories, similar to the Creek granary.

People in south Florida built their villages on hammocks and near rivers. Houses, or *chickees*, had pole foundations of palmetto trunks and palmettothatched roofs, platforms raised about three feet off the ground, and open walls. The thatch was water-tight and could resist very strong winds.

Women grew corn, beans, squash, and tobacco. They made hominy and flour from corn and "coontie" from certain roots. They also grew such non-Native crops as sweet potatoes, bananas, peanuts, lemons, melons, and oranges. They also gathered wild rice; cabbage palmetto; various roots and wild foods, such as persimmon, plum, honey, and sugarcane; and nuts, such as hickory and acorns. Men hunted alligator, bear, opossum, rabbit, squirrel, wild fowl, manatee, and turkeys (using calls for the turkeys). The people ate fish, turtles, and shellfish.

Traditional trade items included alligator hides, otter pelts, bird plumes, and foods. Bird plumes and alligator hides in particular were very much in demand in the late 19th century. Seminoles were known for their patchwork clothing and baskets. Their geometric designs were often in the pattern of a snake. Ribbon appliqué, previously consisting mainly

of bands of triangles along borders, became much more elaborate during the late 19th century.

Men built fire-hollowed cypress dugout canoes, often poled from a stern platform. Canoes were relatively flat to accommodate the shallow, still water of the swamps. Some had sails, for journeys on Lake Okeechobee and even to the Bahamas. The Seminoles eventually developed their own breed of horses. There was no intertribal warfare: Seminoles fought only with the U.S. Army and local non-Native settlers.

Women made colorful patchwork clothing beginning around 1900. Some clothing was made of tanned deerskin as well. Women wore short shirts and long skirts, both generally of cloth. They also wore as many as 200 bead necklaces around the neck. Men, especially among the Miccosukee, wore turbans made of wrapped shawls. Other clothing included shirts, neckerchiefs, breechclouts, and, occasionally, buckskin moccasins. Both sexes wore ornaments of silver and other metals and painted their faces and upper bodies.

The Apalachee and Timucua Indians were the original inhabitants of north Florida. By about 1700, most had been killed by disease and raids by more northerly tribes. Non-Muskogee Oconee Indians from south Georgia, who moved south during the early 18th century, formed the kernel of the Seminole people. They were joined by Yamasee refugees from the Carolina Yamasee War (1715–1716), as well as by some Apalachicola, Calusa, Hitchiti, and Chiaha Indians and escaped slaves. The Chiahas were known as Miccosukees by the late 18th century. Several small Muskogean groups joined the nascent Seminoles in the late 18th century.

Seminoles considered themselves Creek; they supported the Creeks in war and often attended their councils. They experienced considerable population growth after the 1814 Creek War, mainly from Muskogean from Upper Creek towns. From this time on, the dominant language among the Seminoles was Muskogee, or Creek. However, Seminole settlements, mainly between the Apalachicola and the Suwannee Rivers, were too scattered to permit the reestablishment of Creek towns and clan structures.

Prior to the Civil War some Seminoles owned slaves, but the slaves' obligations were minimal, and Seminoles welcomed escaped slaves into their communities. Until 1821, U.S. slaves might flee across an international boundary to Florida. Even after that year, the region remained a haven for escaped slaves because of the presence of free African American and mixed African American and Seminole communities.

Seminoles first organized to fight the United States in 1817–1818. The conflict was begun by state militias chasing runaway slaves, and it resulted in the Spanish cession of Florida. In the Treaty of Moultrie Creek (1823), the Seminoles traded their north Florida land for a reservation in central Florida. The 1832 Treaty of Payne's Landing, which was signed by unrepresentative chiefs and was not supported by most Seminoles, called for the tribe to relocate west to Indian Territory. By 1838, up to 1,500 Seminoles had been rounded up and penned in concentration camps. These people were forcibly marched west, during which time as many as 1,000 died from disease, starvation, fatigue, heartbreak, and attacks from whites. Although under pressure to do so, the Seminoles consistently refused to give up the considerable number of African Americans among them. In 1856, the western Seminoles were given a strip of land of about 2 million acres west of the Creeks.

Resistance to relocation and to white slave-capturing raids led to the second Seminole War of 1835–1842. Under Osceola, Jumper, and other leaders, the Seminoles waged a guerrilla war against the United States, retreating deep into the southern swamps. Although Osceola was captured (at a peace conference) and soon died in captivity, and although at war's end most Seminoles, about 4,500 people, were forced into Indian Territory, the Seminoles were not militarily defeated. The war ended because the United States decided not to spend more than the \$30 million it had already spent or to lose more than the 1,500 soldiers that had already been killed.

A third Seminole war took place from 1855 to 1858. From their redoubt in the Everglades, the Indians attacked non-Native surveyors and settlers. The Army, through its own attacks and by bringing in some Oklahoma Seminoles, succeeded in persuading another 100 or so Seminoles to relocate, but about 300 remained, undefeated, in Florida. There was never a formal peace treaty.

In the 1870s, as the first non-Natives began moving south of Lake Okeechobee, there was another call for Seminole removal, but the government decided against an attempt. In the late 19th century, a great demand for Seminole trade items led to close relationships being formed between Florida Indians and non-Native traders.

Western Seminoles settled in present-day Seminole County, Oklahoma, in 1866. By the 1890s the people had formed 14 bands, including two composed of freedmen, or black Seminoles. Each band was self-governing and had representation on the tribal council. Most of the western Seminole reservation, almost 350,000 acres, was allotted in the early 20th century. Through fraud and other questionable and illegal means, non-Natives by 1920 had acquired about 80 percent of the land originally deeded to Indians. Tribal governments were unilaterally dissolved when Oklahoma became a state in 1907. An oil field opened on Seminole land in 1923, but few Indians benefited. Many Oklahoma Seminoles moved away from the community during and after World War II in search of jobs.

Indian Baptists from Oklahoma achieved the first large-scale successes in Christianizing Florida Seminoles in the early 20th century. Most Florida Seminoles lived by subsistence hunting, trapping, and fishing, as well as by trading, until non-Natives overhunted and trapped out the region. Around the time of World War I, the subsistence economy disintegrated even further as Florida began to drain the swamps and promote agriculture. By the 1920s, the new land boom, in conjunction with the drainage projects, led to significant Indian impoverishment and displacement.

Most Seminoles relocated to reservations during the 1930s and 1940s. There they quickly acculturated, adopting cattle herding, wage labor, schools, and Christianity. With the help of Florida's congressional delegation, the tribe avoided termination in the 1950s. At that time they adopted an Indian Reorganization Act–style corporate charter. Formal federal recognition came in 1957. By the 1950s, a group of more traditional Mikasuki-speaking Indians, mostly living deep in the Everglades, moved to separate themselves from the Seminoles, whom they regarded as having largely renounced their Indian traditions. After a great deal of struggle, the Miccosukees were given official permission by the federal government to form their own government, the Miccosukee Tribe, which they did in 1962.

Further Reading

Debo, Angie. *A History of the Indians of the United States*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970; Iverson, Peter. *"We Are Still Here": American Indians in the Twentieth Century*. Arlington Heights, IL: Davidson, 1998; Power, Susan C. *Early Art of the Southeastern Indians: Feathered Serpents and Winged Beings*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004; Rawls, James. *Chief Red Fox is Dead: A History of Native Americans in the Twentieth Century*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishing, 1996.

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