

THE DEATHS OF FRANCIS DADE AND WILEY THOMPSON

Three days after Christmas of 1835 two coordinated events ended the first cold period of the Seminole War: The Dade Battle and the assassination of Wiley Thompson.

Talks had been ongoing between the United States and Seminole since the Removal Act, but most refused to be forced out. Relations got worse after the controversial Treaty of Payne's Landing in 1832. American envoy James Gadsden stated the Seminole leaders signing had agreed to leave Florida once they saw the proposed lands in Oklahoma. Tribal leaders insisted that they had only agreed to visit the lands. American military officers present called Gadsden's dealings corrupt and duplicitous, but this didn't stop the government from declaring the treaty valid. After this, the Seminole prepared for open war.

America sent Wiley Thompson to take over negotiations, and things only got worse. While remembered as an "Indian Agent", his title was clear: Superintendent of Seminole Removal. A political friend of President Andrew Jackson, Thompson had taken a hardline on removal. He made clear he intended to use military force if the Seminole would not willingly leave, and decreed (with no authority) that Tribal leaders who objected were "struck from the council."

Both sides prepared for conflict. Americans brought in increasing numbers of troops and weapons, and Seminole merchants stepped up purchase of guns and powder. By winter of 1835 the situation was tense enough that when Fort Brooke was ordered to reinforce Fort King, necessitating a long march through Seminole territory, worries about the danger delayed the movement for over a month. Fort Brooke was understaffed, and Seminole envoys had made it clear they would not allow an army force through their lands. Major Francis Dade, who had only just arrived at the command and was eager to make a name for himself, volunteered to lead the march.

Seminole defenders, led by Micanopy and Alligator, attacked Dade's force from ambush. Most of Dade's force were struck down in the first round of fire, including Dade himself. Fifty miles north at the same time a Seminole team led by Osceola attacked and killed Wiley Thompson outside of Fort King. Newspapers reported the events as murders and massacres, giving the United States government the public outcry it needed to declare open war once more.



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Pictured: "The Dade Massacre" by Ken Hughes, 1974, courtesy Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, 2014.6.2

