

# Palatka's Fort Shannon

The Second Seminole War (1838-1842) was also known as the Florida War and the Seminole War. It was a conflict between the Seminole Indians<sup>1</sup> and their allies against the government of the United States. This war was the longest and costliest of all the Indian conflicts in the history of the United States. The Indian Removal Act<sup>2</sup> provoked many Seminole Indians and their allies to revolt against being forcibly relocated from their lands and homes in the Florida Territory to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River. After the Dade Massacre<sup>3</sup> on December 28, 1835, the Second Seminole War escalated with armed skirmishes and guerilla warfare. Shortly after it began, the strategically located town of Palatka, Florida Territory was attacked and burned by a group of Seminole Indians and their allies. Most surviving white settlers and black slaves fled to the city of St. Augustine for safety, and the area was mostly abandoned except for free roaming groups of Seminole Indians and their allies. Realizing the importance of a militarily protected and efficient supply line along the St. Johns River General Walker Keith Armistead<sup>4</sup> ordered the main depot moved from Garey's Ferry on Black Creek to Palatka where the U.S. Army built Fort Shannon. During the Second Seminole War, Fort Shannon was one of the most important supply depots and district headquarters for the United States Army.

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<sup>1</sup> **Seminole Indians** - The Seminole nation was formed from several Native American groups who settled in Florida in the 18th century. The most significant of these groups was the northern Muscogee (Creeks), who originated from the area in present-day Georgia and Alabama. The word "Seminole" is derived from the Muscogee word *simanó-li*, which most likely originated from the Spanish word *cimarrón*, which means "runaway" or "wild one." Today, the Seminoles mainly live in Oklahoma with a smaller population in Florida. The Seminole Nation comprises of three federally recognized tribes: The Seminole Tribe of Oklahoma, the Seminole Tribe of Florida, and Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, as well as some smaller independent groups.

<sup>2</sup> **Indian Removal Act** was a law instigated and signed by President Andrew Jackson on May 28, 1830. It authorized the president to negotiate with Native Indian tribes throughout the southern United States for their removal to federal territory west of the Mississippi River. The ancestral lands of the Native Indians in the southern United States were systematically exchanged in favor of white settlement. More than 46,000 people were relocated and 4,000 died on the journey from disease, starvation and exposure to extreme weather conditions (this infamous forced removal of human beings is referred to as the "*Trail of Tears*" ([figure 1](#))).

<sup>3</sup> **Dade Massacre** – occurred on December 23, 1835 and named after Major Francis Langhorne Dade who departed from Fort Brooke (present-day Tampa, FL) with two companies of U.S. troops totaling 110 men. On the way along the Kings Highway to resupply and reinforce Fort King (present-day Ocala, FL) a group of Seminole Indians and their allies staged an ambush that killed all but three of the U.S. soldiers (one died the following day). This defeat suffered by the U.S. Army greatly escalated the hostilities of the Second Seminole War.

<sup>4</sup> **Walker Keith Armistead** – (March 25, 1783 – October 13, 1845) was a U.S. military officer who graduated from West Point in 1803. On November 12, 1818, he was promoted to colonel and Chief Engineer. On June 1, 1821, he became commander of the 3rd Artillery Regiment. In November 1828, he was brevetted brigadier general. During the Second Seminole War, he succeeded Zachary Taylor as commander of the army against the Seminole Indians in Florida from 1840 to 1841. He served in the U.S. Army as a commissioned officer for 42 years, and died in New Market, Virginia at the age of 72.

## Brief History

Fort Shannon was established in May of 1838 under the command of General William J. Worth.<sup>5</sup> General Worth remained in command of Fort Shannon until 1840 when he was promoted and succeeded Brigadier General Zachary Taylor<sup>6</sup> as commander of all the U.S. armies of Florida. This fortification was part of a network of forts that protected the strategically important transportation routes along the St. Johns River. Fort Shannon grew to include eight blockhouses, a hospital, several large wood framed buildings, officer's barracks and stables large enough to accommodate 400 horses.

General Walker Keith Armistead divided his command into 3 districts: The St. Johns – headquartered at Fort Shannon in Palatka; the Atlantic – headquartered at Fort Marion (*figure 2*) in St. Augustine; and the Oklawaha – headquartered at Fort King (*figure 3*) in Ocala. Fort Shannon remained an important supply depot and headquarters where large numbers of troops could be housed, trained and deployed during the Second Seminole War. It was abandoned by the U.S. Army on August 24, 1843 after the Second Seminole War concluded.

Fort Shannon was briefly utilized during the American Civil War (1861-1865) by Union troops as they occupied Palatka and patrolled the St. Johns River with gunboats. The original powder magazine building (*figure 4*), which doubled as a stockade to house Indian prisoners during the Second Seminole War, was used as the First Presbyterian Church of Palatka from 1858 to 1879. The only surviving structure is the Officer's Quarters building (*figures 5 & 6*), which now serves as the Putnam Historic Museum and home of the Putnam County Historical Society. It is the only known surviving military structure constructed by U.S. Army troops or militiamen during the Second Seminole War. The building was moved to its current site in 1984 and was renovated as the Putnam Historic Museum.

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<sup>5</sup> **William Jenkins Worth** – (March 1, 1794 – May 7, 1849) was a United States officer who served during the War of 1812, Second Seminole War, and the Mexican–American War. In 1838, during the Second Seminole War, he was promoted to colonel and placed in command of the newly created Eighth Infantry Regiment. In 1842, he was promoted to brevet brigadier general. His negotiations with U.S. Secretary of War John C. Spencer allowed some Seminole Indians and their allies to remain in an unofficial reservation in southwest Florida, which resulted in a declaration that ended the Second Seminole War in August 1842.

<sup>6</sup> **Zachary Taylor** – (November 24, 1784 – July 9, 1850) served as the 12th president of the United States (from March 1849 until his death in July 1850). Taylor was a career officer in the United States Army, who achieved the rank of major general. In 1837, Taylor was directed to Florida where he led large forces deep into Seminole territory during the Second Seminole War. He led U.S. troops in the 1837 Christmas Day Battle of Lake Okeechobee, which was among the largest U.S.–Indian battles of the nineteenth century. In May 1838, Taylor assumed command of all U.S. troops in Florida, and held that possession until 1840. Taylor's reputation as a military leader resulted in the nickname of "Old Rough and Ready." However, he was highly criticized during the Second Seminole War for using bloodhounds to track Seminole Indians and their allies.

## **Fort Shannon's Namesake: Samuel Shannon**

The *Army and Navy Chronicle*, Volume III, From July 1 to December 31, 1836 announced the death of Captain Samuel Shannon as follows:

“At Tallahassee, Florida, on the 7th ultimo, Captain Samuel Shannon, of the 1st infantry, assistant quartermaster of the U.S. Army. In the death of this valuable officer, the country has sustained no ordinary loss. Ever prompt to obey the summons of his country, Capt. Shannon although laboring under severe bodily infirmities repaired to Tallahassee to take charge of the quartermaster's department, preparatory to the anticipated campaign against the Seminole Indians. Whilst in the active performance of its duties, he was attacked by the prevailing fever, and sunk under its influence.

As an efficient officer, there were none superior, but few equal. Energetic, prompt, and undeviating in principle, he was a peculiar favorite of the department he represented. The unlimited confidence reposed in him by the head of it, attests the value and high regard entertained for his services, by not ordering, but soliciting him to perform the arduous duties of quartermaster in that sickly clime.

In private life, or whenever relaxation from duty permitted him to mingle with his friends, the feelings of his warm and generous heart shone conspicuous. His effable demeanor and friendly attentions endeared him to all who knew him, and long will his memory be cherished with feelings of the fondest recollection, by the friends who knew him well.”

The official date for Captain Samuel Shannon death is September 4, 1836. He is buried in the St. Augustine National Cemetery, in the Benea, Pyramids plot, in St. Augustine, Florida.

### **Site of Fort Shannon**

The original site of Fort Shannon was along the bank of the St. Johns River in Palatka which now supports a bridge, hotel, restaurant, park and other structures. An historical sign (*figure 7*) placed by the Florida Board of Parks and Historic Memorials in cooperation with the Palatka Junior Chamber of Commerce stands near its original site and reads:

“Established in May, 1838, this fort was one of the major quartermaster depots in Florida during the Second Seminole War. It operated under Gen. William J. Worth until he assumed command of the armies of Florida. Military facilities included a hospital, barracks, blockhouses and stables for more than

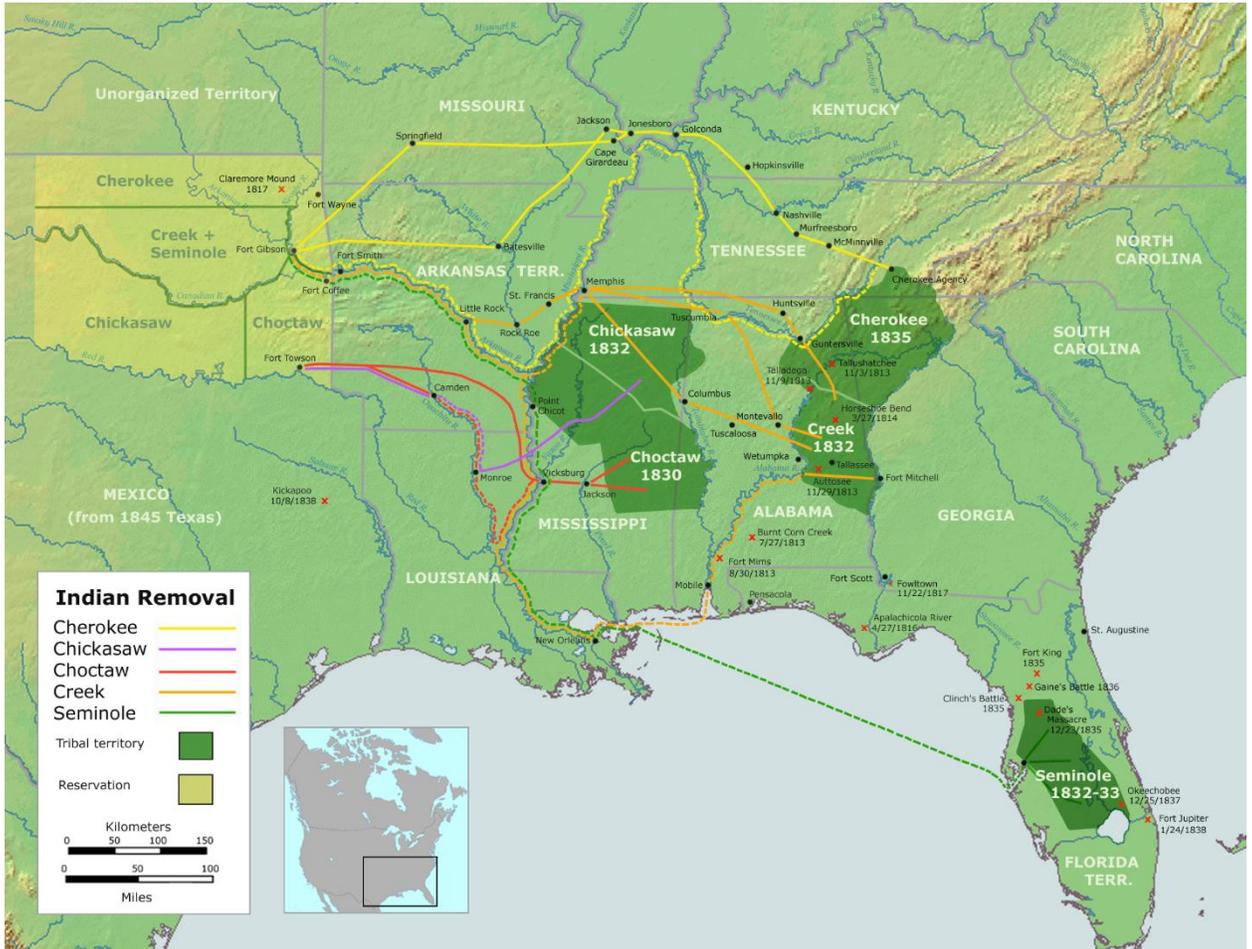
400 horses. During the fort's existence, Palatka was military in appearance and under military control.”

### **About the Author**

Randy Jaye is an historian currently living in Flagler Beach, Florida. He has written many articles that have been featured in various historical publications. He has also written the history books: *Flagler County, Florida: A Centennial History* (2017) and *Perseverance: Episodes of Black History from the Rural South* (2020).

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# Figures



**Figure 1** - Map showing the routes of the “*Trail of Tears*” where Native Americans were forcibly relocated from the southeastern United States to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River between 1836 and 1839. Source: Public Domain.



*Figure 2* – The **Castillo de San Marcos** (Spanish for “St. Mark’s Castle”) was built between 1672 and 1695 and is located in St. Augustine, Florida. It is the oldest existing masonry fort in the continental United States. Possession of the fort has changed hands six times, among four different governments: Spain, 1695–1763 and 1783–1821, Great Britain, 1763–1783 (renamed to **Fort St. Mark**), and the United States, 1821–1861 and 1865 to present – (renamed to **Fort Marion** from 1821-1942). The fort was under control of the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War (1861-1865). It was declared a National Monument in 1924, deactivated in 1933, returned to its original name in 1942, and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1966. Source: National Park Service – public domain.



**Figure 3 – Fort King** is located in Ocala, Florida. It was originally built in 1827 to act as a buffer between white settlers and the Seminole Indians. During the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) it was an important fort for the U.S. Army. When Marion County was founded it served as a courthouse in 1844. After the county abandoned the structure local residents pilfered all of its building materials until nothing remained of the original fort. In 2004, its site was designated as a National Historic Landmark. In 2017, a reconstruction of the fort was built to as close to its original configuration as possible. Source: City of Ocala website:

<https://www.ocalafl.org/government/city-departments-j-z/recreation-parks/fort-king-national-historic-landmark>



*Figure 4* – The original powder magazine building of Fort Shannon (photograph is circa 1875). During the Second Seminole War (1835-1842) it doubled as a stockade to house Indian prisoners. From 1858 to 1879, it served as the First Presbyterian Church of Palatka. The fate of the building is somewhat a mystery as it appeared on the 1884 Bird's Eye View of Palatka, but was not included among the losses in the November 7, 1884 Great Fire of Palatka. It was most likely demolished sometime between 1884 and 1890 as no mention of it appears in the historical record after this time. Source: First Presbyterian Church of Palatka.



*Figures 5 & 6* – The original Officer’s Quarters building of Fort Shannon (front and side views). In 1984, the Putman County Historical Society and the City of Palatka purchased the building and relocated it from the riverfront to 110 Madison St., Palatka, FL (near the Bronson-Mulholland House). It has been refurbished and now serves as the Putnam Historic Museum and home of the Putman County Historical Society. Source: Photographs by the author.



**Figures 7** – The Florida Board of Parks and Historic Memorials sign honoring Fort Shannon. The sign is located in Palatka near the original site of Fort Shannon. Source: Photograph by the author.

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