

The First Ocala!

Just east of the heart of present-day Ocala, is a hill. A very special hill, stained with the blood of fallen soldiers and Indians during America's longest and most expensive Indian war. A hill with a nearby spring that still flows today, and a hill of such historic significance to our nation that Congress and the Secretary of the Department of Interior designated it a National Historic Landmark on February 24, 2004.

The history begins with the sounds of soldiers and wagons making their way through the nearby forests in search of a site to build a fort. The year was 1827. It would be the same type of picket fort constructed by George Washington at Fort Necessity in 1754. It would be like Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, Fort Sill in Oklahoma, and Fort Laramie in Wyoming. Just as many forts became America's cities, like Fort Pontchartrain becoming Detroit, Fort Dearborn becoming Chicago, and Fort Pitt becoming Pittsburgh, this fort was destined to become Ocala.

As trees fell and construction began, the fort would be named in honor of Colonel William King, Commander of the Fourth Infantry. It was constructed to administrate the treaty of Moultrie Creek, which relocated Seminoles to a large reservation in Central Florida. Fort King was to promote law and order in the wilderness by protecting the Seminoles from trespassing settlers. Fort King, and the nearby Indian Agency, were viewed positively by the Seminoles. Fort King was a symbol of hope!

As the recession of 1829 worsened, the Army abandoned Fort King due to severe budget cuts. Seminoles were left with no soldiers to protect them, and with reduced subsidies from the government, they could no longer buy corn and other staples. Fort King stood empty for three years (1829-1832), but the Seminoles did not disturb it. Instead, they waited for the return of the soldiers to protect them.

In May 1832, Andrew Jackson summoned Seminole leaders to Payne's Landing on the Ocklawaha River and forced them to sign a new treaty. One



The only known sketch of Fort King by Lt. John Sprague, circa 1837

month later, in June 1832, the soldiers returned to Fort King. By this time, instead of protecting the Seminoles, the soldiers ordered their expulsion from Florida, according to the terms of the Treaty of Payne's Landing. Now, instead of a symbol of freedom, hope and justice, Fort King and its soldiers became a symbol of hate and oppression. And, it was on this stage that a new Seminole stepped forward. . . his name was Osceola.

Osceola made his first appearance to the world at Fort King in October 1834. The defiant young war chief rejected US orders and threatened war unless the Seminoles were left alone. Tensions continued to rise. Two companies of US regulars, under the command of Maj. Francis Dade, were dispatched from Fort Brooke in Tampa to reinforce the troops at Fort King. On the morning of December 28, 1835, they were ambushed and annihilated by a band of Seminoles under the leadership of Seminole warrior, Micanopy.

That afternoon, Osceola shot and killed Indian agent Wiley Thompson as he stepped out of Fort King for an afternoon walk. The Second Seminole War had begun!

During the seven-year war that followed, every major general and Regiment of the U.S. Army were either stationed at or passed through the gates of Fort King. Notable generals like Gaines, Scott, Clinch, Jessup, Taylor, and Armistead, along with junior officers like Worth, Johnson, Prince, Bragg, Mead and Pemberton would all see duty here. Yet with all of that might, the U.S. Army could not win the guerrilla type warfare of the Seminoles. Finally, US forces began to withdraw, and in May 1836, Fort King was once again abandoned. This time it was burned to the ground by the victorious Seminoles!

The victory, however, was short-lived. One year later in 1837, the U.S. Army returned and the fort was rebuilt. This time the Army of the South would direct dragoon and infantry units in unrelenting "search and destroy" missions against the Seminoles. At the war's end in 1842, most of the Seminoles had been killed or captured or moved to Oklahoma. The Seminoles that were moved to Oklahoma make up the Seminole Nation of today. A small number of "unconquered and defiant" Seminoles withdrew to the vastness of the Florida Everglades and are known today as the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

In 1842 with the war ended, Fort King was once again abandoned by the troops and transferred to the people of Marion County. The Fort then became the county's first courthouse and public building. In 1846, it was dismantled for its lumber, and the courthouse moved into the new city of Ocala.

Fort King is the link to our past and our future! Standing on the hilltop at Fort King puts us in the very footsteps of the Indians and soldiers that roamed our City and County before we arrived. It is how we got here, it is our story, and, in our very midst, it is the exact spot where it all happened.

Fort King is Ocala.



General Scott



General Gaines



General Thomas Jessup



Micanopy



Osceola



Alligator