



THE SEMINOLE WARS

SEMINOLE PLEDGE
MAY 1832
I, _____ do hereby pledge to
support the Seminole people in their
struggle for self-determination and
to oppose any and all actions that
would harm or threaten them.
I will do this because the
Seminole people are the
original inhabitants of the
land and have the right to
live on their land.
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BIG CYPRESS — To tourists, Egmont Key is a lovely spit of land in the Gulf of Mexico near Tampa Bay, but to Seminoles it represents the misery endured by ancestors during the Seminole Wars in the mid-1800s.



THPO Field Technician David Scheidecker makes a presentation to high school students at Ahfachkee Jan. 11. (Beverly Bidney)

The island is disappearing due to erosion, but thanks to the Tribal Historic Preservation Office, the story of the atrocities suffered by the Seminoles and the heroism of those who escaped will live on in a book being created by THPO. As well as the history of the island, the book will contain oral histories and student artwork related to Egmont Key.

Maureen Mahoney, THPO archaeologist, and David Scheidecker, THPO field technician, gave a presentation about Egmont Key to students at Ahfachkee Jan. 11 to ensure that legacy will not be forgotten.

The only permanent structure on the island, a lighthouse, was built on the island in 1848 and promptly destroyed by a hurricane. It was rebuilt the following year and still stands today. During the wars, the U.S. Army captured Seminoles and tried to contain them on land near Fort Myers.

“Being a swamp, the soldiers didn’t know the area so people escaped all the time,” Scheidecker told the students. “Their solution was to turn Egmont Key into a prison camp. It was also referred to as a containment camp and a concentration camp. Hundreds or thousands of people were held there. We aren’t sure what it was like because there are no photos or records available, but we are trying to find some.”

Disease and suicide claimed lives on Egmont Key. A story told by a member of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma during a recent outing to the island illustrates how desperate the people held there must have been.

“One group didn’t want to be taken to Oklahoma so they held hands, walked into the sea and

drowned themselves rather than be taken," Scheidecker said.

Another dramatic story with great significance to the Tribe took place when Billy Bowlegs, his warriors and families were captured and taken to the island to await relocation to Oklahoma. The group was loaded onto the Grey Cloud and taken to St. Marks, south of Tallahassee, to gather supplies for the rest of the journey.

Once there, Polly Parker convinced the soldiers to allow her off the ship so she and some others could gather medicine for the journey. She escaped and made her way 400 miles to Okeechobee. Many of her descendants still live in Brighton.

When Tampa Bay was dredged, the sand and soil from rivers that replenished the island were cut off so normal tides washed away the land. Egmont Key today is about one-third the size it was in the 1800s; it is only about three-quarters of a mile long.

"One of the reasons THPO is out there is to try to preserve the story," Scheidecker said. "There are efforts to save the island, but we aren't sure if they are going to work. We want to make sure the story doesn't go away with the island itself. We want people to know what happened there."

Medicine Man Bobby Henry gave an oral history about what he knew about Egmont Key to Mahoney, which she shared with the students. Henry said he believed Parker and some others jumped off the boat to look for medicine in the swamp. Then they took off.

"Young kids today, they don't know nothing about where we lived before," Henry said on the recording. "We need to talk about it."

Ahfachkee parent and storyteller Billy Walker sat in during the THPO presentation and shared his thoughts with the students.

"She was a powerful medicine lady," Walker said. "You need to learn our legends and stories because that's who we are. Hold onto your roots. We are a very special people."

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