

The Story of Billy Bowlegs



Billy Bowlegs, 1858.



In 1841, when North Florida was booming with settlers, South Florida was still a war zone. Congress appropriated more than one million dollars to capture by bribe or bully the surviving Indians. The Indian Council, headed by Holatta-Micco (Billy Bowlegs) was determined to defend the Biscayne holdings.

The Third Artillery under Major Childs and Lt. John McLaughlin began to crisscross the swamps with the intent of destroying anything that would help the Seminoles. By 1842, 230 Indians had been captured by this strategy.

There was great pressure in Congress among Northerners to curtail this expensive and bloody conflict, which could only result in the creation of another slave state. A truce was started when Billy Bowlegs agreed to stop hostilities. This truce did not last.

Inspired by the discovery of the rich muck lands of the Okeechobee area, Governor Thomas Brown encouraged cattlemen and farmers, protected by the Florida militia, to enter the region. Fort Myers was developed into a full-sized village.

In December of 1855, Lt. George Hardstuff, on a "survey" of Seminole facilities, ran survey lines across Billy Bowlegs' prized banana garden. The Indians returned to the war.

Billy Bowlegs rejected bribes of \$5,000 plus \$100 per surrendered Indian, but when his granddaughter was seized, he was forced to surrender. On May 4, 1858, the last of the famous Seminole warriors met the soldiers at Billy's Creek and was sent forever from Florida. A handful of Seminoles remained in the Everglades, but fighting ended.

Interesting Facts About Fort Myers:

- Thomas Edison and Henry Ford had winter estates in Fort Myers.

- Fort Myers is home to the Fort Myers Miracle baseball club of the Florida State League, and is the spring training locale for the Boston Red Sox. The Minnesota Twins hold their spring training in suburban South Fort Myers.

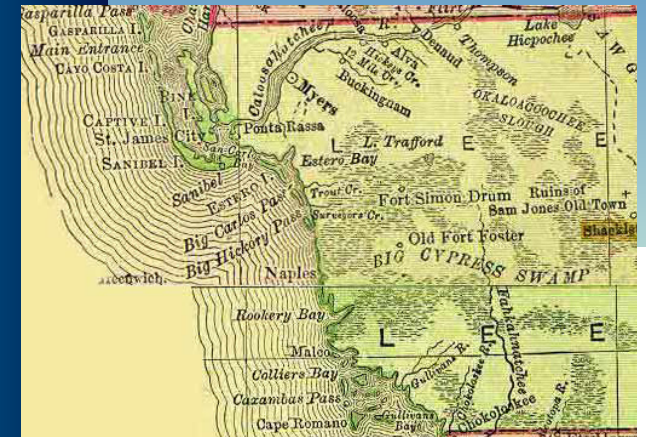
- Fort Myers shares the Florida Everblades ECHL hockey team, Florida Firecats arena football, and Florida Flame NBA Development League basketball team with nearby Naples, and have the Florida Stingrays AIFA indoor football team at the Lee County Civic Center.

- For the golfing enthusiast, the Fort Myers Area (Bonita Springs, Cape Coral, Estero, Lehigh Acres, Sanibel Island and Venice) is home to over 50 of Southwest Florida's renowned 130 public and private golf courses.

- The Calusa Nature Center and Planetarium is a private, not-for-profit, environmental education organization. It has a museum, three nature trails, a planetarium, butterfly and bird aviaries, a gift shop and meeting and picnic areas.

- The Winternats R/C car race, attended by people from around the world, takes place annually at the Lee County Civic Center.

The history of Billy's Creek and Billy Bowlegs



Map of Lee County, 1895.



Billy's Creek

Billy's Creek & The Battle of Fort Myers

The Battle of Fort Myers was fought on February 25, 1865, in Lee County, Florida during the last months of the American Civil War. This small engagement is known as the "southernmost land battle of the Civil War."

Fort Myers had been abandoned after the Seminole Indian Wars and was reoccupied by Union soldiers in December 1863. It was the only federally occupied fort in South Florida. Union commanders planned to send horse soldiers into the area north of the Caloosahatchee River to confiscate livestock from area cattle ranches, thereby preventing shipment of beef to the Confederate Army of the Tennessee in Georgia. By 1865, it was estimated that more than 4,000 head of cattle had been taken from cattle farms by the Union cavalry units from similar raids.

Fort Myers was used as a refugee center for escaped slaves and also for Union sympathizers who were being persecuted by the secessionists, who were burning their homes and driving them off their farms. At one period during the Federal reoccupation, more than 400 people crowded into the fort's grounds. The fort was garrisoned primarily by the 2nd Florida Cavalry (made up mostly of refugees who had enlisted), a recently detached company of the 110th New York Infantry and a company of soldiers of the 2nd United States Colored Infantry, both from Fort Zachary Taylor in Key West.



Soldiers on the move.

The Confederates organized a special battalion of the state militia with the sole purpose of stopping the Union raids. The battalion, commanded by Col. Charles Munnerlyn, was made up of cattle drovers who were exempt from the



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Confederate Army. Among them was Capt. Francis A. Hendry. They became known as the Cattle Guard Battalion or "Cow Cavalry."

In early February 1865, the Cattle Guard Battalion was deployed at Fort Meade. Orders were given for the battalion to attack Fort Myers because it was learned that the fort might soon be abandoned. Three companies and one artillery piece set out, and arrived at old Fort Thomson (LaBelle, Florida) on February 19. From there, they marched down the river and encamped near Billy's Creek. The next day, they surprised some Union soldiers who were on picket duty and shot them.

This alerted the fort, so in the morning the Confederates fired a warning shot from their lone cannon and sent a messenger forward with a demand to surrender. The commanding officer of the fort refused and wheeled his two cannons outside the fort. Soon, a battle began. Throughout the day, both sides continued sporadic firing, which finally ceased at dark.

By morning, the Cattle Guard Battalion returned to Fort Meade. Fort Myers was abandoned in early March.



During the Third Seminole War, rewards were offered to white bounty hunters for capturing Seminoles: \$500 for braves, \$250 for women, and \$100 for children.

Billy's Creek, which flows into the Caloosahatchee River, was named after a temporary camp where Billy Bowlegs and his men awaited ships to take them west.

The first settlers arrived to Fort Myers in 1866, but it wasn't until 1882 when the city experienced a significant influx of settlers. By 1885, Fort Myers was the second largest city only to Tampa on Florida's west coast south of Cedar Key even larger than Clearwater and Sarasota, also growing cities at the time.