



Indian village, Silver Springs, Florida, circa 1939 - Burgert Brothers photos - courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System

A Brief History of the Seminole People in Florida

(Courtesy of the Museum of Florida History)

The Seminole people have been an important part of Florida history for more than 300 years. Their story of survival and success is remarkable, and their unique culture endures today.

The ancestors of today's Seminole people migrated to Florida in the 1700s and early 1800s. These Indians came primarily from Alabama and Georgia, and although they were simply known as "Creeks" to the British, they spoke different languages and lived in independent towns. Different bands of Creeks established towns in north Florida and traded with both the British and Spanish. After 1765, all Florida Indians were referred to as "Seminoles." The name comes from the Spanish word *cimarrón* which means "wild" or "runaway." However, a more fitting interpretation may be "free."

The first half of the nineteenth century was tumultuous for Florida's Seminoles. The U.S. military waged three wars against them; in fact,

the Second Seminole War resulted in the majority of Seminoles being removed to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma.) Less than 200 survivors retreated deep into the Everglades and the military ended its hunt for them.

The Seminoles lived in virtual isolation in and around the Everglades for many years. They lived in open-sided structures called chickees, which were adapted to the swampy environment.



Seminole Indian Chickee, Silver Springs, Florida, circa 1935 - Burgert Brothers photo, courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

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They survived by hunting, gathering wild foods, and growing crops like corn, pumpkins, and potatoes. As white settlers began moving to south Florida, they established trading posts. The Seminoles sold animal hides and pelts to the traders and in turn bought cloth, guns, tools, and food staples. This way of life lasted into the twentieth century.

The great influx of settlers and drainage of the Everglades hastened the end of the trading post era. As a result, some Seminoles entered new tourist attractions in Miami. Seminole exhibition villages were a large part of the tourist scene in south Florida from the 1920s to the 1960s. At these villages, men wrestled alligators to the delight of crowds. Both men and women made crafts such as dolls, baskets, and carvings to sell to the tourists.



Miami tourists watch as Seminole Indian men wrestling alligators, circa 1950 - Burgert Brothers photo, courtesy of the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.

These seasonal jobs in the villages provided important income, and the exhibition nature of the attractions enabled some of the traditional ways to continue.

A typical scene at tourist villages included women sewing colorful patchwork clothing. This colorful style of clothing is one of the most recognizable



Sewing colorful patchwork clothing, Florida's First People on display at the Tampa Bay History Center.

aspects of Seminole culture today. Seminole women invented patchwork around 1917. To make patchwork clothing, different colored strips of cloth are sewn together, then cut and reassembled to make rows of designs. The rows are sewn together horizontally to form the garment. The Seminole people wore patchwork clothing and sold it to tourists. It is still part of the Seminoles' traditional dress today.

In the 1890s, the government attempted to address the question of where the Seminoles should live by setting aside parcels of land. These parcels eventually became reservations. The Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division, a program of the New Deal, employed Seminole men to build roads, fences, wells, and make other land improvements on the reservations. A cattle program was also started at Brighton Reservation in 1936, and it is still a success story today.

In August 1957, the Seminole Tribe of Florida became a federally recognized sovereign tribe. The Tribe operates under a Constitution, Bylaws, and Corporate Charter. It has approximately 3,200 members today.

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The Seminole people of Florida have persevered despite the many social, political, and economic pressures brought against them. They have proven to be successful at adapting to new circumstances while still preserving important aspects of their culture.

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STUDENTS

List 5 ways in which the Seminoles had to adapt. Examples can be cultural, economical, or other ways.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.