

Remembering Whose Land We Occupy (indigenous People's Day)
Sunday, October 10, 2021
Tri-County Unitarian Universalist
Rev. Cynthia Snavelly

A land acknowledgement: Tri-County Unitarian Universalist occupies the ancestral, traditional and contemporary lands of the Seminole, descendants of northern Muscogee Creeks from what is now Georgia and Alabama, remnants of the Apalachee, Timucua, and Calusa, the indigenous Florida peoples who had been devastated by infectious diseases brought by Spanish explorers in the 1500s and later colonization by European settlers. Most of the survivors of those cultures left for Cuba when the Spanish withdrew after ceding Florida to the British in 1763, following the French and Indian War. The Seminole peoples were expanded from the late 18th century by free blacks and escaped slaves from British colonies and the early United States. We recognize the three federally recognized tribes of the Seminole; the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, forcibly removed from their homeland, the Seminole Tribe of Florida, and the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, as well as independent groups. We recognize Indigenous individuals and communities who live here now. In offering this land acknowledgement, we affirm Indigenous sovereignty, history and experiences. We live, in part, on what has been taken from others. With that acknowledgement may we find ways to give back when and where we can.

Our theme for this month is memory and so we remember the people of this land who were here before us and continue to live with us.

The Seminole became a people made from several peoples, Muscogee Creeks from what is now Georgia and Alabama, remnants of the Apalachee, Timucua, and Calusa, free blacks and escaped slaves. Their history reminded me of a theory by Gerhard Von Rad, a twentieth century Christian Old Testament scholar. He suggested that the people of the Israelites were made up of people who left Egypt, people who joined the community as they wandered in the wilderness, and others who joined them as they entered the promised land. He suggested that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were ancestors of three groups of people whose stories were united into one family story to create the story of a united people. The Seminole are a people of many united peoples.

The webpage of the Seminole Tribe of Florida has this statement at the very top of the page, "We are a Federally Recognized Indian Tribe. The only Tribe in America who never signed a peace treaty." Obviously, that is an important part of their story. The only Tribe in America who never signed a peace treaty. That has to do, in part, with one man, Osceola.

Back when I lived in Columbia, MD I served on a county committee with a young man called Ossie. His full first name was Osceola, a name a good number of men in his family had held. He claimed descent from the Florida Seminole Osceola.

In Frank Water's book, Brave Are My People: Indian Heroes Not Forgotten there is a chapter on Osceola. Waters writes in part, "That early April morning in 1835, Osceola emerged from Wahoo Swamp in north-central Florida and strode quickly across the savanna to the clump of wooden buildings that comprised Fort King. The place was crowded with Seminoles and Creeks, and in the big conference room the peace council was already in session. The meeting had been called by the Indian agent for the

Seminoles, General Wiley Thompson, who sat at the table surrounded by thirteen Indian chiefs. Osceola slumped down along the wall with other Seminoles and listened to the talk.

“It concerned the treaty made at Payne’s Landing on the Oklawaha River three years before. General Thompson, one of the sponsors of the treaty, explained that by it the Seminoles had agreed to surrender all their lands and remove west of the Mississippi with the Creeks within three years.

“The chiefs began to mutter. ‘It is true Charley Emathla and other chiefs signed a treaty, but without consent of the Seminole nation.’

“‘Why is it no (blacks) will be allowed to accompany us? Does not Washington know that many slaves have escaped to live with us? We have married them, have had children by them. Would you break up our families when we move to a far land?’

“‘The Congress of the white chiefs in Washington passed the Indian Removal Act,’ answered Thompson. ‘It is the law that all the Five Civilized Tribes- the Creeks, Cherokees, Chicksaws, Choctaws, and you Seminoles – must remove to Indian Territory. Now your three years are almost up. So I ask you to acknowledge the treaty in order that you may get ready to leave.’

“He spread out on the table a paper for the chiefs to sign.

“Some of them nodded surlily. Others stood up, arms folded over their breasts, saying nothing. Suddenly Osceola jumped forward, and drawing his knife plunged it into the treaty.

“‘This is your answer!’ he cried. ‘The Seminole will never be taken from their land.’

“There was a moment of shocked silence. Osceola was not a chief, and so not expected to voice an opinion. Then Thompson called the guards. ‘Seize that man and put him in irons!’ And Osceola was led away.”

Obviously, Waters fleshes out the story a bit in order to tell it, but the main points are true. Osceola was released on his promise to return. He returned and pretended to come to agreement with Thompson but what he really did was begin the Second Seminole War.

Osceola already had a bone to pick with Thompson.

Again, from Frank Waters, “Osceola grew up a Creek. When he was nine years old, the Creeks allied themselves with the British in the War of 1812, bringing on the Creek War. They were defeated by General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in Alabama, only seventy of their nine hundred warriors being left alive. In retribution, the government appropriated more than half their land.

“Osceola, with thousands of other Creeks and other Indians from Georgia and Alabama, fled to Florida...in 1817 General Andrew Jackson in the First Seminole War quelled their uprising and forced Spain to cede the peninsula of Florida to the United States. In this campaign, Osceola, only fifteen years old, saw his first fighting.

“Soon afterward he moved to the vicinity of Fort King, southwest of St. Augustine, and married Che-cho-ter, the daughter of a Seminole chief and a fugitive ...slave. To support them, Osceola served as a scout at the fort. Here he learned what was happening to the Creeks back in Georgia.”

William McIntosh, a part white chief of the Lower Creeks, was in the pay of Georgia land commissioners. He ceded millions of acres of Creek land, which was against Creek law. McIntosh was sentenced for his crime and executed by the Creeks, but that did not get the land back.

Osceola also had more personal troubles. One day his wife Che-cho-ter went to do her trading at Fort King and did not come back home. Eventually Osceola learned that she had been captured at the fort and sold into slavery. Osceola held the commander of the fort and agent for the Seminoles responsible. That commander and agent was General Wiley Thompson.

Thus on that April morning in 1835 Osceola had more than enough reasons to plunge his knife into Thompson's paper.

Osceola became known as the Tiger of the Swamp or the Swamp Fox. One after another army commander came to round up Osceola and his Seminoles, unsuccessfully. Osceola was eventually invited to come to a peace parley with General Thomas Jesup. Osceola debated whether to not to go. When he learned that a large delegation of Cherokee would also attend, he decided to go.

Waters has Osceola say, "We are all troubled with the same disease. Cherokees, Creeks, Seminoles, Chicksaws, and Choctaws too. Let us all make one more attempt to come to terms with the government that would move us.'

"So that fall Osceola with a party of fifty-three Seminoles and sixteen (blacks) set out for St. Augustine under a flag of truce to General Jesup's peace conference. Seven miles out of St. Augustine they made camp to await their call to enter the fort. It never came. Instead, they were suddenly surrounded by soldiers and taken prisoner.....

"Osceola had been imprisoned scarcely three months and was only thirty-five years old (when he died). Yet his impassioned resistance encouraged the Seminoles to fight on for another four years in a war that cost the government fifteen hundred American lives and \$20 million. Most of the Seminoles were then removed to Indian Territory.... Today, living in...Florida..., there are still (Seminoles) whose forefathers never surrendered."

Thus, the declaration of the webpage of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. "We are a Federally Recognized Indian Tribe. The only Tribe in America who never signed a peace treaty."

A 2020 Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly Action of Immediate Witness (AIW) calls for congregations to 'Research, identify, and acknowledge the Indigenous peoples historically and/or currently connected with the land occupied by congregations, and find ways to act in solidarity with or even partner with those Indigenous peoples.'" Monday is "Indigenous Peoples' Day, a holiday that celebrates and honors Native American peoples and commemorates their histories and cultures. On a list of various towns, states and universities that observe the holiday no Florida location is listed [Indigenous Peoples' Day - Wikipedia](#), [Places that celebrate Indigenous Peoples Day - Indigenous Peoples Day MA](#).

But, I invite you to honor the day. Today or tomorrow, as a first step in finding ways to act in solidarity with the indigenous people of Florida, peruse the webpage of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. Go down to the bottom of the page and read about the history at Egmont Key. The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of

Florida and the Seminole tribe of Florida both belong to the United South and Eastern Tribes. You might check out their webpage, www.usetinc.org as well. A first step is to begin to learn more of the fullness of our history, a history that includes the history of the Seminole. May we affirm Indigenous sovereignty, history and experiences. We live, in part, on what has been taken from others. With that acknowledgement may we find ways to give back when and where we can