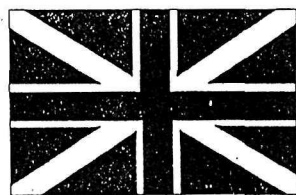


## Thomas Creek & Alligator Bridge

### *Southernmost Battlefields of the American Revolutionary War*



When most people think of the American Revolutionary War, they envision colonial soldiers in blue uniforms, carrying the Betsy Ross flag, fighting British Redcoats in heroic battles on the soil of the original 13 colonies. Places like Valley Forge, Lexington and Concord, and Yorktown bring to mind images of bravery, patriotism, and of our nation's birth. People rarely think of this war being fought in Florida. But it did. Two little known battles occurred here that were to have a far reaching impact upon American History.

In 1763, after nearly two centuries of Spanish rule, Florida became the possession of Great Britain. Sparsely populated and virtually unexplored, Florida was a prized territory because it gave Britain exclusive control of the entire eastern seaboard of North America.

The British began occupation of their new 14th colony in earnest bestowing royal land grants of 100 to 1,000 acres to loyal subjects who would move to Florida.

Initial British settlements in northeast Florida tended to cluster near St. Augustine. As time went on settlers moved farther and farther into the interior areas of the region. The land in between the St. Marys and St. Johns Rivers attracted many settlers and by 1770 over 100 plantations had been established along these rivers.

In the late 1760's a 200 mile long, 16 foot wide road had been constructed in southeast Georgia and East Florida. Named the King's Road, it connected Ft. Barrington (located on the Altamaha River in Georgia) and St. Augustine. This road afforded settlers and merchants an alternative entrance into the Province of East Florida.

When the American Revolutionary War broke out in 1776 the population of East Florida was 4,000; 1,000 whites and 3,000 enslaved people from the African continent. Of the white settlers, most were immigrants from England and Scotland and were recent recipients of royal land grants from King George III. As can be imagined, they were intensely loyal to the throne.

As tensions in the 13 colonies escalated, the British governor of East Florida invited Loyalists living in the rebellious colonies to come to Florida and "take shelter under the British flag." This invitation was accepted by thousands of people and the loyalty of East Florida to the mother country was greatly intensified. When news of the signing of the Declaration of Independence reached St. Augustine an angry mob of Loyalists burned effigies of John Adams and John Hancock in the city plaza.

Hostile actions between Florida Loyalists and Southeastern Patriots began almost immediately following the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Off St. Augustine Inlet, South Carolinian Patriots boarded the British brigantine "Betsy" and commandeered a large quantity of gunpowder originally destined for East Florida. This act was countered by Florida Loyalists who formed a militia regiment which they named the *East Florida Rangers*, whose purpose was to aid British regulars in defense of the province.

Throughout the fall of 1776 British forces in East Florida remained on the defensive, deflecting and intercepting Patriot raids across the St. Marys River.

Though content to defend East Florida in 1776, in early 1777 British troops were preparing to invade Georgia. In February a large force of men moved north into Georgia along the Satilla River and captured the Colonial Patriot outpost Fort McIntosh. They also captured over 2000 cattle which were driven back to St. Augustine; for a while, beef sold for the bargain price of three pennies per pound.

The Colonial Patriot response to the British invasion was swift, an invasion of Florida with the objective of capturing St. Augustine was immediately put to action. Button Gwinnett, President of Georgia, ordered Colonel Samuel Elbert with two battalions (400 men) of Continental Line soldiers and Colonel John Baker with over 100 mounted Georgia Patriots to march on St. Augustine.



Baker's force was ordered to march overland to Sawpit Bluff, eight miles north of the St. Johns River and await a rendezvous with Elbert's main body which simultaneously set sail from Sunbury, Georgia. Baker reached Sawpit Bluff with the Colonial Patriot forces at the appointed time on May 12th, but found that Elbert had not arrived. Baker then erected a fortified camp and sent out 40 mounted men under his brother, Major William Baker, to reconnoiter the country as far south as Cowford, now Jacksonville. This patrol found that the British knew of their approach and were preparing to meet them.

Three days later a party of Creek Indians, allied with the British, stole forty horses from the Colonial Patriot camp at Sawpit Bluff. The Patriots followed the Creeks and forced them into a skirmish in which the Patriots recovered their horses but lost two men. The Indians suffered one battle death. The Patriots proceeded to scalp and mutilate the dead warrior's body so horribly that the Indians became almost uncontrollable in their rage. The Patriots were to regret this barbaric act in the aftermath of the upcoming Battle of Thomas Creek.

Two more days elapsed and still Colonel Elbert failed to arrive at Sawpit Bluff. Baker decided to move to a place more favorable from which to retreat if attacked by a superior force. Meanwhile, Major James Marc Prevost crossed the St. Johns River with 100 regular British soldiers, some Rangers, and a few Indians. They marched to Rolfe's Saw Mill (11 miles northeast of Jacksonville) and encamped to await news of the location of Baker's men. During the night one of the East Florida Rangers located the Colonial Patriot forces and alerted Major Prevost.

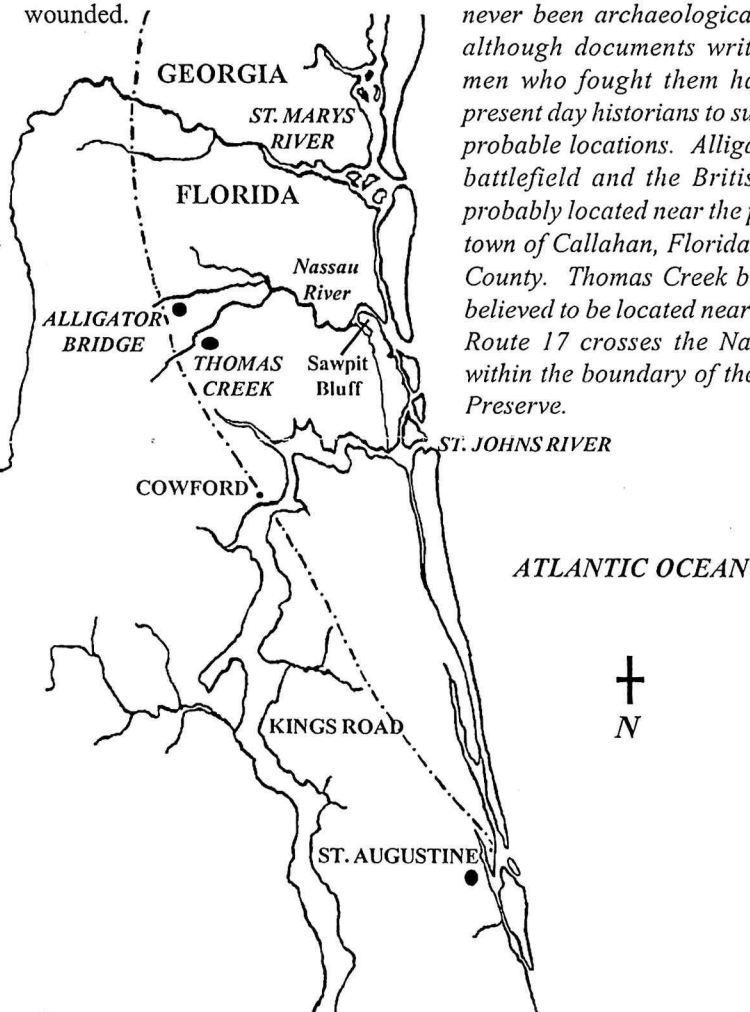
At daybreak, May 17th, the Indians and Rangers came upon the Colonial Patriot camp located east of the King's Road, on the south bank of Thomas Creek, a tributary of the Nassau River. They attacked about 10:00 a.m., firing into the unsuspecting Americans at a range of less than 50 yards. All but 50 of the Patriots fled. Colonel Baker and the remainder of his men fought bravely for some time but when Major Prevost advanced with his British regulars in three columns with fixed bayonets, and turned the Patriot flank, they mounted their horses and fled under heavy fire. Eight Patriots were killed, nine wounded, and thirtyone were captured. Colonel Baker and eighteen men escaped.

In revenge for the barbaric mutilation of their fellow tribesman the Creek Indians killed a reported two dozen of the Colonial Patriot prisoners. The remaining prisoners were saved with great difficulty by Major Prevost and his men.

The Colonial Patriots attempted to once again invade Florida in the spring of 1778. A Patriot force of over 3000 men boarded ships at Fort Frederica, Georgia, bound for East Florida. Upon reaching the south bank of the St. Marys River the troops disembarked and marched overland towards Cowford.

Upon learning of the Colonial Patriots advance, Major Prevost with 450 British regular troops marched to a bridge spanning Alligator Creek, a tributary of the Nassau River, some four miles northwest of the Thomas Creek battle site. On the south bank of the creek Prevost's men constructed a fort surrounded by a moat and an abatis of logs and brush.

On June 30, 1778 Colonial Patriot Colonel Elijah Clark led 300 mounted Georgia militia against the British fort defended by Major Prevost and his regulars. There were 900 additional American soldiers in the vicinity as reserves to exploit developments of the initial attack. After a brisk fight in which Colonel Clark was badly wounded, the assault on the fort was given up and the Patriots withdrew to the north. Nine Patriots were killed including one of African descent and many were wounded. Four British Loyalists were killed and seven wounded.



The following day the British withdrew to a stronger position on the Trout River, six miles northeast of Cowford, leaving a force of Creek Indians to observe the Colonial Patriots. The patriots slowly withdrew towards Georgia and during the crossing of the St. Marys River fought a rear guard action against some of Prevost's men in which two Patriots were killed.

The Colonial Patriots invasion ended in disaster. In addition to their losses in battle over 500 Patriots died of disease before they could be withdrawn from East Florida. There were a number of Patriot raids by sea still yet to come, but so far as land warfare is concerned, the battles of Thomas Creek and Alligator Bridge marked the end of the Revolutionary War land military activity in Florida.

It is interesting to speculate what the effect upon Florida and United States history would have been if either one of the two invasions by the Colonial Patriot Continental Army had been successful in defeating the British. It might have meant that the development of Florida as an American territory would have advanced many years because it is to be presumed that the Colonial Patriot occupation would have been permanent. But the invasions did not succeed, and Florida continued to be a pawn of the European nations until the United States Government purchased it from the Spanish for 5 million dollars in 1819.

*The sites of these two battles have never been archaeologically located although documents written by the men who fought them has allowed present day historians to surmise their probable locations. Alligator Bridge battlefield and the British fort are probably located near the present day town of Callahan, Florida, in Nassau County. Thomas Creek battlefield is believed to be located near where U.S. Route 17 crosses the Nassau River within the boundary of the Timucuan Preserve.*