

4-1-2014

Andrew Jackson Did Not Save Huntsville

David Byers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Byers, David (2014) "Andrew Jackson Did Not Save Huntsville," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 38: No. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol38/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Huntsville Historical Review by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

ANDREW JACKSON DID NOT SAVE HUNTSVILLE

By DAVID BYERS

The War of 1812 should never have happened. A period of uneasy peace followed the end of the Revolutionary War, as Britain continued to affect the Americans in many ways. The primary British insult was impressments of American seamen from sailing ships. This problem was exacerbated by pressure from the fleets of Napoleon on the English navy requiring they fully crew all ships. On occasion, American ships were stopped under the pretext of searching for deserters. Sailors were removed from ships and pressed into service in the British navy. Other squabbles were in the air. Dissatisfaction over the division of western lands after the war resurfaced when the British failed to withdraw from the Canadian border. Then, British/French competition for exclusivity of American shipping and exports resulted in legislation passed by Congress that aggravated the American shipping community. Additionally, British relationships with the Indians, including supply of weapons, ammunition, and food threatened westward movement. No apology bettered the situation.

Congress, meeting in November 1811 clamored for war. Henry Clay, Speaker of the House from Kentucky, John C. Calhoun and others, called “War Hawks,” loudly pushed President James Madison toward war. They proposed we save “American Honor” by invading Canada. Land hungry westerners, an incensed shipping community, and Americans still angry after the Revolutionary War were itching for war. The country wasn’t quite ready. The small navy, a scattered army with questionable leadership left from the Revolution, and a government still designing its methods of managing a third-rate county signaled it was not fit to fight a large, wealthy and well-armed power such as Great Britain.

Expansionists in Tennessee, Georgia and the Mississippi Territory had been entertaining designs to annex Florida, a Spanish territory even though Spain was an American ally. Andrew Jackson had said he would “rejoice at the opportunity of placing the American eagle on the ramparts of Mobile,

Pensacola, and Fort St. Augustine.” Many were willing to fight the war for many reasons. Woodrow Wilson wrote ninety years after the war, “The grounds of the War of 1812 were ‘singularly uncertain’.”

Both countries had pronounced weaknesses when the war began with American attacks on Canadian forts. The bulk of the British Navy was involved in the war against Napoleon. The conflict in America was only a distraction to the British. Just eleven ships of the line and thirty-four frigates were available in the western Atlantic. Many inhabitants of Canada were recent immigrants from the United States and did not want to take up arms against their former homeland. On the other hand disunity of the country was clearly a problem for Americans. In New England public opinion ranged from an outraged shipping community to mere apathy to actively expressed opposition to the war. Many continued to sell grain and provisions to the English.

In August 1812 battles at the northern Forts Michilimackinac, Detroit and Dearborn were fought. At sea the infant navy did well. Captain Samuel Nicholson and the *Constitution* outfought the British ship *Guerriere* resulting in a political lift for the Americans and a new name for the *Constitution*, “Old Ironsides.”

The war was also provoked by Tecumseh, a young Shawnee Indian chief, who was born near Tuscaloosa and raised in the Ohio Valley. His message of rejection of the white culture and protection of the Indian ways was widely spread from Wisconsin to Florida:

“Where today are the Pequot? Where are the Narragansett, the Mochican, the Pocanet, and other powerful tribes of our people? They have vanished before the avarice and oppression of the white man....Sleep not longer, O Choctaws and Chickasaws...Will not the bones of our dead be plowed up, and their graves turned into plowed fields?”

In the Mississippi Territory the Indians, armed and encouraged by the British, were the center of the war. Especially in what is today Alabama the Indians were the enemy, not the British. A small group young and very aggressive Creek Indians, known as Redsticks, wanted to stop the changes brought by the

white settlers. The docile Indian majority chose to peacefully trade, farm, and live beside the squatters who had encroached on their land. This division in the Creek Nation was much like a civil war.

The belligerent Redsticks began attacks on settlers leading to a strong reaction by the militia that was attempting to protect the emigrants. Those pioneers had often broken the treaties and federal promises made to the Indians as they steadily moved southwestward. A major part of every agreement between the Indians and the government was wording in which the Indians ceded or released land to the United States and in return the Federal government would keep the remainder free from venturesome speculators and squatters.

Out-spoken William Weatherford, known as “Red Eagle,” a man of mixed parentage, and a strong ally of the British, secretly stirred the small, semi-secret segment, the Redsticks. A tiny contingent of Redsticks, returning from Detroit, murdered two families on the Ohio River. The killers were executed by the old Chiefs and ignited a civil war among the Creeks. Similar indiscriminate slaughters happened in Georgia and Tennessee.

In July 1813 Redsticks traveled to Pensacola, with the British provided money and a letter of introduction. There the Spanish governor gave them weapons and ammunition. Returning north the Indians were stopped in what is today northern Escambia County on July 27th by American forces from Fort Mims, causing the “Battle of Burnt Corn.” This first Alabama battle of the War of 1812 resulted in twenty Redstick casualties, including eight killed, while the Federal troops lost two soldiers and had fifteen wounded. History has called it a Redstick victory.

On August 30th the Redsticks, led by Weatherford, attacked Fort Mims, 35 miles north of Mobile near the bank of the Tensaw River. Local farmers, homesteaders and some mixed-blood Creeks, terribly frightened by the news and rumors of Indian horrors, had taken refuge in the fort. Three to five hundred (reports varied widely) were cruelly slaughtered and scalped as the small wooden stockade was swarmed. Seventeen escaped to tell the story. The Creek civil war became the War of 1812 and was happening in the Mississippi Territory.

About one year earlier, in November 1812, Major General Andrew Jackson, commander of the Tennessee Militia, had been directed by Governor Blount to move his troops from Nashville to Natchez in an attempt to thwart an expected attack by the British on New Orleans. In January 1813, the soldiers were moved by boat on the Cumberland River to the Tennessee River and down the Mississippi River to Natchez. Colonel John Coffee's mounted troops came cross-country to join Jackson. On arrival Jackson was given orders from John Armstrong, the Secretary of War, that his military units were no longer needed. Because the British threat did not develop as expected, he was told to dismiss his volunteers to return on their own, unpaid, to Tennessee. The abortive expedition ended after a march north up the Natchez Trace arriving back in Nashville in March with many unhappy volunteers. Jackson paid the men himself and later collected the cost from the Federal government.

News of the Fort Mims massacre traveled like a wildfire. Settlers and peaceful Creeks were panicked. Federal troops were focused on the fighting in the east and north leaving the south to be protected, best as possible, by militia. Governor William Blount of Tennessee was authorized by the legislature to call up 3500 men for a three-month enlistment with \$300,000 voted for their support. Then he directed Andrew Jackson to repel the approaching invasion. Jackson appealed to the volunteers who had gone to Natchez. Jackson's words were "Already are large bodies of the hostile Creeks marching to your borders, with their scalping knives unsheathed, to butcher your women and children: time is not to be lost. We must hasten to the frontier, or we shall find it drenched in the blood of our citizens." They were directed to gather in Fayetteville, Tennessee on October 4th.

Jackson was unable to attend on rendezvous day because he had been painfully injured, probably with a broken arm, in a bar fight at the City Hotel between him, John Coffee, and Thomas Hays on one side and Thomas H. Benton and Jesse Benton on the other. The argument was about a duel that was not fought. He did send a spirited address to be read to the troops. "The health of your general is restored. He will command in person. The bloodshed calls for vengeance, it must not call in vain." He reached the camp three days later, on October 7th. still

feeling the effects of his injuries.

Rumors were rampant. An Indian agent, George Gaines, sent word to Jackson from St. Stephens that help was needed. America's history has been dragged in wild directions because of rumors. In this period and place rumors were common because there was no substantial news. Long distances across poor roads in this wild southwest, with the always present threat of Indian ambush, led to many mistakes and disasters. As Hooper wrote in his *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs*, "The more remote from the scenes of blood, the greater the noise."

On September 26th Jackson sent Colonel John Coffee to Huntsville to provide defense of the frontier until the infantry could come and to protect the supplies gathered there. Coffee arrived with his troops and a detachment of Choctaw Indian scouts on October 4th. He was instructed to have the Indians wear white plumes or deer's tails in their hair so they might be identified as friendly. Jackson suggested that Coffee spread the word that he was moving toward Mobile, hoping to confuse the Indians.

Huntsville was a new settlement. John Hunt had arrived only eight years prior and the federal land sales, begun in August 1809, were just getting a good start. Washington, near Natchez, was the capital of the Mississippi Territory and a very long way from Madison County. It is easy to understand the terror created by the Indian threat.

David Crockett, famed frontiersman, personality and legislator, wrote in his autobiography of his involvement. "When I heard of the mischief which was done at the fort, (Mims) I instantly felt like going." His wife begged him not to volunteer but "I reasoned the case with her as well as I could and told her that if every man would wait till his wife got willing for him to go to war, there would be no fighting done. The truth is my dander was up and nothing but war could bring it right again." Crockett enlisted in the Muster Roll Company of the Tennessee Volunteer Mounted Riflemen under Captain Francis Jones and Colonel Coffee.

Crockett stated, "We all met and went ahead till we passed Huntsville and camped at a large spring called Beaty's Spring, (a large spring in central Madison County, now known as Brahan

Spring). Here we stayed several days.”

On October 8th, Colonel Coffee’s letter advised two Indians had just arrived with information that a war party of 800 to 1,000 had been sent to attack the frontiers of Georgia and the remainder was marching to Huntsville or Fort Hampton. A second message came adding to the fear of attack. At 9:00 AM on October 11th Jackson’s troops and Jackson, with his arm in a sling and in severe pain, force-marched the thirty-two miles from Fayetteville to Huntsville. On arrival Jackson was told the information was erroneous and he camped his tired soldiers at with Coffee’s men at Beaty’s Spring. In 1950 the Acme Club of Huntsville erected and dedicated a roadside marker at the corner of Holmes and Greene Streets to remember this march.

Private Crockett, who scouted miles south into the Indian lands, remembered his observations were ignored. He reported to Coffee “and his information did not stir Coffee to action yet when Major Gipson stated the same facts it put our colonel all in a fidget. When I made my report it wasn’t believed because I was just a poor soldier. But when the same was reported by Major Gibson, why there was all as true as preaching and the colonel believed every word. He ordered breastworks to be thrown up and sent an express to Fayetteville requesting them to push on like the very mischief for fear we should all be cooked as a crackling before they could get here.”

The next morning Jackson led a leisurely march that crossed the Tennessee River at Ditto’s Landing then moved east and joined Coffee’s command at a position on a high bluff opposite a charming island, then called Chickasaw and later Hobbs Island. This encampment became known as Camp Coffee and continued to be an important spot during the Creek War.

Coffee’s letters to his wife, Mary, niece of Jackson’s wife, Rachel, who lived in Rutherford County, Tennessee, tell the story of the troop’s activities in this campaign:

October 9, 1813- From Camp Beaty he wrote, “---things are ready to enter the Indian country tomorrow morning. I shall go to Fort Hampton near the mouth of the Elk River, to Colbert’s Ferry and then towards Fort St. Stephens, our first place of destiny. There is no more appearance of Indians doing mischief here than there is on Stones River, and the best informed here

have always thought so, the alarm has arisen from the poor cowardly creatures that has run off and left this tale in every direction. We have sent spies seventy miles who say there is no appearance of the Indians coming this way. I have 1300 men and have turned off several hundred others that I could not provide for. When General Jackson comes on with his 2500 men now at Fayetteville, we shall overrun the Creek nation, they will fly before us---like a flock of bullocks.” Supplies were a problem throughout the expedition. The lines of delivery and unavailable stocks kept the army on a short leash.

October 13, 1813- A letter, “Camp Coffee, South Side Tennessee,” Coffee wrote, “Since writing the last letter we have had ‘plauseable’ intelligence of the enemy coming against Madison County, which halted me. I moved seven hundred of my men over the Tennessee River to build a small fort two miles above ‘dittoes’ landing on the south of the river. Soon after I encamped, there came other news that the whole Creek nation was moving this way and would reach us the same night we received the information. We prepared and have continued in expectation two days and nights, when Gen’l Jackson with his army arrived and joined me yesterday. We are now out of any apprehension of being attacked. The Gen’l will rest here a few days and I shall make a small excursion into the adjoining country with about 650 of my Reg’t and return and move on with the Gen’l. Things are fine and there can be no doubt of the success of the campaign. Your brother, Jack, is also to accompany us. Your Uncle Jackson has performed the journey out ‘asceedingly’ well and enjoys good health. I never saw him in finer health and spirits than he now shows.” Jackson was apparently overcoming the injuries that had previously slowed him. John Coffee took 600 to 700 men from Camp Coffee.

October 15, 1813- A letter, “He had several picked companies of mounted rangers or spies. They would scout ahead of the main army for enemy war parties.” (13) They marched three days looking for Black Warrior towns and after 80 miles they found an abandoned village then 20 miles farther came upon another empty village. The first genuinely progressive action was the destruction of these towns. A main town was discovered and about 50 buildings were burned. Three hundred bushels of corn

were taken. (14) Supplies were constantly a problem. The forces experienced drastic food shortages.

Oct 24, 1813- A letter, "Headquarters, 24 miles south from Ditto's Landing,. My Dearest, I have this moment arrived here from a route into the Indian Country of ten days, have been to the Black Warrior Towns and found them deserted by the Indians, leaving their corn and some other plunder behind. I burnt three towns and never saw an Indian. Let me beg of you to be of good cheer. I assure you we are not in any particular danger here. I know you are a philosopher and now is the time to exercise it." These letters demonstrate his handwriting and his spelling and prove Coffee was well educated and a careful and caring writer.

October 25, 1813- A letter, "Camp Brown, 30 miles from Ditto's Landing. The Gen'l has gone on with his army and I will follow him tomorrow and join in the evening. We will keep together until we reach the heart of Creek country. There has not been a gun fired by either an Indian or a white man at each other and I am doubtful but a few will be fired. The Indians give up their country as we approach and I think that will continue to be the case." Colonel Smith and Colonel McKee in the Choctaw country reported the Indians had "fled to the center of their country from where they will move down to Pensacola to their friends and allies, the Spaniards and British." Coffee told Mary she could write to him, addressed to the port of Huntsville, Mississippi Territory because he could receive letters through a chain of army depots.

November 4, 1813- A letter, "Ten Islands, Coosa River. My love, I have again an opportunity to write you a line. We are progressing in to the Indian Country as far as we can get provisions. A few more days will bring the East Tennessee troops when the whole will move on together. I had a small 'scirmish' with the Indians where we killed two hundred and took eighty prisoners. We shall build a fort at this place for a deposit of provisions and to leave the wounded men in. The only man killed of my party is young Thomas Hudson who was killed with an arrow."

November 12, 1813- A letter, "Headquarters Camp Strother, Ten Islands, Coosa River. Thirty miles south, towards the enemy, we had a battle at Talladega creek. Our party

consisted of 2000 men commanded by Gen'l Jackson in person. The enemy were a little upwards of 1000 chosen warriors. We were advised by a friendly party of the approach and position, which enabled us by forced marching night and day to meet them thirty miles in advance of the main army. In the morning early we surrounded them and in a few minutes put the whole to flight having killed 300 of their best warriors and most of the balance were wounded. We have in two battles, one on the 3rd and the other on the 4th instant, killed 500 of the warriors and wounded at least as many other besides upwards of 100 prisoners. I lost five men killed and forty some odd wounded. In the latter battle we lost 15 men killed and eighty-five or six wounded. Upon the whole calculation we shall not lose more than 30 men killed in both battles. Although we regret the loss of our brave fellows, yet the great disproportion is beyond the most sanguine calculations on our part."

December 19, 1813- A letter, "Huntsville, I apprehend Gen'l Jackson will have been compelled to yield to the multitude and all be compelled to return, but this will be his last resort. Gen'l Hall's brigade has already left him thus we are clear of the Scotch-Irish in that quarter." Enlistment periods of sixty and ninety days expired quickly, forcing Jackson to strong measures to keep his army together.

Jackson's army continued the Creek War across the country and that finally concluded with a decisive battle at Horseshoe Bend, ending the threat of violence from the Indians. John Coffee appeared on every front of the new southwest and Mississippi Territory. He was not only the husband of Andrew Jackson's niece, but Jackson's best friend. Jackson said, "John Coffee is a consummate commander. He was born so, but he is so modest that he doesn't know it." Coffee, 41 years old in 1813, was a brave and unassuming frontier giant, six feet tall and about 216 pounds.

In 1809 Thomas Freeman was sent by the governor of the Mississippi Territory to take a census and begin the land survey of Madison County. John Coffee was a surveyor in that operation. The surveyors always had the best information on land. They often advised speculators on land purchases. Freeman was the largest purchaser of land when the federal sales began

and Coffee was not far behind. He had purchased eighteen parcels for a total of 2,659 acres. Coffee represented two Nashville land-owners/speculators in the effort to have the Madison County courthouse placed near the Big Spring. When he was able to arrange that, they wrote to him, "You have been the cause of all our profits in the Huntsville scheme." The beautiful and fertile valley of the Tennessee River received much interest from the soldiers of the Creek War. "Of the emigrants who afterward came from middle Tennessee, a large proportion had belonged to Coffee's command."

Coffee was appointed Surveyor General of the Alabama Territory in 1817, putting him in a position to speculate and amass a fortune. He was a key figure in the economic development of the area and became the richest planter in North Alabama. His Cypress Land Company developed the town that became Florence.

Huntsville was an important camp and supply depot during the Creek War. Jackson and his army passed through in October 1813 and several times during the war. There was never an imminent threat of an Indian attack on Madison County. Judge Thomas J. Taylor, an important local historian, wrote in the late nineteenth century "Madison County had always been a land of peace." "The county was a place of perfect security and the negro stood in mortal dread of the Indians and very seldom took refuge among them." "Little was heard about the war in our remote section of the country."

Many soldiers were recruited from the county as the fighting men were organized to hold off the menacing Indians. The Judge reported two companies of militia, captained by Gray and Mosley, were recruited in the county and they accompanied Jackson on the trek to Natchez. After the slaughter at Fort Mims a company was raised by Captain Eldridge in Huntsville and Meridianville and another by Captain Hamilton in the settlements of the mountains on the Flint River. "So the companies from Madison shouldered their muskets and marched away with the other, and were placed with some Tennessee companies in a regiment commanded by Jackson's intimate friend, Col. James Carroll." (20) Captain Mosley's men saw much hard service as scouts, to protect provision shipments and

to watch the Indian movements. Taylor reported, "I regret that the names of the killed and wounded in the Madison companies have not been preserved." Later in the war, "Captains Mosely's and Gray's commands were discharged on expiration of their term of service, but the other two companies before their discharge were at Mobile and at the taking of Pensacola." Like much of history, the rumors and stories of Indian attacks, Jackson's heroic march, and the city's place in the war, have expanded with the telling and the years.

SOURCES

- American Military History, 1607-1953*. Department of the Army. Turner III, Frederick. "Poetry and Oratory". *The Portable North American Indian Reader*. Penguin Book, 246–247
- John H. Eaton. *The Life of Major General Andrew Jackson*. 1828. 23
- Johnson Jones Hooper and Johanna Nicol Shields. *Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers.*" University of Alabama Press. 1993
- Frank L. Owsley, Jr. *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands*. 1981. University of Florida
- David Crockett. (and possibly others) *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett of the State of Tennessee*. E. L. Cary and A. Hart. Philadelphia. 1834.
- Benson J. Lossing. *Pictorial Field-book of the War of 1812*. 1869, 758.
- John Coffee Letters to his wife, Mary. Huntsville Heritage Room Archives. Huntsville-Madison County, Alabama Library.
- Marie Bankhead Owen. *Alabama Indians*. *Alabama Historic Quarterly*, Volume 13. 1951.
- Gordon T. Chappell. *John Coffee: Surveyor and Land Agent*. *The Alabama Review*, Volume XIV, Number 3. July 1961, 188.
- Colonel James Edmonds Saunders. *Early Settlers of North Alabama*. Genealogical Publishing Company. 1899/1969.
- Sean Michael O'Brien. *In Bitterness and Tears*. The Lyons Press, Guilford, Connecticut. 2003.
- Judge Thomas Jones Taylor. *A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama*. Confederate Publishing Company, University of Alabama. 1976.