

The Life & Times of **William Augustus Bowles,** “Director General” of The Nation of Muskogee

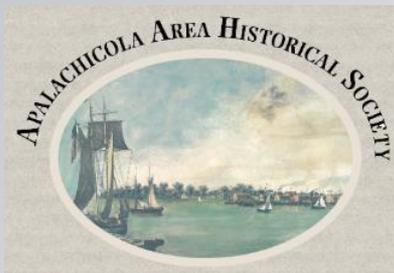


Image: *On Evacuation Day, 1783, the British flag over the United States of America was cut down and replaced with the Stars and Stripes. This day permanently separated **William Bowles**, a British Loyalist (Tory), from his father and mother in Maryland, and altered Florida history.*

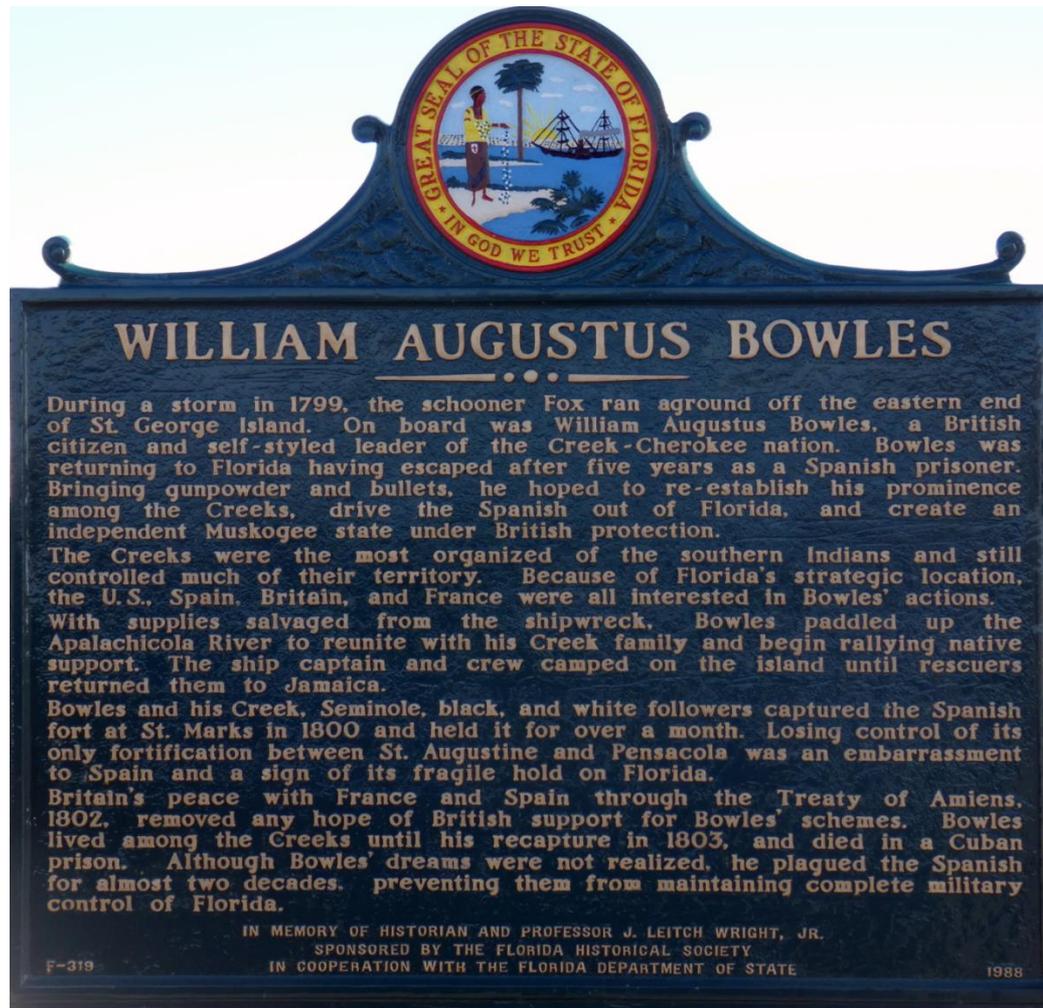
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February 20, 2021



Sign in St. George Island St. Park



[Hargrove, Encounter on St. George Island, Apalachicola Times, 11/30/2018](#)

Note on the Gorget



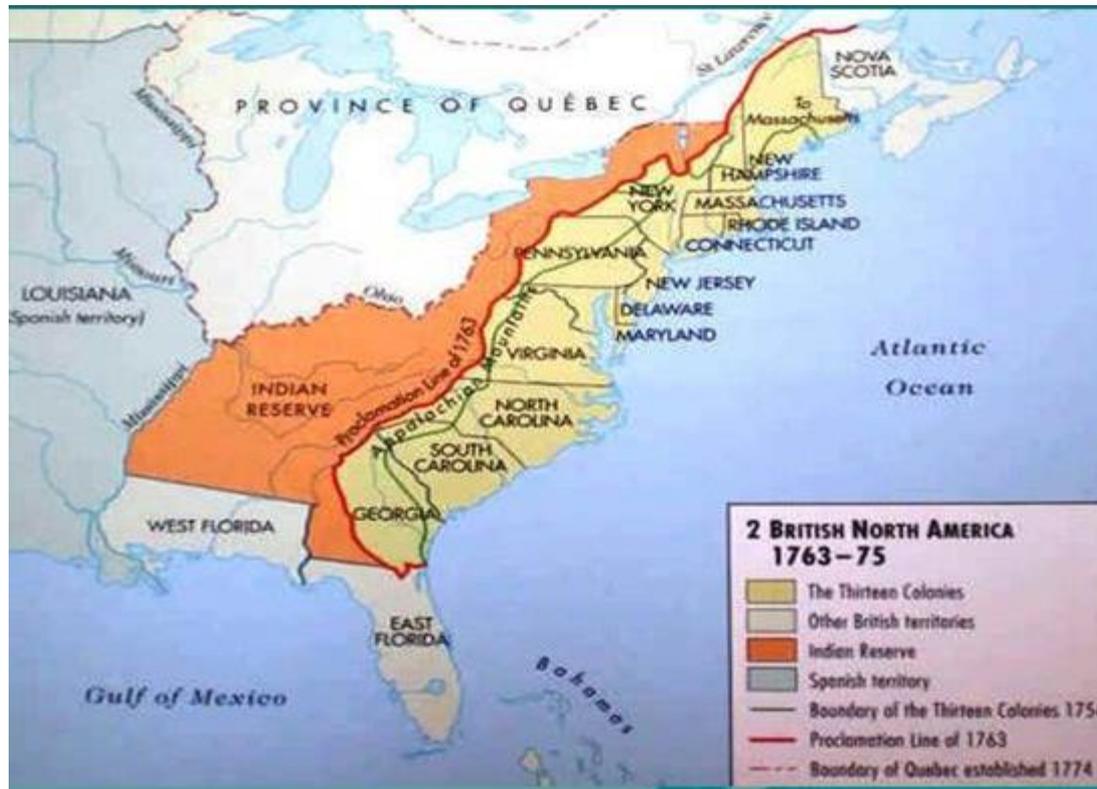
The silver crescent worn by William Augustus Bowles (left) and George Washington (right) is called a **gorget**. Originally armor for the throat, gorgets became symbols of the rank of an officer, and were popular among Creek chiefs (**micco** in Muskogee).

European Conflicts in **1763**, the Year William Augustus Bowles was Born



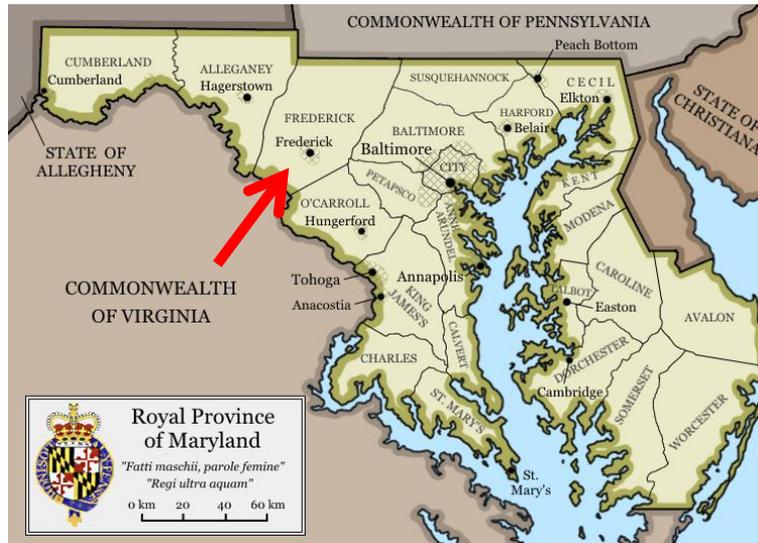
Before the French and Indian War, **Britain** claimed 13 coastal colonies, plus **Jamaica and the Bahamas**. In 1763, the year William Bowles was born, **Britain won the war and claimed all of Florida to the Mississippi**. **Spain** then claimed Cuba, New Orleans and all of Louisiana and Texas.

What was the British Proclamation of 1763?



After Bowles joined the Creeks, he insisted that the Muskogee “Creeks” had a right to control their own homeland as part of this proclamation. **Note that East and West Florida became the 14th and 15th British colonies!**

Timeline of William Bowles' 42-Year Life



Born a **British** subject in Frederick Town, **Colonial Maryland**, 1763 just as the French & Indian War ended and **Spain ceded Florida to Britain (kept to 1783)**.

British trade in E & W Florida, 1763-83



Bowles was stationed
In British Pensacola

The old Spanish trail ran from
St. Augustine to St. Marks (arrow).

Bernard Romans' map, printed in 1776, shows **trading trails**. One runs from Charleston, crosses the **Apalachicola River** (arrow) and ends in Pensacola. At that time, **William Panton was trading out of Charleston and Savannah**.

Trade Goods from Flintlock Archaeology Site on Apalachicola River (pre-1776)



Trader's dugout, 1750-1850



Top, French flintlock and English barrels of smooth-bore **Indian trade guns from British Period**. Bottom, Wilson Type G trade gun to which the barrels belonged.

[Link to Flintlock site](#) (one mile south of Woodruff Dam)

Conflict over Muskogee (“Creek”) Lands



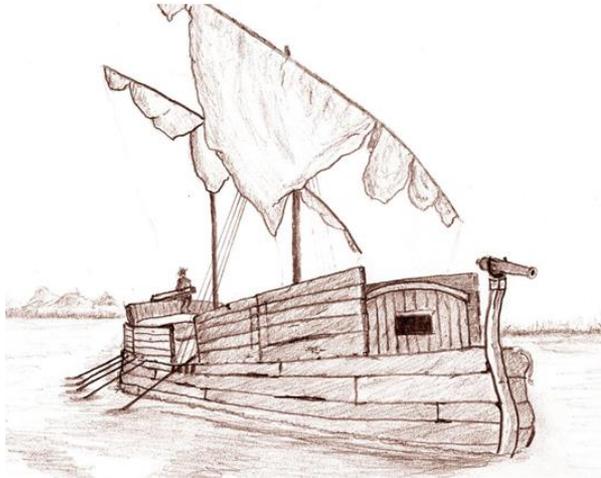
Americans, British, Spanish and French powers claimed rule over Creek homelands. At age 16, Bowles entered Creek lands on foot in 1779 from Pensacola.

At 14, Bowles enlists with British General William Howe in Philadelphia



Bowles joined the Maryland Loyalists in 1777. The redcoats marched to New York in 1778. Bowles guarded the baggage train and saw little action. His regiment was shipped to Jamaica and then **Pensacola in 1778**.

A 1778 American raid down the Mississippi forces British to send troops to Florida



Captain James Willing and a small band of American raiders was sent down the Ohio River to loot British posts from Natchez to New Orleans in 1778.

To protect the Mississippi River, British redeployed troops from New York and Jamaica to West Florida and Pensacola.

The **Rattletrap**, an aptly named river galley used by James Willing's raiders. They also captured a British ship called the **Morris**.

*Among these British troops was a 15 year-old loyalist called **Ensign William Augustus Bowles**...*

Bowles' regiment was sent to Pensacola, where **he deserted in 1779.**



Bowles joined the Maryland Loyalists in 1777. The redcoats marched to New York in 1778. Bowles guarded the baggage train and saw little action. His regiment was shipped to **Pensacola in 1778.**

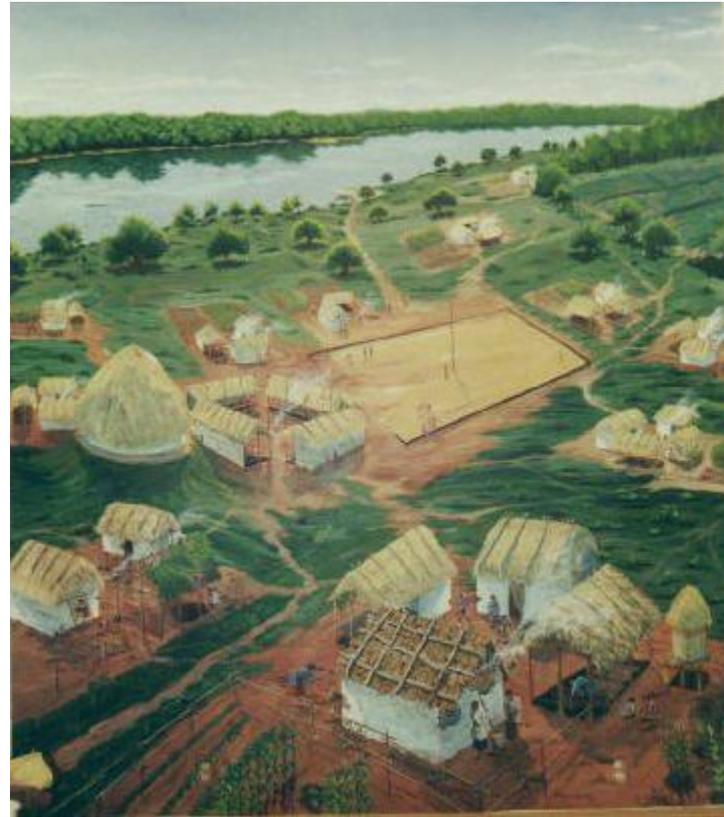
After arguing with an officer, **he threw his regimental coat into the Gulf of Mexico and joined a party of Creek Indians** going north.

Bowles was 16 years old.

With the Lower Creeks, 1779-1781



Bowles may have married a Cherokee woman and had a son who later moved to Oklahoma. He did marry a Creek named **Mary Perryman**. They eventually had at least two sons. Many Creeks were born to marriages between Scottish and English traders and Creek women. ***There are probably surviving descendants!***



Bowles lived in a Muscogee (Creek) town headed by Thomas Perryman. The Creeks were ***desperate for muskets and ammunition*** to defend against American settlers. Bowles proposed that he could provide **British trade goods** if he could break the monopoly of Panton, Leslie & Co. **In order to make the idea legitimate, he announced that the State of Muskogee was an independent nation that did not need Spain's permission.**

Bowles and a party of Creeks rejoined General John Campbell at Pensacola in 1781. The forces were defeated by **Count Bernardo de Galvez** in 1783. Bowles was captured and sent to Havana where he first saw **Morro Prison**. Paroled in New York, he returned to Nassau and then his Creek family. **He was 20 years old.**



Bernardo de Gálvez



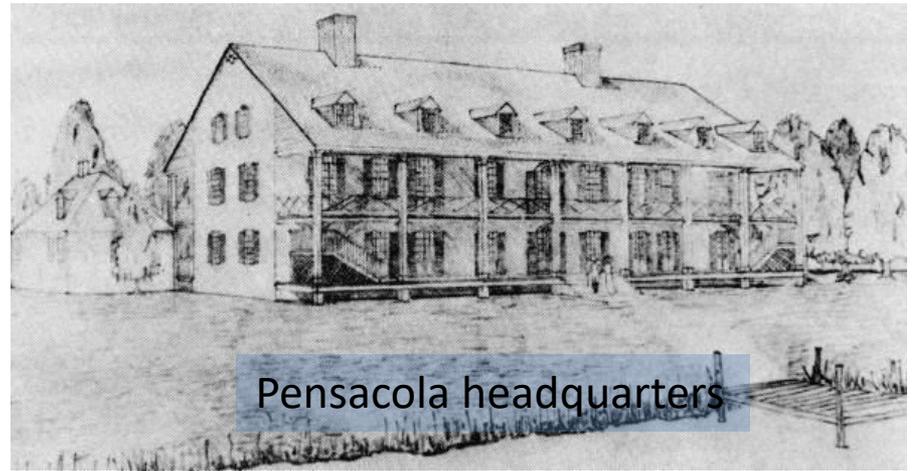
The defeated British evacuated and returned Florida to Spain in 1783.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain_and_the_American_Revolutionary_War

Evacuation Day, November 25, 1783. British loyalists must leave the United States. Most go to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. However, **Bowles returns to Nassau in the Bahamas** and explores **trading with the Creeks** in the vast **Indian Reserve** west of the newly formed United States.



Trading monopoly of Panton, Leslie and Company, 1783-1803



The Spanish were unable to supply the Creeks with muskets, gunpowder and trading goods. They assigned a monopoly in the Indian Trade to Panton, Leslie & Co.

Alliance with Lord Dunmore of the Bahamas

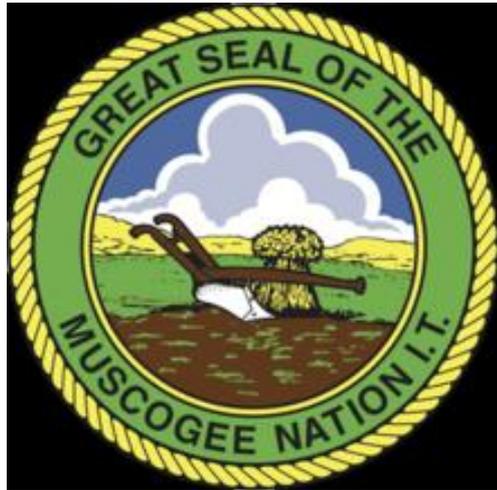
Like Bowles, **John Murray, Earl of Dunmore**, was a British loyalist who became governor of the Bahamas after being forced out of Virginia where he had been governor since 1771.

Seeking personal wealth, Lord Dunmore ***opposed Panton's trade monopoly***. He saw Bowles as a liaison with the Creek trade, and enlisted merchants **Miller, Bonnamy and Company** to establish trade.

To be quasi-legitimate, the ships needed to fly **the flag of Muskogee** in the port of Nassau. *However, the Spanish viewed the trade as illegal smuggling, and Bowles as a guerrilla leader.*



The Muscogee Nation



The idea of a Muscogee Nation existed long before William Bowles arrived. However, he was named **Director-General** or *Estajoca* in 1789. In order to establish trade with Britain and operate ships as **privateers** (rather than pirates), he designed a flag with an image of a smiling sun (above). Bowles wanted to build **two free ports** in Muskogee and also attempted to import a **printing press** and printer so the nation could draw up a written constitution and laws.

Creek delegation to George III, 1789



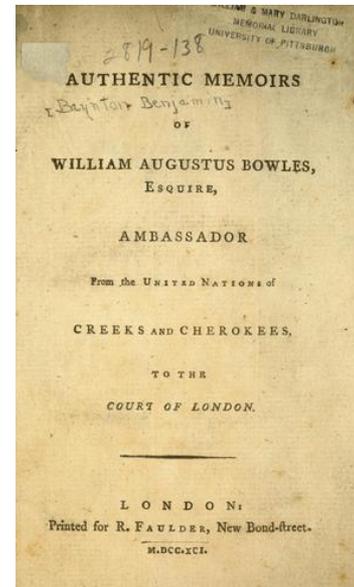
William Bowles led a group of Creek representatives to London in 1789 to negotiate **permission to trade in Nassau** with ships flying the Muskogee flag, and **to establish two free ports** in the nation of Muskogee. He intended to compete with Panton, Leslie & Company's trade monopoly.

Portrait by Thomas Hardy, 1790



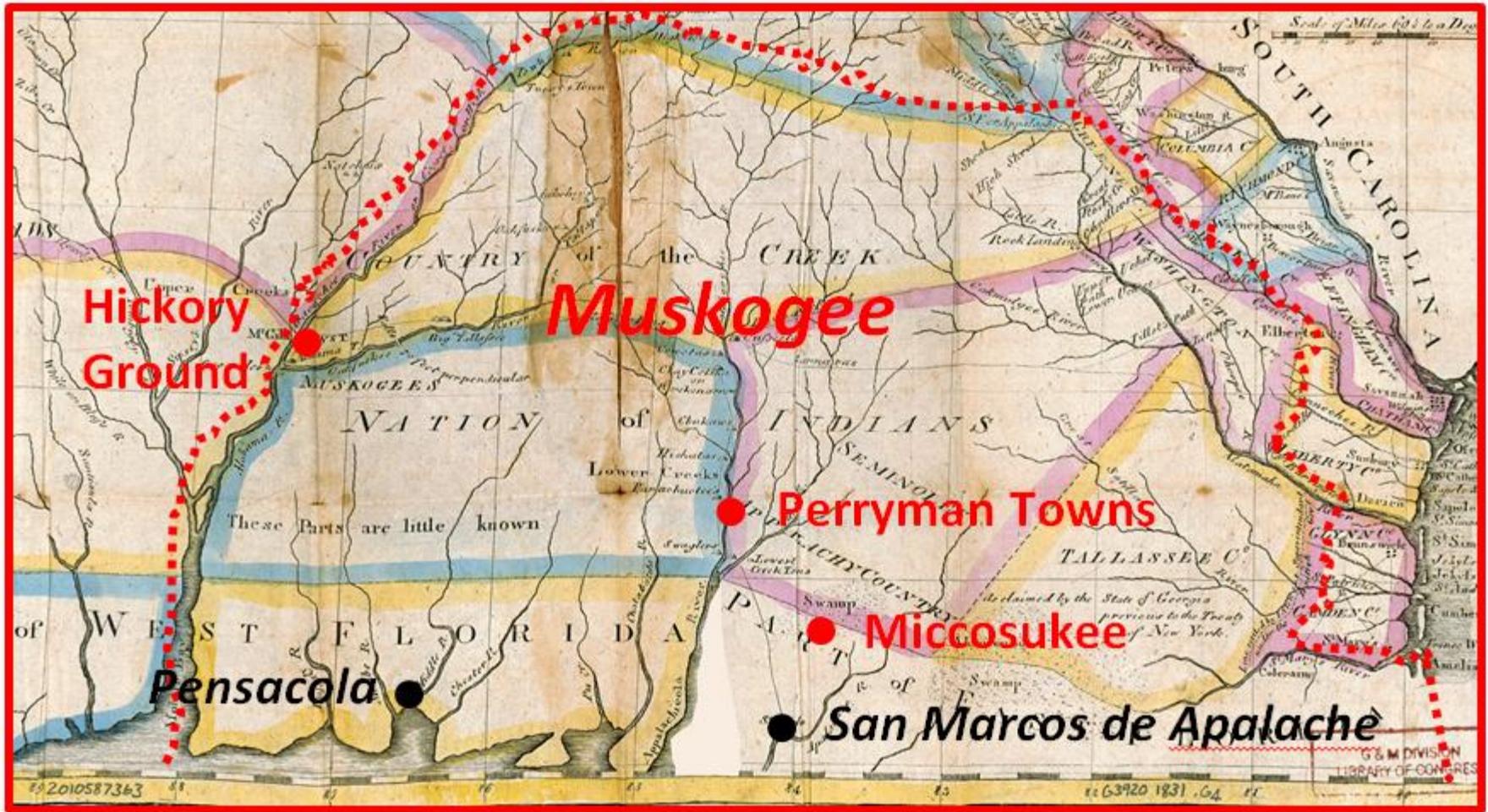
Bowles and the other Creek chiefs were very popular guests at London social events where they pressed their case for British support.

The original painting is on display at the Upton House NE of London.



Benjamin Baynton's **biography** of Bowles was published in London in 1791 when **Bowles was 28 years old and adept at self promotion.**

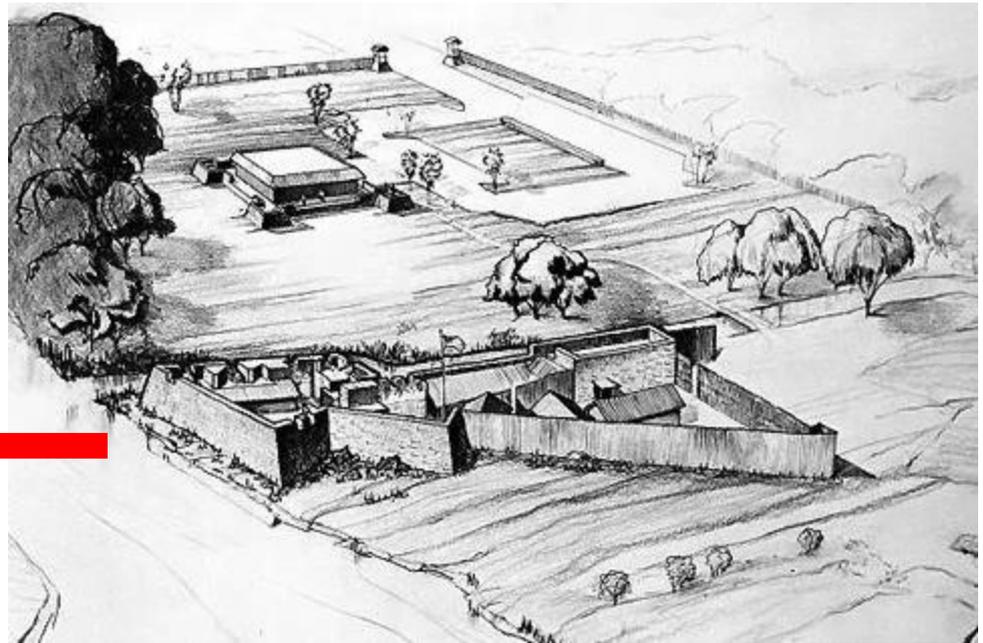
Key Places in Bowles' War



Siege of San Marcos de Apalache, 1792

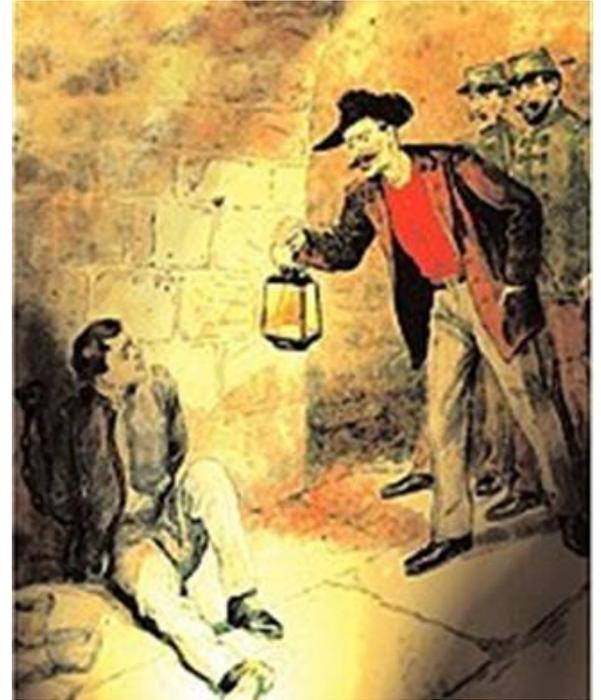


Panton's store on Wakulla River was 2 miles NW of the **Spanish fort**, San Marcos de Apalache.



After capturing Pantón's store and distributing the goods, Bowles went to Fort San Marcos. **José de Hevia** convinced him that Spain wanted him to negotiate with the Spanish governor in New Orleans.

A Prisoner of Spain, 1792 to 1797



Taken to New Orleans to “negotiate,” instead **Baron de Condelet** imprisoned Bowles. First taken to Cadiz and Madrid in Spain, he was transferred to **Bilibid Prison** in the **Philippines**. But in 1797, the governor of Manila thought he might escape to a British ship, and decided to send him back to prison in Cadiz aboard the ship, *Concepcion*.

Escape and Return, 1797



When the *Concepcion* was attacked by a British warship in Dakar, West Africa, ***Bowles escaped through a porthole and swam to an American merchant ship, the *Virtue****. He returned to London and spent a year recovering from illness caused by his imprisonment. He convinced the Crown to provide munitions for the Creeks and soon embarked from Jamaica on the ***HMS Fox***.

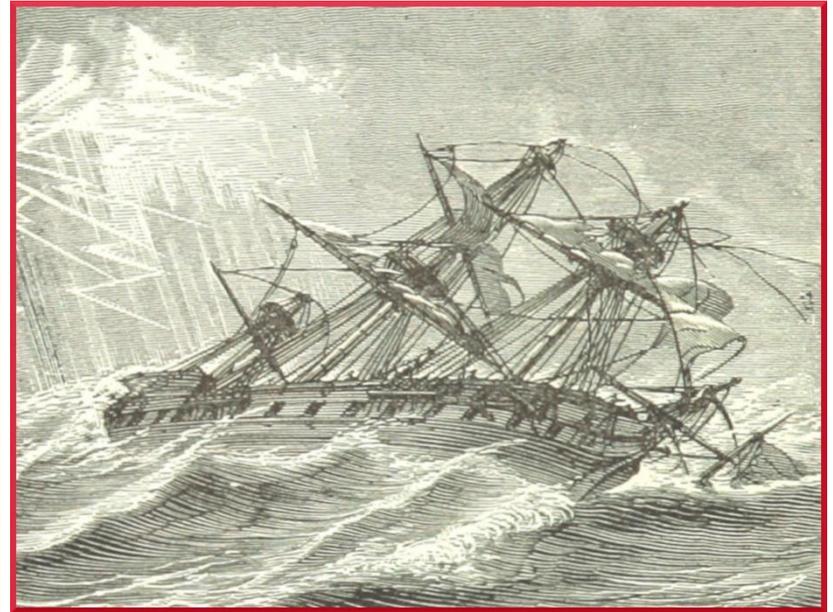
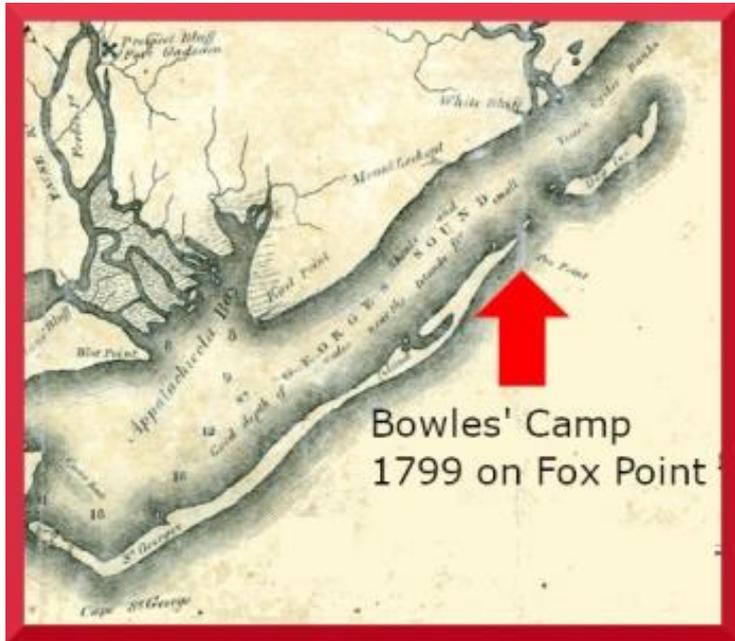
William Bowles the Artist



Freetown, Sierra Leone, a sketch by Wm A. Bowles done in 1798 after he escaped from Spanish captivity. **He turned 35 that year.** Bowles often drew portraits of his associates, including the Creeks.

<https://onstellar.com/blogs/69841/The-man-who-wanted-to-be-a-King-in-America>

HMS Fox Shipwreck on St. George Island



In 1799, Bowles loaded gunpowder and rum onto the British frigate, *HMS Fox* under Lt. James Wooldridge. Trying to reach **Apalachicola Bay**, they encountered a September hurricane and were shipwrecked on the east end of St. George Island (**Fox Point**). Although they saved some supplies, the crew of at least 50 men was stranded in **Spanish territory** for about two weeks.

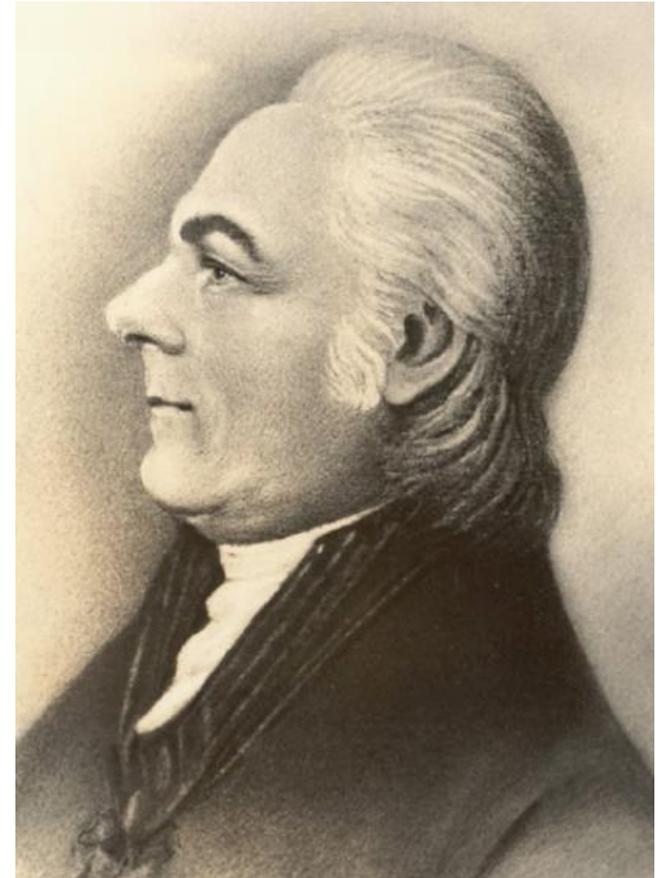
The camp was near Marsh Island in modern St. George State Park.

Rescued by American Surveyor, Andrew Ellicott...in a way...

When the surveying party of the **Southern Boundary Commission** reached the Apalachicola River in 1799, they were threatened by Creek and Seminole Indians. The men sailed down the river and repaired their boat. Meantime, **their supply party from St. Marks saw Bowles on St. George**, and carried a message from him and Wooldridge to Ellicott:

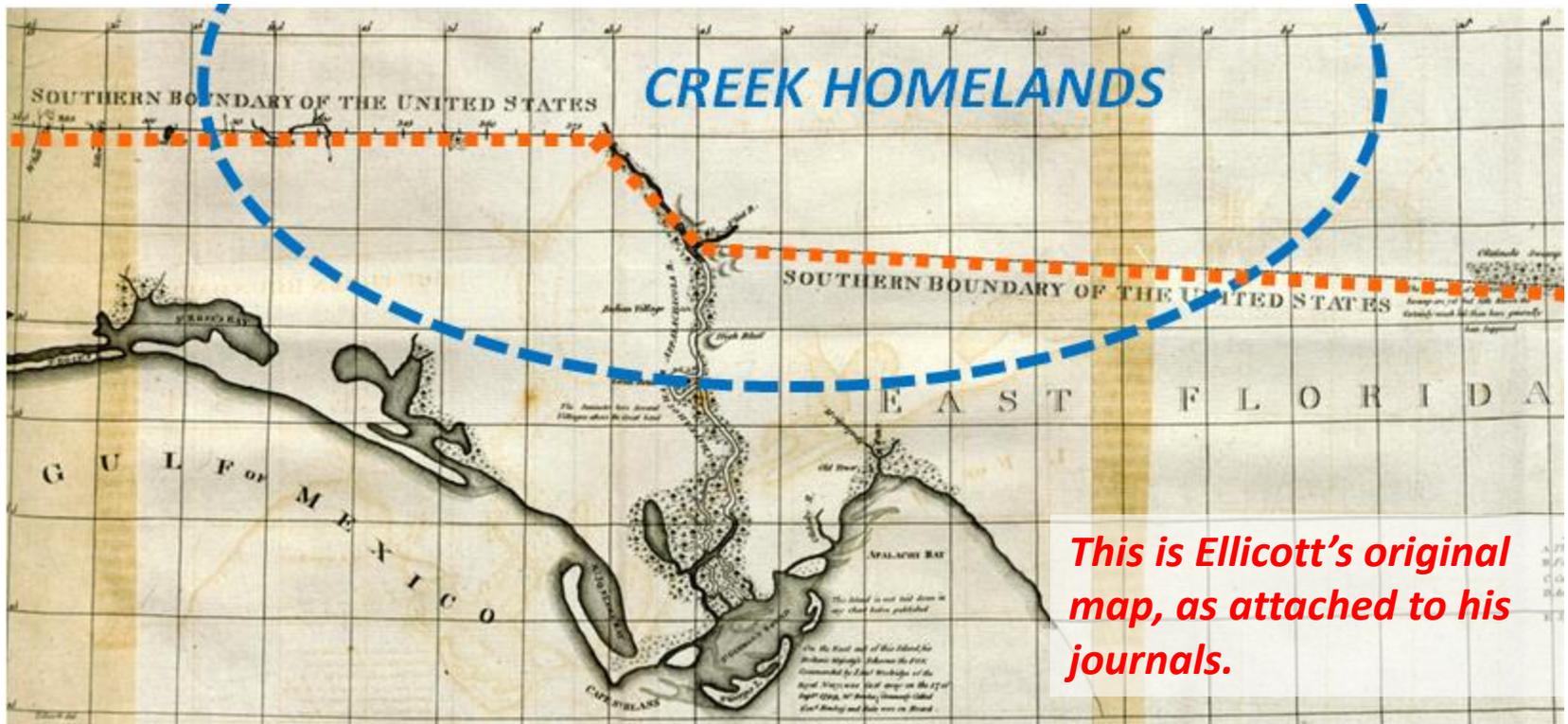
“Altho’ we differ in politics, yet as Gentlemen we may associate and be friends.”

Ellicott provided food but a rainstorm forced him to stay on the island for 8 days. The surveyor later wrote that Wooldridge intercepted his supply ship and sailed away. **“Thus were we repaid for our kindness.”** Meantime, Bowles met the Creeks and took the salvaged gunpowder and rum up river.



Andrew Ellicott, who surveyed the boundary at the 31st parallel.

The 1795 Boundary cut through Creek homelands



The Creeks needed arms to hold back settlers from Georgia who were pushing into their homelands. They were forced to decide whether to obtain the arms from **Spanish** Pensacola (Panton, Leslie & Co.), to make an alliance with the **Americans**, or to seek **British** intervention. **Director-General Bowles opted for British aid.**

Arms from Nassau, 1799-1802



With British approval, ships flying the **flag of Muskogee** could trade in Nassau. Lord Dunmore, Miller and Bonnamy supplied firearms, gunpowder and lead ball for the Creeks.

Bowles also commissioned **privateers** who captured Spanish merchant ships and shared the cargoes with Bowles and the Creeks. ***However, without permission from Spain, these actions were really smuggling and piracy.***

Letter of Marque for privateers issued by William Bowles

God save the state of Muskogee³⁴

His Excellency William Augustus Bowles
Director General of Muskogee &c &c &c —

To all people to whome these presents shall Come Greeting

Whereas His Catholic Majesty has for many years entertained evil intentions against this Nation and pursued measures every way injurious and hostile against us, wantonly violating the Rights that belong to us as a free and independent People has disregarded all remonstrance made by us to obtain redress and induce him to abandon his unfriendly intentions against us

Therefore agreeable to the order made in Supreme Council bearing date as aforesaid we do hereby Commission the Schooner Muskogee Mekko to Cruise on the High Seas in a warlike manner and she is hereby Constituted; appointed and Commissioned to procede to sea and to apprehend Sieze and take the Goods ships and subjects of his Catholic Majesty, by forse of arms, and Conduct the same to the most convenient Port in order that they may be legally adjudged and condemned in our high Court of Admiralty.

And we do pray all Kings, Princes; Potentates; Republics and States as are our friends to give such aid and Protection in their Ports as may be needful We promising to do the like when by them required.

Given under our hand and sealed
with the seal of our office at our
head Quarters Mekkesuky⁴¹ this first
day of Febr.y 1802

Wm. A. Bowles

Achackweithle (Prospect Bluff)

Port Power (Cedar Key)



Useppa Island (Charlotte Harbor)

Salt Key

Cayo Sal

Havana

CUBA

A Fishy Problem for

Pirates: Spanish treasure ships sailed far to the south. Most ships in the northern Gulf were “**Spanish Indian**” *pescaderos* laden with dried and salted fish, plus a few merchant schooners.



Privateers—or *pirates*—in Apalachicola Bay



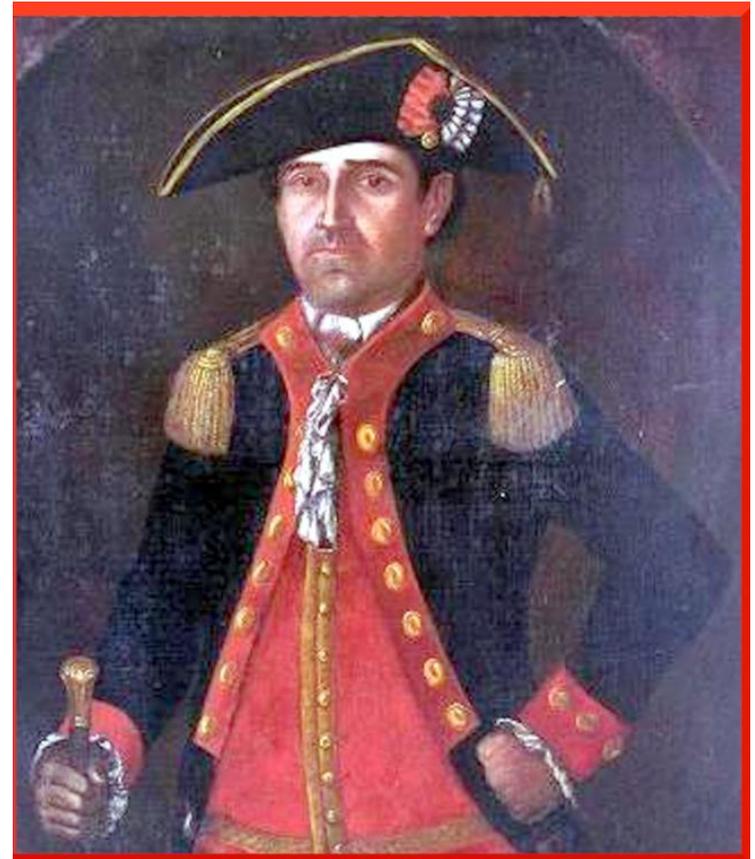
Flying the **Muskogee flag**, Captains Richard Powers and James Ward captured at least 12 Spanish merchant ships and brought the prizes to **Apalachicola Bay** to distribute the cargo with Bowles and the Creeks. *Unfortunately, most of the captured vessels were fishing boats and the “booty” mostly dried fish!*

Meantime, **Governor Folch** sent several *river galleys* to fight off the pirates, and Bowles moved his capitol from Coweta (in modern Georgia) to Miccosukee in Florida.

The Spanish pursue Bowles and the “Muskogee Navy”

The Spanish governor of West Florida, General Vicente Folch y Juan, sent **Captain Pierre George Rousseau** with several shallow-draft galleys in pursuit of Bowles. Rousseau also pursued Bonnamy and Miller’s ships flying the flag of Muskogee or smuggling goods to Apalachicola.

Neither Rousseau nor Garcia managed to capture Bowles. Instead, he had returned to Miccosukee and decided to attend an 1803 Creek conference. By then, **John Forbes, Benjamin Hawkins, and Vicente Folch** were offering **rewards for Bowle’s capture.**



Captain Pierre “Pedro” Rousseau and a Spanish shallow-draft galley



The Downfall: Treaty of Amiens, 1802

Although the main aim of the Treaty of Amiens was to create peace with Napoleon's France, *Britain and Spain also agreed to cease hostilities.*

As a result, *no officials in Britain or in Nassau could provide arms to Bowles and his Nation of Muskogee*, which had declared war on Spain in 1800. *The "Muskogee Navy" was declared a band of pirates who would be executed in Nassau.*

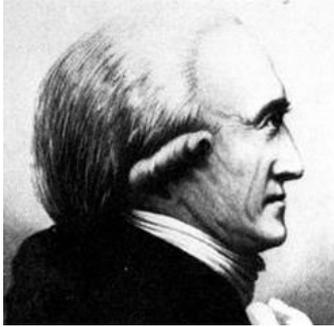
Since the Creeks could not obtain arms from Bowles, their source was limited to Panton, Leslie and Company in Spanish Pensacola. Panton had died in 1801, and **John Forbes** took over, renaming the firm *John Forbes and Company in 1803.*

Worse yet, the Lower Creeks and Seminoles signed a treaty stating they would not fight for Bowles. His army and navy were gone, and he was a wanted man.



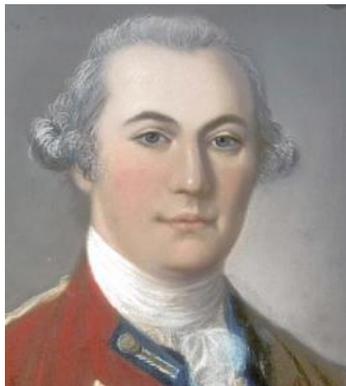
Executing a pirate in Nassau, 1802.

Conspiracy at Hickory Ground, 1803



American Indian agent **Benjamin Hawkins** knew Bowles had not committed crimes against the United States but helped turn him over to the Spanish.

Esteban Folch, son of the governor of West Florida, was sent with instructions to capture Bowles.



John Forbes, successor to William Panton, attended in order to secure a land cession from the Creeks and to eliminate William Bowles, who had raided company stores three times.



Location of the Creek conference at Hickory Ground

A party of Upper Creeks led by Folch and Forbes' employees seized William Bowles and handcuffed him with custom-made irons.

Imprisonment and death at Morro Castle, Havana, Cuba in 1805



The **third time William Augustus Bowles was captured** by Spain, there was no escape. No longer could he rally Creeks behind him, nor could he find a haven in the Bahamas, Maryland or Britain. By some reports, he went without food and died after months of starvation.

Bowles and the Creeks lost, Jackson & the U.S. won

Daring as William Augustus Bowles was, there was no way that he or the Creeks could retake Florida from Spain or hold off American settlers, who were backed by a vastly superior army with modern weapons.



After **“Red Stick”** Creeks massacred settlers and army personnel at **Fort Mims, Alabama**, in **1813**, four armies converged on the Indian territory. **Andrew Jackson** crushed Creek warriors at Horseshoe Bend, defeated the British at New Orleans, and destroyed Seminole villages across north Florida.



The Creeks were held responsible for repaying the **cost of goods looted from Panton’s Wakulla store**, and they paid the debt with **the largest land grant ever approved in Florida**. John Forbes sold the **Forbes Purchase** and retired to Cuba. Spain sold Florida to the United States in **1819-21**, and the city of **Apalachicola** became an important cotton port in the new territory, for which Andrew Jackson was the first governor.

Sources, resources and a note of thanks

Mississippi River Gunboats on the Gulf Coast: The Spanish Naval Fight against William Augustus Bowles, 1799-1803, Gilbert C. Din, [Click for link](#)

[Gilbert Din, JSTOR, Bowles Conundrum](#)

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David Narrett, **Adventurism and Empire. The Struggle for Mastery in the Louisiana-Florida Borderlands, 1762-1803**. Google Books, 2015.

James Hargrove's articles on Bowles in the Apalachicola Times, Chasing Shadows:

[William Bowles and the Muskogee Navy](#)

[An encounter on St. George Island, 1799](#)

A tip o' the hat to David Adlerstein, editor of the Apalachicola Times, For supporting publication of historical essays, and to Caty Green for her tireless work on behalf of the Apalachicola Area Historical Society!

