

1836-01-01

## Authentic Narrative of the Seminole War

Mary Godfrey

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# Early Visions of Florida

Poetry • Stories • Chronicles from an American Borderland

## Mary Godfrey, An Authentic Narrative of the Seminole War

An *Authentic Narrative of the Seminole War*, attributed to Mary Godfrey (1836), details the horrors of an African and Indian rampage along the Florida frontier, and was hawked with graphic foldouts of the carnage. Two thirds of the text deals with escalating skirmishes leading up to the Second Seminole War; the information concerning the war is relatively accurate, the details of successive disputed treaties are repeated from the perspective of the white invaders, however, and the “savages,” are consistently portrayed as intent on a “war of extermination” against the innocent settlers. One quarter of the text, excerpted here (with a short piece of pro-war propaganda at the end) is a third-person description of Mary Godfrey’s ordeal and a first-person narrative attributed to Godfrey herself.



*It is not known whether Mary Godfrey existed, but the thin account herein of her four-night swamp bivouac with her three young daughters and infant girl, as the Seminoles and free blacks rioted through the countryside, is plausible because of the lack of invention it demonstrates. The text shows clearly the profiteering and rhetorical saber-rattling that accompanied expansion of the United States; a one-armed charity case was advertised as the seller of the poster, and great effort is made to portray the Seminoles as worthy and vicious adversaries, yet simply an intransigent minority, violently resisting the inevitable agreement to evacuate west of the Mississippi.*

*The major significance of this pamphlet is found in the role of a maroon who discovers Mary and her children hiding in the swamp. He offers sustenance, until the reign of terror ends and white*

volunteers ride to the rescue. At first, the black stranger is just as “ghastly” as the hordes he emerges from, but in this self-serving narrative, his conscience comes to light, and the stranger recalls his own children and desire for familial peace.

Edited by Keith Lewis Simmons, University of South Florida St. Petersburg

### Further Reading

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Derounian-Stodola, Kathryn Zabelle (ed.). *Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

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*An Authentic Narrative of the Seminole War; and of the Miraculous Escape of Mrs. Mary Godfrey, and her Four Female Children* (1836).



... Among the many unfortunate families who were compelled to leave their late peaceful homes, in quest of aid, or for some place where they would be less exposed, and in less danger of falling victims to the fatal tomahawk and scalping knife of the savages, there was one instance in which a providential interposition was so remarkable, as that of the miraculous preservation and deliverance of Mrs. Mary Godfrey, the wife of Mr. Thomas Godfrey and her four female children, one an infant at the breast. The husband of this unfortunate woman had been, with others, drafted and compelled to leave his family unprotected for the purpose of endeavoring to check the enemy in their murderous career; it was not until she heard the frightful yells of the approaching savages, and saw the dwellings of her nearest neighbors in flames, and the inmates flying in every direction to escape from the awful death with which they were threatened, that she was induced to follow their example; but being impeded in her flight by the burden of her infant, but six months old, she (as the only alternative left her by which she could escape from her pursuers) was obliged to penetrate into a thick and miry swamp! In this dreary and uncomfortable retreat, the unfortunate mother found means to conceal herself and helpless children for the space of four days, with nothing to subsist on but a few wild roots and berries! As she concluded by the almost constant

whooping of the Indians, that they had full possession of all the adjacent country, and that it would be impossible to escape discovery should she attempt to seek a more comfortable situation, she came to the conclusion that it would be preferable there to remain, and with her poor children to fall victims to hunger and thirst, than to subject themselves to the tortures, and which in all probability, would be inflicted on them were they to fall into the hands of the enemy. As the savages appeared by their yells to approach very near, to prevent a discovery she was obliged to use every exertion to induce her suffering little ones to stifle their cries and lamentations, though driven to it by pinching hunger and burning thirst! On the fourth day, finding that in consequence of her extreme suffering and deprivations, that she could no longer afford the nourishment to her babe that it required, she, with becoming fortitude, endeavored to prepare her mind to part with her precious charge, and to submit, without a murmur, to whatever might be the will of Him to whom alone she could now look for protection. Toward the close of day, the pitiful moans of her tender babe (produced by its sufferings) were such as to be heard by and to attract the attention of a straggling black, who had enlisted in the cause of the enemy; guided by its cries, and the bitter lamentations of its poor mother and sisters, he was brought full in view of them, and at whose sudden and unexpected appearance, the poor sufferers manifested their terrors by a united shriek of horror and despair! The two little girls in the meantime clinging to their parent, and imploring that protection, which she, poor woman, was unable to afford them. The negro, grinning a ghastly smile, as if elated with the discovery, approached them with an uplifted axe, apparently intent on their destruction! The distracted mother at the moment, begged for the lives of her children; and on her pointing to her almost expiring infant, the negro dropped his axe, and after contemplating the sad spectacle for a few moments, appeared much affected, and broke silence by assuring Mrs. G. that she had nothing to fear, that neither herself or her children should be hurt—that he had two children who were held in bondage by the whites, that to enjoy his own liberty he had left them to their fate, and something now seemed to whisper him, that if he should destroy the lives of her innocent children, God would be angry, and might doom his little ones to a similar fate by the hands of the white men in whose power they were! Such, in substance, were the remarks of the relenting African, and who further manifested his pity, by requesting Mrs. G. and her children to remain concealed where they were, and at night he would bring them food and water, and as soon as a favorable opportunity should present, would conduct them to a path which would lead them to the plantation of some of their friends. He then left them, and in proof of his fidelity, he early in the evening returned, bringing with him two blankets and a quantity of wholesome provision; which as he represented, he had succeeded in saving from the house of a planter which had been that afternoon set on fire; having thus provided for their immediate want, he again retired, but early the next morning, once more made his appearance, and apparently much agitated, informing Mrs. G. that a company of mounted volunteers (whites) had just made their appearance in the neighborhood, and had dispersed the Indians, who had been there embodied, and as some of them in their flight might seek shelter in the swamp in which she was concealed, he thought it unsafe for her to remain there any longer, and proposed to her that she now improve the favorable opportunity which presented, to escape to her friends, and that he would accompany her to within view of them, which the friendly negro did, although at the risk of his own life!

The following particulars were received from the lips of Mrs. Godfrey, of the manner in which she passed the four days in her dreary abode:—"The first day, my apprehensions that we should be traced by our tracks, discovered and butchered by the savages, were too great to think for a moment to what extremities we might be driven by hunger, and other privations. Their frightful

yells were heard without a moment's cessation during the whole day, at the close of which, I selected as dry a place as could be found, which I overspread with a few pine twigs, on which with my poor helpless children to repose the night, which to me proved a sleepless one; and from the sobs and sighs and bitter moans of my affrighted little ones, I had reason to believe it proved equally so to them. Miserable, however as was our situation, it might have been still more so. Had an equal quantity of rain fallen that night as the night previous, it is not probable that my tender babe would have survived until morning.

The sun arose bright and cheering on the morning of the second day, but the frightful whoopings of the Indians had not ceased; nor were our prospects of escaping with our lives any better, should we attempt leaving our hiding place. Before the close of the day my youngest children began to complain of hunger and thirst; a few wild berries and a little stagnant water was all that could be procured with which to appease either. My oldest daughter bore her sufferings and privations with remarkable fortitude; when not engaged in conversing (in a low tone of voice) with her two younger sisters, to pacify and to avert their dreadful forebodings of being seized and murdered by cruel Indians, her time was employed in relieving me of the burden of my helpless babe. We passed the night of this day much as the first, with but little if any sleep; indeed, exposed as we were to the heavy dew and unwholesome night air, and compelled either to sit or lie upon the damp ground, it was not possible for either my children or myself to obtain that repose which nature required; and if more comfortably situated, our fearful apprehensions of being discovered and put to death by the merciless savages, would have prevented it.

The morning of the third day, although clear and pleasant, found us, if possible, in a still more wretched condition, having all contracted bad colds by reason of our thin apparel and exposure; and for the want of proper exercise, our limbs were so benumbed and cramped as to be hardly able to stand erect! and what added still more to my afflictions, I found that in consequence of my long fasting, in addition to other sufferings, I could but a little while longer afford that nourishment to my babe so necessary to support life; and in addition to which, the lamentations of my other children (with the exception of the oldest) it is impossible to describe correctly what were my feelings at this melancholy moment! mothers can best judge, and they can have but a faint conception of them unless similarly situated! But, in this hour of severe affliction, I did not fail to look to and call on One who had power to save and to deliver us, and as He "tempers the storm to the shorn lamb," to revive and protract the life of my tender infant! By the assistance of kind Providence, we were enabled to pass another night, and our lives were spared to witness the rising of another sun, although with a great depression of spirits and relaxation of bodily strength, in consequence of being so long deprived of wholesome nourishment; and, indeed, so visible was it as regarded my infant, as to render it almost certain, that before the close of the day, I should be compelled to part with my precious charge! Although, apparently with insufficient strength to raise its little hands, yet its constant cries were still more shrill and distressing, nor could they be hushed; and fortunate it proved for us that they could not be, for thereby the attention of the humane African (our deliverer) was attracted, and by them brought to our relief."

There were other instances in which parents were less fortunate—who were not only doomed to witness the total destruction of their property, the fruits of many years labor, but, if not so fortunate as to escape, were treated with most savage barbarity; and in some instances, where, in consequence of the absence of the husband, it was suspected that he had been either draughted

or had volunteered his services to assist in repelling the assaults of the savages, but little mercy was shown their wives and children if left behind. In one instance, as was represented to the writer, a house (the only inmates of which were a mother and her two young children) was visited by an Indian and his squaw, and after demanding liquor, and refreshing themselves with whatever they pleased that the house contained, and about to depart, the Indian seized and bound one of the children, a lad about seven years of age, while the other, an infant, was seized by the squaw, and notwithstanding the entreaties and lamentations of the poor distracted mother, would no doubt have carried both off had it not been for two armed white men, who fortunately were discovered, although at some distance, approaching, as the two savages were about leaving the house with their captives.

In addition to the foregoing, many horrid murders have been perpetrated; a great number of the most valuable plantations have been totally destroyed, and whole families missing, and as the Indians have been frequently discovered dancing to and fro around their burning dwellings, there can be but little doubt but some of the missing were consumed in them—and as places have been noticed where fires have been enkindled, with burned stakes erected in the centre; they are doubtless those to which a portion of those who have fallen into their hands, have been inhumanly sacrificed, agreeably to their savage mode of torture.