

University of Oklahoma College of Law

University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons

American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899

1-18-1839

Memorial of Hezekiah L. Thistle, praying that certain communications addressed by him to the Secretary of War, and Chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs of the Senate, on the subject of expelling the hostile Indians from Florida, may be printed

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.ou.edu/indianserialset>



Part of the [Indigenous, Indian, and Aboriginal Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

S. Doc. No. 108, 25th Cong., 3rd Sess. (1839)

This House Document is brought to you for free and open access by University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in American Indian and Alaskan Native Documents in the Congressional Serial Set: 1817-1899 by an authorized administrator of University of Oklahoma College of Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Law-LibraryDigitalCommons@ou.edu.

MEMORIAL

OF

HEZEKIAH L. THISTLE,

PRAYING

That certain communications addressed by him to the Secretary of War, and chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs of the Senate, on the subject of expelling the hostile Indians from Florida, may be printed.

JANUARY 18, 1839.

Ordered to be printed.

To the honorable the Senate of the United States in Congress assembled:

The memorial of Hezekiah L. Thistle, of the State of Louisiana, late senior captain and commandant of a body volunteers raised by him in the State of Pennsylvania, under the authority of the Secretary of War, for a tour of duty in Florida, which has been performed,

RESPECTFULLY SHOWETH :

That your memorialist having had much experience in former years with the Indians in various sections of the country, by which he became familiar with their habits and usages; and having been employed during two campaigns in Florida, as a captain of volunteers in the service of the United States; and having seen by the report of the Secretary of War to the President, of November 28th last, as communicated to Congress with the President's message of December 3d last, that "*the Indians must be expelled from Florida,*" your memorialist was desirous that the Government should profit by his experience, and, if acceptable, also by his services; he thereupon communicated his views on that subject to the Secretary of War, on the 19th of November last, which were further developed in another communication of the 19th ultimo, addressed to the chairman of the Military Committee of the Senate; which communications your memorialist prays may be printed for the use of the Senate; and for that purpose he respectfully presents herewith copies thereof. And as in duty bound he will ever pray.

H. L. THISTLE, *Captain.*

WASHINGTON, *January 17, 1839.*

Blair & Rives, printers.

WASHINGTON, *November 19, 1838.*

SIR: I had the honor to address a letter to you on the 18th of September last, enclosing the tender of a number of citizens of Philadelphia, as volunteers in Florida for one year, in which service, if accepted, they solicited my command. Your prompt answer informed me that, as no existing law authorized the acceptance of volunteers, you declined the proposition. Since that period the treacherous character of the Florida Indians has been more fully developed to the public, (but not to myself, since early and long experience had given me distinct knowledge, as well of their faithlessness, as of their haunts, habits, warfare, and the most promising mode to subdue them.) Knowing your ardent desire to expel them from Florida, and that your best efforts are directed to that object, while the attention of the military force is attracted in several other quarters, I have taken the liberty to make another communication, under the hope that my zeal and experience may be acceptable to you and useful to our country; whether for present service, or such as Congress may authorize.

I profess to be a perfect woodsman, and have given proof of my ability to trace the wilds of Florida without guide or interpreter, (those fruitful sources of vexatious disappointment, ignorance, and treachery,) to reach the haunts of the wily savage, and to face him when found; for these truths I may refer and safely appeal to many of the most distinguished officers of the army. I have also the influence to raise promptly a considerable body of able and suitable men, (chiefly mechanics, of strength to endure and perform, and skill to make or repair what may be needed,) of which your department had some proof last year.

If thus permitted to raise and command a partisan corps, say of 600 men, more or less, 200 of which to be mounted, with one light field piece, sufficient baggage wagons, drawn by oxen and pack horses, for carrying provisions, ammunition, &c., the whole to be landed near Cape Roman, on the west side, or New River inlet, near Fort Lauderdale, on the east side, I should reasonably count on success.

On landing I should start my baggage train well protected in a direct line across the peninsula, say about fifty miles above its southern extremity; 150 men with the baggage, exclusive of teamsters, and 50 mounted men for reconnoitring and selecting the best route, together with the field piece, would constitute my moveable fort and depot; and 200 men on each side of the baggage train, moving parallel with it at about thirty miles distance, with pack horses carrying eight or ten days' provisions, (and having constant access to the train of baggage, as well for additional supplies when needed, as to unite the whole force when necessary,) would constitute my plan of movement, by which the entire effective force is constantly kept up without detachments or delays; the whole corps being constantly in the field and in rapid motion; the efficiency and probable success of which you can judge of better than myself. In this brief outline, details are purposely avoided, as useless.

I should prefer for the mounted men northern horses, for many reasons; they are accustomed to grass and very little grain; they are much cheaper, more easily kept, more hardy and durable, and more easily recruited when worn. And for the baggage train, oxen are entitled to great preference over horses; they draw more weight, move more steadily, do not balk or fret in the draught, feed on grass, require no shoes, their feet do not sink or stick in deep roads or marshes, they are not apt to chafe, they travel as far per day

as is necessary, and when halted take care of themselves and do not stray; cost less than horses by one-half; when their labor is spent they serve as food for the troops, and their place of labor is easily supplied in the enemy's country.

With regard to the arms, a portion of Yager rifles would be most relied on; and English muskets, (being more crooked in the stock, and for that reason better sighted, an object of great consideration, as Indians must be shot at upon the run with quick sight,) used with ball and buckshot, would supply the rest.

A portion of land should, perhaps, be tendered to the men upon condition that their duty be faithfully performed; and this would create a strong inducement to recruits, and also to faithful services.

With such a force, I think I might safely promise to expel the Indians from any reasonable portion of Florida that might be assigned to me. And if the whole Territory were thus simultaneously operated on, a few such corps, and a very short time, would obviously suffice to drive out or destroy its whole Indian population, and at a very small comparative expense.

In thus submitting my views and tender of services, I feel assured you will do ample justice to my zealous frankness, and give them all the consideration they merit.

I have the honor to be, with much respect, your most obedient servant,
H. L. THISTLE, *Captain.*

To the Hon. JOEL R. POINSETT,
Secretary of War.

Extract from the report of the Secretary of War to the President, dated 23th November, 1838, and printed with the message of the President to Congress of December 3, 1838, document No. 2, page 100.

“A considerable portion of the troops have been employed in Florida, under that indefatigable and zealous officer, General Taylor. Engaged in an harassing service, during the sickly season of that unhealthy climate, they have displayed a spirit of enduring courage and perseverance highly creditable to the American soldier. The theatre of this war is a country of dense forests, swamps, and morasses; the enemy active, subtle, cruel, and invisible; and the mode of warfare one of pursuit, by following the track of an unseen foe. It is, in short, a contest entirely devoid of all the incentives which usually repay the soldier for the toils, privations, and dangers to which his duty exposes him. But the Government has no alternative. The Indians must be expelled from Florida, and the army will make any sacrifice that is required to protect the inhabitants of that Territory from these ruthless savages, and to maintain, untarnished, the honor of their arms. During the past summer, profiting by the unhealthiness of the season, the Indians made several incursions into the settlements, committing the most cruel murders, and, as is usual with them, sparing neither age nor sex. They attacked the light houses, and murdered the crews of the vessels which were unfortunately driven on shore and wrecked on that dangerous coast. The necessary protection due by the Government to the commerce of the country and to the citizens of Florida demands that the utmost exertions be made to drive these merciless savages from a coun-

try which they have so cruelly afflicted. No pains will be spared to effect this object; but it does not appear that the means hitherto adopted are calculated to do so. A vigorous effort was made the last year, with a formidable force of regular troops and mounted volunteers. Every scheme was tried that a skilful and vigilant commander could devise, and that brave and active soldiers could execute. The morasses were traversed; the forests and swamps penetrated in every direction; the Indians beaten whenever they could be overtaken, and many of them forced to surrender, who were afterwards sent out of the country; but still, as soon as the sickly season set in, it was found that some of these savages had eluded the vigilance of our troops, gained their rear, and penetrated into the heart of the settlements, where their presence was first discovered by the murders they committed and the barbarous cruelties they perpetrated upon the aged and helpless. They were enabled to effect their bloody purposes only by the unsettled state of the country through which they passed. When this war first broke out, the Indians destroyed all the frontier settlements; and the inhabitants beyond them in the interior abandoned their homes, and were either received into the service or supported at the expense of Government. A valuable and fertile portion of the Territory became a wilderness, through which the Indians wandered like wild beasts seeking their prey. Had these people been compelled to remain, to picket their houses, to arm themselves, and form associations for the mutual protection of their firesides, we should have been spared the recital of Indian murders and devastations. This is what is now proposed to be done. General Taylor has been directed to invite the settlers to return to their homes; to receive them, when there, into the service; to cause them to surround their houses with stout pickets; to organize them into battalions for mutual defence, a part of them to be kept under arms, while others are employed in cultivating their farms. No doubt this arrangement will aid in protecting the country from the inroads of the savages; but the farms which will be so occupied will be too sparse to form an impenetrable barrier to the Indians; and it is respectfully recommended that a portion of land, selected by the officers of Government, should be granted to such settlers as will bind themselves to settle on it, and to cultivate and defend it under such regulations as shall be made by the Executive."

WASHINGTON, *December 19, 1838.*

DEAR SIR: I had the honor to hand to you on the 11th instant, copies of sundry letters relating to various subjects, including one to the Hon. Secretary of War, of 19th ult., on the subject of employing a partisan corps in Florida, with a brief outline of its contemplated operations, to which letter I now respectfully invite your attention, and to which I will now proceed to make some supplementary remarks, premising that, in all I shall say, no tint of censure is intended to the army or its auxiliaries, whether officers or men, whose bravery and skill in the line of their profession are not surpassed in this or in any other country. Nor do I presume to question in any degree, or in any shape, the measures of the War Department, whose chiefs enjoy, and of right, the confidence of the whole country, and for whom I entertain no other sentiments than those flowing from profound respect.

I set out the broad ground that the army proper is wholly unsuited to Indian warfare, more especially in the wilds of Florida, yet untrodden by the foot of civilized man, and where, indeed, nature itself seems almost to have forbidden his approach, by raising barriers of swamps, morasses, and deleterious exhalations, which encompass him at every step in pursuit of the subtle savage, acting on his own well known and selected ground, and in his own mode of warfare, scattered, flying, unseen, through secret and sunken paths after using the deadly rifle, while pursuit is our certain exhaustion and defeat, either through enticement to the murderous ambuscade, or equally fatal morass.

What can be expected from the best appointed army (and such we have had there more than once) under such circumstances? Unused to the woods altogether, and such a woods and its appendages few men have ever even dreamed of, and equally unused to such an enemy—an enemy trifling in number, but of such a character and in such a country as would keep at bay and certainly destroy twenty times their own number of the bravest inexperienced men on earth. Glory is the soldier's stimulant; but there is no glory there, and hence it is no field for the regular soldier. But the woodsman and hunter would find it their proper element, and their efficiency would well compensate the Government that employed them.

The history of our whole Indian wars demonstrates the fact that regular armies are not suited to such operations. It is believed that, wherever victories have been gained in such contests, they have resulted from the employment of woodsmen in the whole, or as auxiliaries; or if any exceptions can be found, they may be safely attributed to the hunter character and habits which regulars will, in course of time, acquire, after much practice and great loss. And in this view, doubtless, if the war in Florida should be continued for a series of years, our regular army employed there would ultimately acquire the hunter's skill; but the loss of time, sacrifices, and enormous cost of money and character necessary to raise the efficiency of the regular to that of the hunter, would greatly outweigh all the benefit which complete success would warrant. Besides, the object of expelling the Indians is of a temporary character, and for that reason temporary but prompt and direct means should be resorted to; since, after drilling the soldier to that kind of service, the field for its operation would no longer exist, (the Indians being expelled,) and a like difficulty would be found in re-drilling him back to his ordinary routine of duty.

Why not employ sailors in this service? They are as brave, persevering, and rapid as any class of men on earth, and yet no one has hinted at such an auxiliary. It is neither the impetuous headlong movement of the sailor, nor the characteristic slow movement of the soldier, that is required, but the wary hunter, now fleet as the deer in pursuit or retreat, and now buried in the leaves and bushes awaiting the crouching approach of the subtle enemy; or, by a *ruse*, wholly beyond the skill or contemplation of the soldier, leaves his adversary for a time prowling over the empty waste, while, with characteristic cunning, he plunges like an eagle into the most retired haunts, seizing the stores of provisions, munitions, women, and children there deposited, and by these means brings the savage warrior to his feet almost without firing a gun.

We have not understood the Indian character, nor given him due credit for his sagacious war course, which tradition and his whole experience and

intercourse have imprinted on his character as the chief object of his life. Following nature as his guide, he adopts the like decoys which she has given to the beasts and birds to lead off assailants from their cherished young; and he applies them successfully. Why is it that we hear of Indian depredations and murders in the very presence of our forts and armies? It is to amuse us with a few scouts, and divert our attention from the secret haunts where their depots are thus held so safely that the contiguous fields are cultivated without interruption or alarm, even while active war is raging in the neighborhood; and so perfectly have these stratagems and decoys succeeded that all our efforts heretofore have failed to find these depots, fields, women, and children. And, further, our armies have frequently been seduced into the acceptance as guides of ignorant and treacherous Indians and negroes sent covertly and expressly by the enemy to mislead, and although repeated disaster to our arms has been traced with certainty to that cause, it is still unfortunately resorted to.

If we find the enemy and pursue, the trail is soon lost by the scientific stratagem of the flying band of savages, who never abandons his main route but by breaking off from it right and left in small parties and alternately recruiting, he leaves a deceptive diverging trail which, followed by his pursuers, leads them to the deep morass and thus defeats them; or, by passing over it by hidden sunken wicker bridges of irregular and zigzag course, well known to him, he soon finds his pursuers struggling in the mire, the trail lost, and nothing obtained but the conviction of having pursued an *ignis fatuus*. In this dilemma, the enemy, securely covered and generally unseen, aims his deadly rifle with effect, and those are held fortunate who effect a retreat, even with the sacrifice of their wounded comrades, left to all the hopeless horrors of the tomahawk and scalping knife. Another and another expedition is sent out, and like results follow, till the heart sickens at the immolation of our brave men. Indeed, it is a forlorn hope throughout, and none but the brave could follow their predecessors through a course so marked with blood and sacrifice, in which success itself yields but an empty reward. I repeat that we have wholly mistaken the Indian character; his strength, his safety, and his policy is flight, aided by stratagem, by which means he leads his enemy as he wishes, chooses his own distance from our troops, selects his own time and place for combat, gives the deadly fire unseen, then flies with a rapidity that defies pursuit, and yet we vainly pursue until exhaustion demonstrates its futility; and then, as a reward for the toil, zeal, and sacrifices of our troops, we coolly declare that "the army has done nothing," when, in truth, it could do nothing more but die.

In the late very able report of the Secretary of War, that enlightened statesman has portrayed in glowing colours much of the difficulty yet to be overcome. (For convenient reference, as connected herewith, I enclose an extract of so much of his report as relates to this particular subject.) He lays down as *ultimata*, that the Indians must be driven off, and the lands occupied by settlers capable and willing to defend themselves.

The wisdom of these contemplated measures no person will doubt, and every citizen should feel it his duty to give them full support. In that view, I am anxious to contribute my mite, and shall be truly happy if any suggestions I may make, or any personal aid I may be able to render, shall, in any degree, tend to carry out so desirable an end. And having taken an active part in two campaigns in Florida, been long accustomed to the In-

dian habits and the hunter's life, as well as the localities of nearly so much of Florida as has been visited by civilized man, and having seen in person many of the disadvantages we have suffered, and reflected seriously on the mode, in my view, best adapted to perfect the before mentioned objects, I have come to the following conclusion on the two most essential points, viz :

1st. The manner of expelling the Indians.

2d. The manner of settling the lands in Florida.

To the first—the manner of expelling the Indians—my first object would be to dispense with the regular army, with all its embarrassing accompaniments of interior forts, garrisons, block-houses, &c., regarding them all as worse than useless there when the war has been terminated, and more especially discarding the use of guides as wholly worthless, and often extremely dangerous, from ignorance and treachery.

Assuming the whole Territory to be 300 miles in length, I should propose a division thereof into six parts of 50 miles each ; to each of said divisions to be assigned a complement of 500 to 600 volunteers, (hunters as far as may be,) headed by an experienced woodsman or hunter. These several corps in due proportions of horse and foot, each with one or two light pieces of artillery, a small baggage and ammunition train drawn by oxen, and a sufficient number of packhorses to convey (and if necessary fly with) small stocks of supplies, to take their posts allotted in said divisions respectively, say on the eastern or western shores of the peninsula, and by a simultaneous movement, directed by such General in chief as the department may designate; the whole of said corps subdivided, as far as may be safe to separate each from the other, to march in straight lines directly across the peninsula to the opposite shore, in the manner briefly laid down in the paper herewith. By such a movement the whole face of the country would be passed over in a few days, and not an Indian could escape, since all his haunts would be penetrated. The expenditure of money would be reduced to a comparative trifle, the loss of life probably nothing, the character of the nation redeemed, and the whole Territory placed in a state of perfect and perpetual security. In the mean time, and always thereafter, the Government would have the entire use of the army proper for other purposes, and the expenditures would, of course, cease altogether in a few weeks of active operations, thus relieving the Treasury and the army effectually, and promptly, and permanently.

Minute details are purposely omitted, and will probably best suggest themselves.

2d. The manner of settling the lands in Florida.

It is evidently the policy of the Government to settle these lands with brave and hardy people ; and that policy would be fully carried out by doing an act of simple justice to those brave partisan volunteer corps above referred to, viz : as a reward for their merit, and as a stimulent to their zeal, to give them a portion of the very land which their bravery may conquer, conditioned on that contingency, and to be carried into effect only when the object has been fully and faithfully completed.

A dangerous enemy thus expelled, and a population of brave men thus planted on the soil of our most exposed frontier, would give a permanent security to that portion of our country, which could not be obtained, perhaps, so effectually, so promptly, and at so trifling an expenditure of men and money in any other mode.

I repeat, that being a man of limited education, and without extraordinary pretension to skill in scientific warfare, I offer these remarks simply in my true character of woodsman and hunter, as to which I have considerable experience, and am zealously desirous that my Government shall have the benefit thereof, whatever it may be. And I submit my remarks to you with the more confidence from the conviction, of which your general character is a safe guaranty, that however humble my pretensions may be, you are fully competent to determine whether they possess any merit; and that my motives will be liberally and kindly construed.

I have the honor to be, with much respect, your most obedient servant,

H. L. THISTLE, *Captain.*

Hon. THOMAS H. BENTON,
United States Senate.