



Florida's Pocahontas:(1802-1848) Evolving Narratives of Milly Francis



Allyson Abarca; Dr. Benjamin Gunter, Idy Codington

ABSTRACT

Though Milly was born in Alabama and lived most of her life in Oklahoma she is best remembered for her actions while living in northwest Florida. Milly Francis became known as a "Florida Pocahontas," after newspapers across the United States publicized her act of mercy in rescuing a white soldier named Duncan McCrimmon from execution by her community in 1818. Later in the same year on the Wakulla she witnessed the execution of her father at the hands of Andrew Jackson – another highly-publicized event in Florida history. Analyzing the evolving vocabulary used in relation to the Francis family offers us understanding of the parallel evolving US perspectives regarding Natives.

BACKGROUND

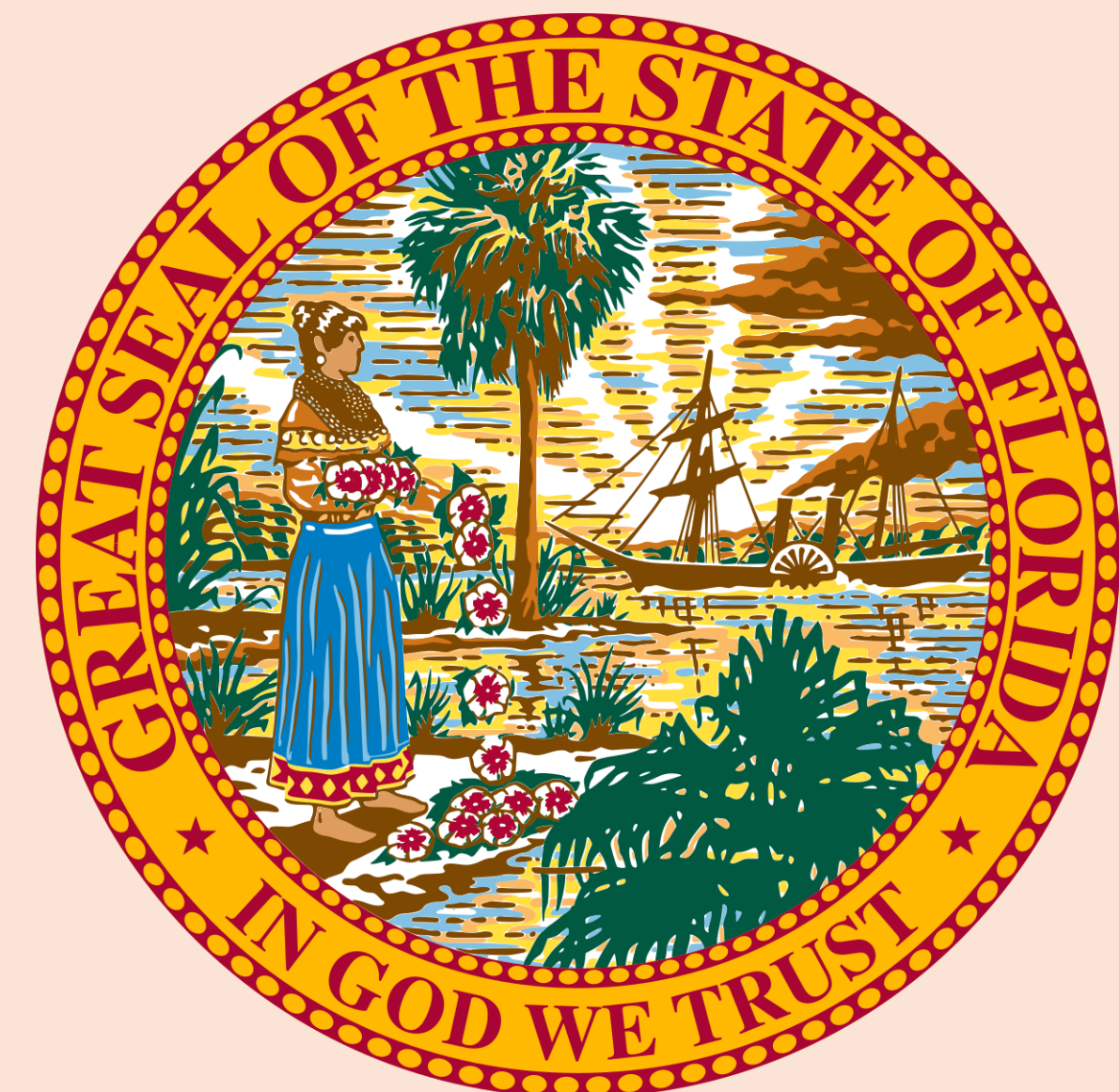
By analyzing the viral newspaper stories about Milly during her lifetime we gain greater understanding of the profound impact Milly had on 19th century US society. The awarding of the Medal of Honor following Milly's death presents a unique enigma. It stands as the first recorded instance of such an honor being granted to either a woman or a Native American by the US government. Contextualizing the lives of the Francis family in Florida just prior to US acquisition of the territory in 1819-1821 and analyzing the language used to describe these newsworthy natives provides greater insight into how mainstream US perspectives about Native Americans evolved during this transformative period in history.

CONCLUSIONS

- ❖ From 1818 to 1843, Milly's memory always excites comparison to that of Pocahontas. This comparison originated in 1818 newspaper articles on Milly.⁵ In the opening of the 1843 Congressional report recommending Milly receive a pension the comparison to Pocahontas was made explicitly.⁴
- ❖ A commonality between Pocahontas and Milly left unacknowledged is the romanticization of the women's real lives. Many have been taught fictitiously that these women married the white men they saved as children. Both women's names even have been exoticized; Pocahontas was neither the given name of Matoaka or a name she took on, Rebecca Rolfe. Some texts erroneously claim 'Milly' is an anglicized version of 'Malee' though Milly is both her given name and the name she went by for her entire life.²
- ❖ In the eyes of the US Government, Milly's actions exemplified virtuous humanity to her "uncivilized" people. This recognition by the US government underscores the significance of her actions beyond mere individual heroism, signaling a willingness to reward natives for demonstrating mercy and so-called civility.⁴
- ❖ In 1818, McCrimmon's name was printed right along Milly's as he was the first to share the story, yet his name is absent from the 1843 congressional report, not worth mentioning. What captured the attention of Congress was not the act of saving McCrimmon's life, but the narrative painted by Milly's mercy. Congressman J.C. Spencer repeats the comparison to Pocahontas, "Similar to the romantic scene in our early history, [Milly's] peculiar case demands our sympathy and admiration..."⁴
- ❖ The 1843 report compares Milly and the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette's reward for heroism – a land grant in Florida Territory – provides a precedent for rewarding Milly. This development in the narrative underscores the complex dynamics at play and connects Milly's story with Tallahassee.
- ❖ Prophet Francis, who was executed by Andrew Jackson on the Wakulla River in 1818, highlights the stark realities faced by indigenous leaders who resisted US expansion. In 1817, the first newspaper describing Josiah Francis uses the word "savage" to describe him.⁶ By the 1840's the adjectives used for Josiah no longer depicted a violent war monger. In the short decades following he is transformed to a "distinguished" figure and "melancholy celebrity" in the memory of the US.⁷ This points to a growing awareness of the injustices done to the Creek nation by the US in Florida.
- ❖ As stories of the Francis family reached Europe Milly's mercy juxtaposed to Jackson's brutality was remarked upon ironically in The Times of London, "So much for the Humanizing influence of civilization!"⁶
- ❖ Through honoring Milly, the US maintains the dignity of the nation as the 1843 congressional report argues, "[...] the Government which does not possess the power to pay its debts of gratitude, and to perform acts of beneficence and charity, would be unworthy of the respect and affections of its citizens."⁴

METHODS

This study utilized a combination of historical sources. The primary sources included newspaper articles and official 19th century government documents. Additionally, secondary sources such as scholarly articles and biographies, particularly Dale Cox's 2013 biography, were consulted to provide context/analysis.



Some believe the native woman on the Florida state seal is a representation of Milly.¹

Great Seal of the State of Florida

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Cox, Dale, and Savannah BriDninstool. *Milly Francis: The Life and Times of the Creek Pocahontas*. Old Kitchen Books, 2013.
2. Drake, Samuel G. *The Aboriginal Races of North America*. Philadelphia: C. Desilver, 1860.
3. Hitchcock, Ethan Allen, et al. *A Traveler in Indian Territory: The Journal of Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Late Major-General in the United States Army*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1996.
4. H.R. Rep. No. 274, 27th Congress, 3rd Session. (1843)
5. "A Second Pocahontas." *The Weekly Standard Newspaper*. May 6, 1843, Edition 13 Section 10.
6. "General Jackson." *The Times London*, 5 Feb. 1819.
7. "June 13, 1818 Indian War." *Niles Weekly Register*, pp. 267-268.



19th century rendering of Milly Francis in 1818, begging her father, the Prophet Francis, to spare the life of Duncan McCrimmon, a US soldier captured by Creek lookouts.

