

Dangers of the White Savior Complex: An analysis of how attempts to defend the Seminoles in the Everglades were harmful



Gracie Macia, Dr. Andrew Frank



Abstract

Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, Everglades drainage efforts caused the removal of Seminoles from their homelands. Different groups of people had varying opinions on how the Seminoles were being affected. This study focuses on those who had a "white savior" attitude towards the Seminoles and contributed to their demise while trying to do the opposite. For this project, the words and actions of May Mann Jennings, Minnie Moore-Willson, and Episcopalian missionaries are analyzed. To do this, data on what these groups of people said, believed, and fought for was collected and ordered causally to get a view of how efforts to help the Seminoles truly affected them. Consistently, it was revealed that the help imposed upon the Seminoles was largely unwanted and unwarranted. Had the Seminoles been consulted about whether they wanted help or what they thought was best, a better outcome that was more in line with their desires could have resulted. It is important to give attention to this area of history, as it is not largely talked about when discussing the Everglades National Park, nor are the effects of these key players who believed they were doing what was best for the Seminoles. This opens a new conversation about what "help" truly is when it is imposed on a group of individuals who live differently from the source of aid. More research can be done on how aid has affected the Florida Seminoles, and this idea can be studied in many other fields as well.

Background

Since as early as the 1800s, the Everglades have been under the attack of drainage efforts by different groups of developers and politicians. Consumer culture and manifest destiny in the 1900s contributed to a culture of seizing Everglades land for economic gain at the cost of the Seminole people living there. During this era of uncertainty regarding land use and ownership, there were groups of people who simply did not care how it affected the Seminoles. Although this can seem like a one-dimensional evil, there is a less-revealed issue that arises from those who do care to see the Seminoles. Caring about the effects of change on communities is important, but it is just as important to consider how to go about helping a group of individuals who are different than you. Throughout the drainage issues, as well as decisions regarding the creation of the Everglades National Park, themes of the white savior complex can be found in activists and politicians of the time, making their own unnecessary marks on the Seminoles. Large players at the time include Minnie Moore-Willson, May Mann Jennings, and Episcopalian missionaries in South Florida. Analyzing each of these people individually as well as cohesively allows for an account of how white people consistently throughout history impose their help onto other groups, however they see fit, which can be destructive even if intentions were good.

Methods

The methodology used for this project was a Qualitative Causal Analysis of the actions taken or statements made by Minnie Moore-Willson, May Mann Jennings, and Episcopalian missionaries, and how they affected the Seminoles.

Minnie Moore-Willson

- Connected the Seminole culture to their relationship with the Everglades. The Everglades were the natural home of the Seminoles, and only they could understand and live in it. → The Seminoles were actually new to the Everglades. Moore-Willson is mistaken in her understanding of their history.
- Connected the plight of Seminoles to the fate of migratory birds due to hunting. Claimed that before white settlement, Seminoles lived in harmony with the birds. → The Seminoles were a part of the plume trade and did hunt birds. They were introduced to the market through white traders and willingly participated in it.
- Claimed that Seminoles were of a superior stock than Western Indigenous people because they were descendants of Aztecs and Ancient Egyptians. → Insulting towards Western Indigenous people while trying to make the Seminoles look better. It is not ethical to slander others in the pursuit of proving a point.

May Mann Jennings

- Wanted Seminoles to assimilate into American society because they needed the help of "enlightened" people. → The Seminoles rejected "civilization" and were happy in their traditional ways.
- Wanted Seminoles to receive drained lands to farm on and receive a vocational education consistent with American culture and religion. → The Seminoles resisted American education and wanted to teach their kids traditionally.

Missionaries

- Hoped to bring the Seminoles to civilization, "domesticate" them, and protect them from extinction. Mission in Fort Myers for housing, hoping the Seminoles would settle there. → Seminoles opposed efforts to learn English or Christianity, and did not ask for the help of the Missionaries.



Seminole women eating on the ground, The Everglades, 1910



Cleaning Turkey, The Everglades, 1910



Three Seminole boys in canoe, The Everglades, 1910



Seminole man, woman, and child standing next to drying buckskin, The Everglades, 1910



Shooting bow and arrow in canoe, The Everglades, 1910

Conclusion and Future Directions

The methods display various instances of how people would take action as they saw fit, even if it did not align with the wishes of the Seminoles. The purpose of this study is not to condemn those who tried to help the Seminoles, but to provide a different perspective on the effects of this type of aid. The Seminoles consistently had decisions being made for them, which resulted in the diminishing of their culture and the removal from their homeland. Overall, there are instances in which unwarranted assistance to a group of people that did not ask for it may do more harm than good, even if the intentions were good. Future research could go in the direction of other minorities that have also felt the negative effects of imposed aid, as well as further research on how other types of help to the Seminoles affected them in other ways.



Jack Tigertail washing, The Everglades, 1910

References

