

# SILVER WORK OF THE FLORIDA SEMINOLE

by  
John M. Goggin

Originally published in  
El Palacio  
vol. 47, no. 2 Feb. 1940

FLORIDA  
COLLECTION

OSCEOLA COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY  
HELEN WILSONY DONOR  
POST OFFICE BOX 7139  
SEMINOLE, FLORIDA 32077

SEMINOLE

## SILVER WORK OF THE FLORIDA SEMINOLE

*By* JOHN M. GOGGIN

THE FLORIDA Seminole Indians, numbering about 500 individuals, are a small remnant of a once powerful Southeastern tribe.<sup>1</sup> These people moved into the Everglades and the Big Cypress Swamp regions of southern Florida after the last Seminole war of the 1830's. They now constitute two bands; the northern one speaks Hitchiti or "Creek," and the southern one speaks Micosuki. The two groups seem to have approximately the same material and social culture with only linguistic differences. At the present time they have a craft of silversmithing, with which this paper will deal.

In prehistoric times the Indians of the Southeast worked copper to some extent, making ornaments and ceremonial objects from the native metal. Silver, however, was found in the native state very rarely and its use then was negligible. The first silver ornaments were brought in by European traders, particularly by the English. A small amount of silver probably came from Spanish sources, as Bartram mentions silver crosses worn by the Cuscowilla Seminoles, which came from the Spaniards.<sup>2</sup> John Adair,

1. This paper is the result of field, library, and museum work done sporadically between 1935-39. Informants have been Frank Tommie of the Hitchiti group and several individuals of the Micosuki group. Grateful acknowledgment for assistance is made to Miss Mary McGunagle, Miss Jeanette Rogers, Mrs. Dorothy Field Morgan, and Mrs. Lyda Taylor.

2. Bartram, 184.

one of the traders of the early 18th century, mentions silver ornaments several times and he says that once in return for a favor some of the Southeastern Indians did for him, "I did myself the honor to fit them out with silver arm-plates, wrist plates, gorgets, earbobs, etc ..."<sup>3</sup> On another occasion he speaks of "... silver ornaments, their nose, finger and ear rings; their breast, arm and wrist plates."<sup>4</sup> It was sometime during this trading period that the Indians learned to make their own silver ornaments,<sup>5</sup> but it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that they did so to any great extent.<sup>6</sup>

In the eastern United States silver working was long practiced by a large number of tribes. In the north the Iroquois are noted for their craftsmanship and it has been shown that they learned their silver working from the Scotch immigrants.<sup>7</sup> In Wisconsin the Menominee learned the art second hand. "The art of silversmithing was introduced from the Atlantic seaboard. This art had been acquired by them from some early European colonists."<sup>8</sup> The Choctaw, a Southeastern tribe, also did their own silver working, having learned to first work brass.<sup>9</sup> A

---

3. Williams, 355.

4. *Ibid.*, 481.

5. A native made silver ornament dating from early historic times has been found in a mound on the Florida east coast (Moore, 45).

6. Other types of silver ornaments from this period are described by Bartam: "... the lank behind is ornamented with pendant silver quills, and then joined or articulated silver plates; and usually the middle fascicle of hair, being by far the longest, is wrapped in a large quill of silver, or the joint of a small reed, curiously sculptured and painted, the hair continuing through, terminated in a tail or tassel ...." 491.

Silver bells were also used on the leggings and on the edges of mantles and a silver collar was worn around the neck. 502.

7. Parker.

8. Densmore, 9.

9. The making of ornaments out of trade brass or copper was practiced over large parts of North America before silver was available in sufficient quantities to work.