

Adam Wasserman

A People's  
History of Florida  
1513-1876

How Africans, Seminoles,  
Women, and Lower Class Whites  
Shaped the Sunshine State

4<sup>th</sup> Edition

Revised Edition, March 2010

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: May 2009

ISBN-13 978-1-4421670-9-4

Special Dedication: For my love Tamara McCoy, I couldn't have garnered the motivation for this project without your everyday love, encouragement, and support. For my family members and friends who all contributed and provided inspiration in their own unique ways.

Acknowledgements: Howard Zinn and various other People's History authors who continue to challenge traditional historical narratives. Marcos Solis, my cover designer, for his great work in making this project happen. Much appreciation for the inspiration provided by J.R. Bird's fantastic website *Rebellion: John Horse and the Black Seminoles, the First Black Rebels to Beat American Slavery*. For every reader and editor who has given me some form of feedback and contributed to this project.

Adam Wasserman is a native resident of Sarasota, Florida. Inspired by the People's History series and other critical historical texts, he has determined to base his writing career on revisionist history, social change, and global issues afflicting the world today. After reading numerous People's History renditions and relentlessly studying the primary source narratives of people marginalized by traditional history books, Adam decided to derive a comprehensive, revisionist history of where he was born and raised.

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## Introduction

The mainstream history taught in school curriculums, relayed in the media and in politics, is not objective in the sense that it has no social agenda. Indeed, as mainstream history is increasingly challenged on all sides from critical historians, political activists, students, and everyday people, history itself is becoming a battleground for social conflict. As Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* grows in popularity and new, critical viewpoints of history become more prevalent, it's only logical that the more orthodox, sanitized, and patriotic vision of history is being pushed harder in the classrooms, the media, and politics. In recent years, particularly since the 1960's and 70's, history has taken a turn from the past "great men" theory of history that only credited governments and leaders to covering a wider range of people and differing experiences. History is no longer the monopoly of the upper-crust, a mere one to five percent of the population, but the contribution of the population as a whole and their differing experiences, perspectives, and struggles. Common people had to fight tooth-and-nail to shift the lens of history from the top to the bottom. But others interested in ensuring that mainstream history simply relays the official viewpoint are seeing to it that these gains are reversed. Seeking to turn back US history to a "national history," the class, race, and gender conflicts that have shaped US history are now being marginalized for the viewpoints and actions of leaders and governments.

As Florida teeters on the brink of a failed state, it's not surprising that creative outlook, alternative perspectives, or any sort of analysis outside of the orthodox framework are being forced out and excluded from classrooms. The Florida state legislature is at the forefront in protecting the rigid foundations of public education. With a diminishing budget, overcrowded classrooms, teacher layoffs, and crumbling infrastructure, the Florida legislature has taken measures to institute a more rigid, rudimentary education system, ensuring that education reciprocates class relations in an ever more unequal system. In 2006, Governor Jeb Bush approved a law barring critical history in Florida public schools. "American history shall be viewed as factual, not constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable," declares the Education Omnibus Bill. Neither Bush nor the Florida legislature has probably ever sat and pondered whether the official, "factual" viewpoint they are imposing was itself "constructed." The bill continues: "[American history] shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence." **1**

*A People's History of Florida* does not teach the “history, meaning, significance and effect of the provisions of the Constitution of the United States and the amendments thereto,” as according to the provisions of the Education Omnibus Bill. It does not emphasize “flag education, including proper flag display and flag salute” or “the nature and importance of free enterprise to the United States economy.” The “importance of free enterprise” in US history would surely not be emphasized in schools or the media if we were to shift the perspective from the JP Morgans, Carnegies, and the Rockefellers (or, in Florida’s case, Rockefeller associate and railroad magnate Henry Flagler) to the railroad and steel workers who lost their limbs in heavy machinery with no compensation, worked and died in diseased conditions, were killed and sometimes massacred by police, militia, and hired thugs, denied the right to organize a union, paid starvation wages, forced to work additional unpaid hours on top of their average work day of ten to twelve hours, etc. – all to build the wealth of a handful of capitalists. We never hear about the importance of free enterprise in US history in this aspect. This book instead encourages readers to think about the people who stood on the opposite side of America’s dominant institutions - capitalism, imperial expansion, white supremacy, and patriarchy - about how these institutions were expanded or limited by struggle. While masquerading itself as non-ideological, the very assumptions underlying these fundamental institutions are subtly ingrained in mainstream US history. By excluding the struggles, perspectives, and experiences of those who have stood on the receiving end of these institutions, traditional US history has made itself the ideology of the “victors.” This top-down viewpoint shows how elites have shaped history with their acts, wars, policies, and beliefs, but gives little time to the various ways that the majority of people reacted, whether through protest, petition, revolt, defiance, or quiet resentment. Continuing the “great men” theory, military generals, Presidents, politicians, and wealthy elites are seen to be the only ones who have shaped history, ignoring the popular undercurrents that contribute highly to significant social and economic change and the systems that marginalize large portions of the population.

Thus we turn to the bottom when we look at the foundations of this nation. The foundations of the US were not the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, as says the Education Omnibus Bill, but the ethnic cleansing, dispossession, and extermination of its native inhabitants, the enslavement and exploitation of Africans, the destitute conditions of millions of working class white men, and the general oppression of women across racial and class lines. Their labor, conflicts, struggles, experiences, and pains define US history for the vast majority of people. At its very fundamental core, the history of the US has been not been one national community, but of conflict across class,

race, and gender lines. There is no such as a unified nation-state, and therefore it's impossible to cover the entire range of any national history from a general perspective. Varying experiences of upper and lower class, of white and black, of men and women, of oppressor and oppressed, need to be considered. The US itself was formed out of the drive to establish the white man's domain. The conflict and resistance that arose to challenge wealthy white male hegemony is what truly shaped the creation of the United States over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As will be elaborated in chapters 3 and 4, the very formation of US boundaries, particularly in Florida, were based on blatant disregard for international and constitutional law, the dispossession and suppression of indigenous people, and the expansion of slavery. Efforts of common people to resist this encroachment on their liberty were what defined the outcome.

So who were the real freedom fighters? Was it the American patriots intending to expand slavery and destroy native tribes after they defeated the British? Or was it the black Seminoles of Florida who determinately resisted US military attempts to enslave them for over thirty years? The blacks and Seminoles were the very antithesis to the Constitution. In the marshy swamps of Florida resided a large nation of disaffected natives and fugitive slaves, unified in their common interest and enemy, sympathetic to one another's cause, and ready to resort to militant action if aggressed upon. This was the American nightmare. The United States, founded upon a Constitution that excluded African slaves, natives, women, and propertyless whites, saw the natural byproduct of its institutions organically form at its Achilles heel – the Spanish Florida border. US policy from the start was slavery expansion and white hegemony over the land from “sea to shining sea.” Both were impossible in Florida, a territory greatly desired to complete the US acquisition of the Southeast. The US used false treaties, covert operations, invasions, massacres, and a list of “unsavory” methods to make Florida safe for slavery and white landowners.

What is the importance of Florida state history? As goes Florida, so goes the nation. Florida is an extreme microcosm of national history. The struggles over slavery and “Indian Removal,” the two defining institutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century US, came to their climax in Florida. Consequently, Florida also developed a legacy of native and black militancy unparalleled by any other region of the country. It should be understood that the Emancipation Proclamation was founded upon the tactics that military commanders used in the Second Seminole War. As the black Seminoles were the most powerful warriors, most uncompromising and avid militants, and most skillful politicians and diplomats in the Seminole Nation, they were the greatest obstacle to removing the Seminoles from Florida. Although the Second Seminole War was largely intended for

their enslavement, commanding General Thomas Jesup decided that he had to make some concessions if Seminole removal was to be consummated. In order to divide the resistance, weaken the Seminoles, and induce the tribe to move out west, he officially declared freedom for all blacks in the tribe if they agreed to emigrate. The same logic, weakening the Confederacy, was used in the theoretical formation of the Emancipation Proclamation during the Civil War, citing Jesup's act as the primary precedent. This is how the popular struggles and liberation movements that take place in a region like Florida may have ramifications on a national basis, making it important to understand and learn local people's history, and its greater impact. We can also see how black militancy shapes black liberation, not government legislation.

Discussed extensively from chapter 3 to chapter 7, the US made numerous treaties, ordered three covert invasions, and fought three wars over a span of forty years - one that was drawn out for seven years, costed \$40 million, and resulted in 1,500 soldier deaths - in order to destroy black Seminole autonomy and freedom in the state of Florida. But the stories of the Seminole wars, Seminole and black solidarity, and the US obsession with enslaving the black Seminoles of Florida, are all excluded from orthodox history class curriculums. The Seminole wars teach us that guerilla war parties backed by the general population and defending their home territory can defeat a technologically and numerically superior US military, a particularly important lesson considering our contemporary wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Seminole and black solidarity that characterizes Florida history is a lesson for young people of color that infighting between themselves takes off focus from their common oppressor and the shared interest they have in unifying. That the US foreign policy agenda in the Florida territory was for seizing fugitive slaves, enslaving the black Seminoles, and destroying the Seminole slave refuge that compromised the stability of Southern slavery is a lesson for those who are convinced of America's foreign and domestic benevolence - the doctrine of American exceptionalism. That the black Seminoles successfully received their freedom after a long period of struggle and militant resistance is a lesson for those who give primacy to Civil Rights non-violent struggle. That their regional movement had a significant impact on the national movement for black liberation shows how grassroots, local-level organizing contributes and culminates into wider social movements.

Chapter 1 dissembles several myths of the European conquest of the Americas. Very little in the history of the European conquest of Floridian natives can substantiate the false extremities that natives were either passive sheep or barbaric heathens. The myth of quiet passivity as natives were decimated by their overwhelmingly powerful conquerors is easily disproved by the successful guerilla warfare carried out by Floridian

natives against Juan Ponce de Leon, Panfilo de Narvaez, Hernando De Soto, and other would-be conquistadores who unsuccessfully attempted to invade Florida. But the reception that Floridian natives gave to their French allies compared to the domineering Spanish under Pedro Menendez reveals that this native resistance was not simply “barbarity” either. Floridian natives, as natives elsewhere, actively or subtly fought against those Europeans who attempted to encroach on their existing social, political, and religious systems. When the Spanish believed that they had successfully conquered Floridian natives through military might and missionary activity, they then faced constant revolt from various native provinces against the exploitation of Spanish officials, settlers, and friars. It was neither disease nor missionary work that spelled out the conquest of Floridian natives, but the use of military force to repress constant uprisings against the repressive Spanish colonial system. The various native uprisings that destroyed the Spanish military outposts throughout Florida from 1566-1571, the constant Gule uprisings from 1573 until the major revolt of 1597-1601, the Ais revolt of 1597, the Apalachee revolt of 1647, the Timucua revolt of 1656, the inability of the Spanish to conquer or convert the powerful Calusa of southern Florida for the entire duration of Spanish colonial rule in Florida, all reveal that native deference for Spanish rule was completely absent. But Spanish repression, constant pandemic outbreaks, and the exploitative *repartimiento* system all contributed to making Floridian natives vulnerable to outside invasion by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The geopolitical conflict between Spain and Britain resulted in the absolute destruction and genocide of Floridian natives in the first few decades of the 1700’s, when the British and their Creek allies weakened Spanish rule by decimating their native subjects.

But while the colonial conflict between Spanish Florida and the British Carolinas spelled out ethnic cleansing and destruction for Floridian natives, chapter 2 discusses the Africans who exploited the Spanish offer of liberty and refuge for Carolinian slaves, as well as the far less rigid system of slavery in Spanish Florida, to break for freedom. The complexities of Spanish colonialism meant tyranny and death for natives on the one hand and liberty for African slaves on the other. Spanish Florida proved a formidable threat to the stability of slavery in the British Carolinas. The sole beacon of freedom for African slaves in the colonial American south, St. Augustine became the destination for every individual or group of slaves absconding from the Carolinian rice plantations. Surviving natives allied with the Spanish united with free blacks and rebellious slaves in making incursions onto the Carolinian frontier and decimating large slave-based plantations. The Stono Revolt and other lesser-known slave uprisings in the Carolinas were intent on making their way to St. Augustine. Defected slaves at St. Augustine eventually built and

settled into a military outpost known as Fort Mose, famous for being the free black settlement in North American history. The free blacks formed into autonomous militias with natives and fought their former owners, proving integral to the maintenance of Spanish rule. When Spain ceded Florida to Britain in 1763, many of the free blacks left to Havana with the Spanish while others incorporated into native settlements, foreshadowing the Seminole Nation as the new beacon of freedom in the Florida territory.

Further discussed in chapter 2, the first notable instance of white class conflict in Florida occurred during the British occupation of the territory (1763-1783). Under British rule, an unprecedented number of white indentured servants were transported to build several plantation colonies - experiments with the potential profitability of white labor over African slave labor. But the indentured system began to closely resemble chattel slavery, the workers held in a miserable state of bondage verging on starvation, dying out from diseases, abused by overseers, formed into work gangs and worked to death in the fields, and their contracts extended indefinitely. But in several mass insurrections, white servants managed to attain their freedom and consequently undermine the ruthlessly exploitative indentured system in British East Florida. The revolt of white servants in the colony was well in-sync with workers throughout the American colonies who were rising up against British landowners prior to the American Revolution – the common people whose involvement and acts in the revolution are normally marginalized for battle details and the political contributions of leaders. It was feared that the revolutionary spirit of the American colonies would spread to Florida if the servant revolt wasn't appropriately dealt with by the colonial judicial system. Additionally, it was feared that the white servants would join up with Georgian patriots and aid them in invading the colony. Granting them liberty ensured the survival of British rule in the Florida colony, an important safe-haven for Loyalist refugees, until the end of the war with America. More importantly, the Florida indentured servant uprisings established a foundation of common whites resisting their superiors for years to follow.

In later years, discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4, British agents returned to the Spanish-owned territory seeking to assume control and use it as a base of operations in war against the United States. While interested in turning Spanish Florida into a British protectorate during the War of 1812, some of them also identified with the cause of people of color. Many of them held abolitionist sentiments and supported the Seminoles, black maroons, Miccosukees, and Creeks in their struggle against white land invaders and slavers. William Bowles had lived with the Seminoles and blacks for some years, forged alliances, and knew that they underwent a constant threat of displacement and

enslavement, sympathizing with their plight. In 1803, he formed the Muskogee State in West Florida, assembling hundreds of natives, maroons, and runaway slaves to seize Spanish Florida. This was one of the first major events of Seminoles and blacks challenging US power. British official Col. Edward Nichols sincerely protested the raids of white settlers on his Seminole, Red Stick Creek, and black allies, assembling an army of natives and blacks in the infamous “Negro Fort.” George Woodbine assisted Nichols and located some the blacks from the “Negro Fort” to Tampa Bay where they would be relatively safe from slave raids. Nichols and Woodbine both provided the blacks at the Appalachicola Fort with the necessary weapons and munitions to resist the US government. Woodbine commissioned Alexander Arbuthnot and Robert Ambrister to ensure their safety. During the First Seminole War, both men assisted the Seminoles and blacks with weapons and information. Arbuthnot had forewarned the black settlement at the Suwannee of the impending invasion of US military forces, giving the blacks enough time to move their families to safety and prepare to defend themselves. And while the British agents varied in their level of true sentiment towards their black and Seminole allies, they did prove to be valuable allies against the encroaching US. Their operations in Florida provide an important lesson on how white-black unity can often vary from strategic interest to mutual affinity.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss how the manufactured uprisings and covert operations in Florida during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century would lay the foundations for US foreign policy to declare on its own terms when it could tread on the sovereignty of nations and peoples. The United States had little regard for the sovereignty of Spain over Florida and even less so for the sovereignty of the blacks and Seminoles over the vast amount of territory they had cultivated, formed, and resided on for several generations. Indeed, the 1812 Patriots War in East Florida, a covert invasion of Florida authorized by Congress and by President James Madison, was characterized by its motivation to eliminate black and Seminole towns, seize the blacks, and divvy up their lands, than it was to simply overthrow Spanish rule in Florida. The illegal covert operations into East and West Florida set the precedent for later operations to acquire the Texas and California territories from Mexico. The acquisition of Florida was largely desired to expand chattel slavery as it existed in the rest of the South, make it safe for other slave states suffering from a loss of fugitive slaves into Seminole territory, and return fugitive slaves to their owners. Establishing slaveholder hegemony in the South was a main foreign policy objective of the US government in the nineteenth century and Florida stood in the way as a significant obstacle.

The Patriots War and Andrew Jackson's later overt invasion of the Florida territory were at least similar in their underlying motives if not anything else. The mass slaughter at the "Negro Fort" was the most blatant and devastating assault out of the three. The several US interventions into Spanish Florida were successful at breaking the back of black autonomy in the state, clearing the way for the safe expansion of slavery, and protecting institutional slavery throughout the South. Official timelines attempt to justify the war by making the Seminoles the aggressors and giving priority to Seminole and black counterattacks in order to make Jackson's invasion appear defensive. But the prior US aggressions, encroachments, and atrocities committed on the Seminoles and blacks prove otherwise, calling into question the notion of American exceptionalism. Shortly after the US acquired Florida, Jackson's successful elimination of the black maroon community of Angola, located in modern-day Sarasota-Bradenton, served to break up the last significant rallying point for runaway slaves from other Southern states. Imperialism played a significant part in shaping the history and social relations of Florida as did the half-a-century long resistance of black maroons and Seminoles.

For the most part, common whites in Antebellum Florida were content with their subordinate class status, supported slavery, and forged an alliance with their white "superiors," the Southern aristocracy. Yet at times, discussed in chapter 8, poor whites fraternized with slaves, purchased stolen goods from slaves, assisted slaves in running away, and even plotted insurrections together, proving that there was potential for a slave-poor white alliance. The common myth of white unity in the Antebellum South across class divisions was contradicted in the banking crisis of 1837. Amidst the Second Seminole War, the Florida territorial banks externalized the \$4,000,000 debt of the aristocracy onto the general population. Public outrage ensued. The "faith bonds" issued out by the Union Bank of Middle Florida ensured that planters had no limitation in increasing their capital, using imaginary slaves and lands as collateral if they defaulted on their payments. When cotton prices plummeted from overproduction, they did just that. Common white Floridians were expected to pay for expanding the capital assets of a privileged few. In response, poor white yeomen reverted to grassroots politics, organizing in mass public meetings and channeling their disaffection into the voting polls in Florida's first real election. As white countrymen for the first time rallied around the ideas of Republican democracy and white male equality, they successfully asserted their rights and undermined the power of the slaveholding oligarchy. Florida's white countrymen adopted the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy in opposition to corporate monopoly and aristocratic rule. Grassroots organizing on the local level snowballed into a statewide movement to topple the power of the dominant planter class. For the first time



in Antebellum Florida, the majority abandoned the idea of white unity and sought to challenge their “social betters.” Nevertheless, poor whites were unable to culminate their rebellion into a significant, long-lasting revolution that would overturn the structured class hierarchy in Florida.

Floridian slaves were not merely passive victims of their owner’s brutality, discussed in chapter 9, but openly and subtly resisted their bondage in various ways. Besides the mass revolt at the St. John’s River at the beginning of the Second Seminole War and other smaller uprisings, slaves ran away individually and in groups to the swamps, to Seminole territory, to the Bahamas, to the North, wherever freedom was available. At times, free blacks and abolitionists aided them in escaping. During the St. John’s revolt, free blacks and urban slaves aided them in insurrection. Many would run away to Seminole territory only temporarily, such as Luis Pacheco and Sampson Forrester, while others would run away to the swamps for the time-being before turning themselves back over out of necessity. Others individually murdered their masters and overseers, committed acts of arson, hung out in the swamps to make depredations on the plantations, and made concerted efforts to destroy slavery. Those who did not openly resist their bondage resisted in a variety of ways, including disobeying orders, slowing down work, cutting off their own limbs, feigning illness, stealing, ignoring slave codes, holding secret religious services, learning to read and write, forging passes, fighting patrollers, etc. Even those house slaves who displayed exemplary behavior held a quiet resentment against their bondage. Free blacks, such as Sandy Cornish, sought out their economic and social independence from whites. As the vast majority of free blacks were a relic from Spanish colonial rule, they felt the squeeze on their precarious liberty tightening with the increasingly rigid racial codes of Antebellum Florida.

When the Civil War broke out after Florida’s secession, discussed in chapter 10, poor whites gave up inner-white conflict and rallied to fight for the “Confederate cause,” unaware that it was merely to protect the slave property of the ruling oligarchy. But it eventually became generally understood that the war was a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight” as the poor were conscripted to fight while wealthy planters purchased substitutes for the draft and remained at home. As the soldiers’ families suffered bitter starvation and ruthless oppression from the Confederate government, and they themselves became bitterly destitute in the army camps, mass army desertion and conscript evasion began to severely drain the manpower of Confederate regiments. Poor white Floridians resided on the isolated frontier and held more allegiance to their families and households than to state authority or patriotic ideals and slogans. Companies of regulators, guerillas, and conscript officers attempted to hunt down poor white draft-

dodgers for military service, inflicting atrocities on their families, destroying their homes, and driving them into the swamps. To protect themselves and their families, poor white deserters and draft-dodgers organized into decentralized, armed bands with runaway slaves and fought the Confederate Florida government from within as a home-grown insurgency. After forty years of persistent violence on the Antebellum Florida frontier, bands of runaway slaves and poor white deserters replaced the Seminoles and black Seminoles as the new threat to the planter aristocracy. The Civil War resulted in the collapse of white unity across class lines.

Discussed in chapter 11, the Civil War was also characterized by a mass defection of slaves, also known as “contrabands,” who entered the “white man’s war” on their own terms and liberated themselves on their own initiative prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation could be said to have been an immediate reaction to the vast numbers of runaway slaves filling up the Federal camps, hiding out in the swamps, roaming the backwoods country, and fighting the Confederates. But it also organically formed from past experiences - most importantly, General Thomas Jesup’s declaration of freedom for the black Seminoles during the Second Seminole War. And once again, black militancy forced the white state to make concessions. Before the proclamation, thousands of slaves in the St. John’s River plantations in East Florida made a break for freedom to the Union occupation forces in April and September/October 1862, providing intelligence on Confederate movements, guiding Union gunboats, plotting uprisings, planting crops, and forming into regiments. This was the sequel to the massive St. John’s River slave revolt at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War. If the “contraband” defection spread to the general slave population in the South, the results could have been potentially disastrous for both sides of the war. A South overrun by rebellious slaves would have compromised white supremacy everywhere, proving as much of a threat to Northern capitalism as to the Southern aristocracy. Additionally, North business elites wanted to spread industrial capitalism into the South following the war, accessing its cheap raw materials and labor.

Rather than allow the slave disaffection to get out of hand, the Union decided to utilize the contraband rebels for its own ends, directing and controlling them to undermine the Southern rebellion. A tacit alliance was forged between Northern whites and black slaves to cooperatively undermine the Confederacy for their mutual benefit. But in mainstream history, emancipation is seen as having been imposed from above. Supposedly, Northern Republicans and abolitionists, driven by anti-slavery sentiment, benignly granted freedom for the South’s slave population. Yet *A People’s of Florida* gives credit to Floridian slaves who had taken direct action for their own liberation while

the Union still remained ambiguous on the question of emancipation. The Union had three objectives for the South's slave population in the war: 1) Prevent insurrection 2) Utilize their defection for the benefit of the war effort 3) Drain the slave population that the Confederacy strongly relied on for its rebellion. Practicality for the war effort was not the only reason for slave emancipation. Northern officials used the same pragmatism that military officials applied in the Second Seminole War, acknowledging the freedom of the black Seminoles as both means to divide the black and Seminole resistance and prevent further slave insurrection.

Chapters 12 and 13 retells the history of Reconstruction through the lens of class conflict, the struggle for ex-slaves to consummate their liberation through economic, social, political, and religious independence against their former masters and Northern capitalists who desired to establish a forced labor system in the South. Historians have long deconstructed the Southern mythologies about Reconstruction: that Reconstruction governments plundered the public treasuries of Southern states; that the ex-slaves mismanaged and abused their political seats for personal gain; that the ex-slaves were indolent and preferred to wander about living easily off of the white man's tax money than work; that Union officials and soldiers incited the ex-slaves to rebel against their former masters; that Southern whites were willing to accept black liberty. But mainstream history has also emphasized the benevolence of Reconstruction governments, their efforts for social progress and to establish racial equality in the South. Thus they tend to ignore the various ways that white moderate Republicans and Northern officials worked hand in hand with Southern oligarchs in maintaining white supremacy and undermining black political power.

To the contrary, *A People's History of Florida* emphasizes that black advances in education, religious independence, political organization, and economic independence were largely the result of direct action applied by organized and individual blacks, not the charity and sympathy of Northern whites. Black subordination was a universal sentiment held by Southern oligarchs as well as Northern ex-abolitionists, capitalists, military officials, and Republicans. White control, with a more benign face, was to be the underlying assumption of social relations in Reconstruction Florida. The forty acres of land promised for each black family at the end of the Civil War was denied in order to maintain white land monopoly in the South, meaning that blacks were now forced to become an impoverished, subordinate wage laboring class for propertied whites. Before they could test out their new state of emancipation, black laborers were forced to sign exploitative labor contracts, overseen by the Freedmen's Bureau, which once again gave Southern planters direct control over their black labor force. Refusal to sign under these

slavery-like contracts resulted in imprisonment for vagrancy and being sold out for a year's term of service - the precedent to the Southern "black codes" formed in 1866. Ex-slaves, denied their rightful share of their ex-master's land, found themselves trapped under a brutal system of debt peonage.

In response to black rebellion against the black codes and the new forced labor system, the Federal military occupied the South, reorganized the governments, gave blacks the franchise, and overturned the repressive black codes. But moderate Republicans, with the approval and support of Southern elites, assumed control of the Reconstruction government in Florida through fraudulent maneuvers against the black, working class-supported "radical" Republicans and formed a constitution that denied full representation to ex-slaves, undermining the strength of the black franchise. Nevertheless, black grassroots activism continued to push for laws regulating contracts and the workplace, enlarging the franchise, funding education, opening up lands for homesteads, etc.

Fearing the growth of black political strength, the Southern oligarchy formed the Ku Klux Klan as the paramilitary arm of the Southern white Democratic Party, targeting both black and white Republican activists, politicians, homesteaders, unruly workers, voters, etc. Reestablishing white planter dominance through terror was the Klan platform. The result of the Klan's terror campaign was the significant reduction of the black franchise and thus the base of Florida's Republican Party. From the end of the terror campaign in 1872 to the end of Reconstruction in 1876, the Republican and Democratic parties in Florida grew silently cooperative with one another and efforts for racial equality were discarded for laws encouraging Northern capitalist investment in the state. Northern capitalists and wealthy Southern planters found that a political alliance was in their mutual interest to create a desirable political and economic atmosphere for wealthy white investors. In another campaign of coercion in the 1876 election, the national Republican Party, run by Northern business elites, cooperatively ended Reconstruction with Southern Democrats. Collaboration between the two political parties, both run in the interests of white elites, signaled to black grassroots leaders and voters that the two-party system was not only ineffective but an obstacle in the way of black liberation.

With the expansion of Northern industrial capitalism in Florida following Reconstruction, both black and white laborers would begin to take direct, organized action to improve their political and economic conditions. The Independent and later Populist parties attracted both the black and white poor, united against the elite-run two-party system. Sporadic revolts followed the development of a notoriously exploitative debt peonage system in the state. A radical class of Cubans, Afro-Cubans, and Italian

workers in Key West and Tampa Bay introduced anarchism and socialism to the shop floors of cigar factories, shaking capitalist rule with general strikes and industrial unionization. Black organizations and unions used a variety of methods to challenge the loss of black suffrage and the growing strength of white supremacy in the state. After the turbulent Reconstruction era, common Floridians were only beginning to challenge the white capitalist elite who ran the state. For the first time in a compiled text, their struggles and the rich legacy of popular liberation movements in the Sunshine State can be fully appreciated.

# Chapter 1

## Spanish Colonialism and Indigenous Uprisings (1513-1704)

### The Spanish *Entrada*

Florida history, like most history, is made up of both untold and mistold stories. The first being that of Juan Ponce De Leon, a young conquistador looking to expand his wealth, fame, and glory in two failed expeditions to Florida. Ponce De Leon was reputedly at age 39 on his first voyage not in his 50's, contrary to the historical image that he was an old man searching to renew his youth. Many have continued to suggest he was born in 1461 rather than 1474, one myth of many that was made to give credence to the original myth: The Fountain of Youth. **1** The Fountain of Youth myth, a romantic tale that hides the reality behind his intentions, was not comprised until over a century after his voyages. The traditional story is told as if an old man looking for eternal youth had his romantic search cut short by a band of ruthless "savages." This universally accepted fairy tale is among the many regurgitated in elementary school history textbooks right alongside the numerous extrapolations, omissions, and outright lies that cover up the reality behind Christopher Columbus and the Spanish conquistadors. Ponce De Leon fits into the category of Spanish conquistadors who made a career out of conquest, wholesale murder, and plunder. Bartolome de las Casas, in his *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, made time to account for Ponce De Leon and the other Spanish conquistadors who attempted to conquer Florida:

"Since 1510 or 1511 three tyrannical adventurers have made their way to these provinces and behaved in much the same way as their compatriots in other parts of the New World. Two of them already had blood on their hands from campaigns in other parts of the region, and had clawed their way up to their present commands not on merit but on the dead bodies of their fellow men. I knew them personally, and all three came to a sticky end, the fortunes they amassed by pillage and murder have long since been dispersed and all memory of them has been expunged from the face of the earth. It is now as though they have never been born. Yet, during their lifetime, the whole world was struck dumb with terror at the mere mention of their names and at reports of the killings for which they were responsible; not that, in the end, there

were all that many of these, for the Lord was quick to bring them to account for the crimes I had seen them commit in other parts of the New World, cutting them short before they could wreck havoc on a larger scale in these provinces.” 2

Surely de las Casas, who arrived to the “New World” as early as the second voyage of Columbus, settled in Hispaniola in 1502, witnessed massacres in the conquest of Cuba in 1513, wrote detailed and extensive notes on the various conquistador expeditions throughout the Americas, was personally acquainted with Ponce de Leon, and knew about native legends, folklore, religion and customs, would have at least made a note that Juan Ponce was searching for the Fountain of Youth or that it was a Caribbean native legend. Yet he only takes note that Ponce de Leon and the other conquistadors that came to Florida lived in infamy for the terror they inflicted on the West Indies and then Florida’s native people - not quite the “romantic” discovery that historians have made it out to be.

Juan Ponce de Leon set out for Florida with objectives that were characteristic of the Spanish conquistadors in the Americas – Spanish colonial expansion, gold, personal glory and prestige, and landholdings, although he already possessed considerable wealth and extensive estates in Puerto Rico, taken through conquest and worked by native slave gangs under the brutal *encomienda* system. Yet the adventurism and romanticism that have sugarcoated the massacre, pillage, and brutal Spanish conquest of the Americas reach new heights in the traditional accounts of Ponce de Leon’s voyages to Florida. Lacking any viable basis in primary source documents, the Fountain of Youth myth is still taught to students today after they learn about how Columbus “founded” or “discovered” America. The association of the Fountain of Youth, a long-told myth in the “Old World,” with Ponce De Leon’s voyage, can be attributed to several 16<sup>th</sup> Spanish historians who all fabricated an association of the myth with Ponce De Leon’s slave-hunting, gold-seeking, colonial expeditions. Of course, these accounts were all formed many decades after his death, extrapolate heavily on the primary source documents, and use additional hearsay evidence. Historians have attached on the legend to romanticize what was generally a plain Spanish expedition accompanied by some skirmishes with local native tribes. 3

Furthermore, nothing can be found in Ponce De Leon’s original voyage log about native guides, or natives encountered along the way, directing to or being asked anything about a fountain, lagoon, or magical spring. Spanish historian Antonio de Herrera sums up Ponce De Leon’s objectives in more realistic terms:

“Juan Ponce De Leon finding himself without office, through Juan Ceron and Miguel Diaz having been restored to those of the island of San Juan, and seeing himself rich, determined to do something with which to gain honor and increase estate; and as he had news that lands were found to the northward he resolved to go to explore toward that port.” 4

Juan Ponce De Leon was far from a common man. He descended from a Spanish aristocratic family whose nobility stretched back several generations. Ponce, as other conquistadors, first honed his military skills in the slaughter of black Moors in the reconquest of Spain. The wars to overthrow Moorish rule, subjugate Grenada, and exile the Moors out of the country had initially prepped the conquistadors to fight other dark-skinned people wherever their imperial ambitions may take them. Ponce had served on the second Columbus voyage, leading the Spanish army to slaughter indigenous settlements throughout the Caribbean. In Hispaniola, Ponce commanded a small army to massacre over 7,000 natives, the first massacre of many that would eventually wipe out the island’s population of over one million. 5

Ponce was later appointed governor of Puerto Rico, building the first settlement on the island and distributing unruly natives as slaves among his followers. In “pacifying” native uprisings against the *encomienda* system, he applied his expertise in massacring Moors back home in Spain. One historian noted this connection: “As he had served in the former wars, his experience and valor were recognized...He found, as has been seen, a state of discontent on the island, in which he took sides with the constituted authorities.” 6 Ponce de Leon and his infamous bloodhound assisted the Spaniards in crushing native unrest in Puerto Rico. Herrera recorded:

“He had a dog, called Bezerillo, that made wonderful havock among these people, and knew which of them were in war and which in peace, like a man; for which reason the Indians were more afraid of ten Spaniards with the dog, than of one hundred without him, and therefore he had one share and a half of all that taken allowed him, as was done to one that carried a crossbow, as well in gold as slaves and other things, which his master received. Very extraordinary things were said of this dog.” 7



The Spanish crown eventually stripped Ponce De Leon of his governor title, commissioning Diego Columbus, the heir to Columbus, as governor of Puerto Rico. Without office or title, he sought to renew his “prestige.” He requested King Ferdinand to charter him for conquest plus ownership rights and wealth from his ventures. Other than for gold and slaves, the goal of Ponce De Leon’s voyage was to achieve glory and extend the reach of the Spanish Empire. Ponce requested the title of *adelantado* (colonial governor) of any land he could conquer in the name of Spain. **8** On February 23, 1512, the Crown gave him official charter and detailed instructions on his voyage. He was authorized to find the rich, exotic island of Beniny and claim it in the name of the Crown. The instructions didn’t mention the Fountain of Youth:

“Item, That I grant for the space of the ten years aforesaid that those persons who should go to discover the island aforesaid and who should settle on that voyage, enjoy the gold and other metals and profitable things which should be in the island aforesaid.

Item, That I grant you the title of our adelantado of the island aforesaid, and of the other islands you shall discover in the manner aforesaid.

Item, That you collect the gold, if there should be any, in the same way in which it is now collected in the Isla Espanola, or in the form and manner that I shall order.” **9**

Ponce was not even the first European to “discover” Florida. Some maps accurately depicted the location of Florida, suggesting that there was some awareness with the peninsula before Ponce De Leon’s expedition. The Cantino map of 1502 is the most famous example. In May of 1497, Sebastian Cabot was believed to have coasted the eastern shore of Florida. Also in May of 1497, a voyage led by a relatively lesser known “explorer” Americus Vespucci was believed to have reached the lower end of the peninsular coast of Florida in the vicinity of Cape Florida. It is believed that the Cantino Map was a result of the knowledge gained from this voyage or possibly from unknown Spanish “explorers” who ventured around the “New World.” **10**

But in grade school history textbooks, there is no account of evidence that suggests Ponce De Leon was most likely not the first European “explorer” to reach Florida. It’s taken as an undeniable fact. One fact: Ponce De Leon’s expedition did indeed confront Spanish-speaking natives in Florida, suggesting that either previous Spaniards had been in contact with them or some Caribbean natives had fled to the

peninsula to escape the brutalities of European conquest in the West Indies. There is evidence that the Tainos encountered in the Columbus voyage were aware that Florida was part of a mainland that extended far to the north and had contacts with the Calusa of South Florida. **11** The presence of Caribbean refugees and precolonial contacts suggest that Florida natives were probably well-aware of the monstrosities that the white man had inflicted in other areas, having little reason to believe that they would act any differently in Florida. So whether or not Ponce was the first European to encounter Florida natives, it was not as if its people were completely disconnected from the events that were taking place in the Caribbean. This could explain the fierce native Floridian resistance that Spanish historian Gonzalez Fernando de Oviedo described:

“The natives of the land were a very austere and very savage and belligerent and fierce and untamed people and not accustomed to a peaceful existence nor to lay down their liberty so easily at the discretion or alien volition of other men, nor at the determination of those monks and priests by whom he was accompanied for the exercise of religious rites and the service of the church.” **12**

In early April 1513, Ponce landed on the Florida shore and declared possession of the new territory in the name of the Spanish Crown. This location, originally thought to be St. Augustine, has now been located 125 miles to the south near modern-day Melbourne Beach. **13** The short-lived excursion faced persistent hindrance, harassment, and resistance from Florida natives. In early June, the expedition made its way to the southwest coast of Florida at Charlotte Harbor. While the Spaniards were anchored in Charlotte Harbor, a Spanish-fluent native, probably from Hispaniola, Cuba, or another Caribbean island, met with the Spaniards, attempting to decoy them into an ambush. The Spaniards were searching for the Calusa chief Carlos, rumored to possess gold. **14** The Spanish-fluent native told the Spaniards to wait in the harbor as the chief wished to trade gold. As the Spaniards waited, twenty canoes appeared, some fastened together by twos, and the Calusas showered arrows onto the ships from their canoes. An armed boat was sent against them, forcing some of the Calusa to abandon and flee their canoes. They killed one Spaniard, fatally wounding him with two arrow shots. The Spaniards seized five of their canoes, killing several of their warriors and taking four captive. Juan Ponce offered peace to their chief although he was angry over the death of one of his men. A party of Calusas met with the Spaniards and once again deceived them to believe that the chief wished to trade. The next morning, a war party of eighty warriors ambushed the

Spaniards. They fought them day and night, but their arrows could not reach the Spaniards as the warriors would not come into range of the Spanish crossbow and artillery shots. After a long stalemate, the Calusa war party retired at nightfall. **15**

After loitering for nine days, the Spaniards departed from Charlotte Harbor and reached the Tortuga islands at the western end of the Florida Keys on June 21. They released two of the Calusa captives and kept the others as guides. After three days, the Spaniards changed their course to the southwest-by-west in search of some islands that their captive guides had told them about. Since no islands lie to the southwest-by-west of the Tortugas, the guides must have convinced the Spaniards that rich lands existed not to the northwest, but to the southwest in a trajectory path that led straight to the Yucatan Peninsula of the sophisticated Mayan civilization. The Calusas were apparently familiar with the Mayans, which is unsurprising considering their pre-Columbian Caribbean contacts. The expedition instead reached the far west coast of Cuba, which was a vast wilderness that the Spanish had not yet colonized and so Ponce was unable to readily identify it. With no success in finding Beminy, the Spanish expedition returned to Puerto Rico. **16**

In 1514, the Spanish crown issued a patent to colonize Florida after De Leon's positive account of his venture into the region. The charter made it clear that the purpose of Ponce De Leon's expedition would be to colonize the peninsula, convert the natives to Christianity, and extract their wealth of gold. **17** In 1521, Ponce De Leon returned to colonize Florida "so, that the name of Christ may be praised there, and your majesty served with the fruit that the land produces." **18** This expedition also ended in disaster. Yet Ponce de Leon was accompanied by a Spanish force equivalent to Francisco Pizarro's small army that would later defeat the Inca Empire. Why couldn't he succeed in fighting some small native settlements in Florida? It was believed that Spanish slave hunters from Cuba preceded Ponce De Leon's first voyage by some years, making it very possible that Spanish-speaking native slaves could have escaped into the Florida wilderness and sought refuge with the Florida tribes. **19** Refugee natives flowing in from the Caribbean were also likely to forewarn them of the intruders. Either way, the southern Florida natives had become acquainted with the Europeans before Ponce de Leon and knew full-well their intentions. They would not submit so easily as their counterparts in the Caribbean.

In the interlude between the two voyages, the Calusa confronted another group of Spaniards. In 1517, the Cordova expedition had entered into the same part of southwest Florida that Ponce De Leon had visited. The Calusa quickly drove out the Spanish

soldiers and inflicted a fatal arrow wound on Francisco Hernandez de Cordova. Cordova died from his wound ten days after returning to Cuba. **20**

In his renewed 1521 voyage, Ponce once again directed his course to Florida's southwest coast. In his first expedition, Ponce had heard of a rumor of gold in the vicinity of Charlotte Harbor where the fierce Calusa tribe resided. After sailing to Charlotte Harbor and questioning the Calusa about their cacique's gold, he had skirmished several times with their warriors and was turned back. Now he once again landed in Charlotte Harbor to search for the gold he had heard of in his first voyage. A bloody skirmish with the Calusa warriors left about eighty of the Spaniards in the expedition dead, while they killed twice as many natives, including Ponce De Leon himself who was fatally wounded by an arrow. **21** The Spaniards returned to Puerto Rico where Juan Ponce would die from his wounds.

### **Panfilo de Narvaez**

Panfilo de Narvaez had a long history in the West Indies. He had served as an officer under Diego de Valasquez in the conquest of Cuba. Las Casas, who witnessed the Spanish conquest of Cuba firsthand, horrifyingly recalled the massacre of Caonao that Narvaez led:

“On one occasion, when the locals had come some ten leagues out from a large settlement in order to receive us and regale us with victuals and other gifts, and had given us loaves and fishes and any other foodstuffs they could provide, the Christians were suddenly inspired by the Devil and, without the slightest provocation, butchered, before my eyes, some three thousand souls – men, women, and children – as they sat there in front of us. I saw that day atrocities more terrible than any living man has ever seen nor ever thought to see.” **22**

After the massacre, las Casas, acting on the assurances he received from Narvaez, called together twenty-one caciques on the island to meet the Spaniards and promised them amnesty. But Narvaez, turning back on his promise, immediately seized the caciques and “was all for burning them alive the very next day.” But thanks to the intervention of las Casas, the chiefs were saved. He recalled: “I had a difficult job keeping them from the stake but in the end they did all make good their escape.” **23** In 1520, Valasquez commissioned Narváez to supersede the rule of Hernando Cortes in

Mexico, whose invasion of the Aztec Empire was unauthorized. Cortes left the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan and ordered a guard to hold Moctezuma. Narvaez was seeking to take the prestige of conquering Mexico for himself. But the coup d'état was an abrupt failure. After a brief skirmish, Narvaez found himself in the custody of the famous conquistador for three years, and was then released and sent back to Spain in 1523. **24** Seeking to renew his honor and reputation, to bandage his wounded ego, and to match the extensive wealth that Cortes had seized from Mexico, Narvaez desired to obtain royal permission in Spain for conquest and governorship in the “New World.”

On December 11, 1526, Charles V granted Narvaez charter to conquer all of the territory extending from the Rio de las Palmas to the Cape of Florida and decreed him *adelantado* of all the territory he conquered. **25** The precedent for the Narvaez expedition was the voyage and colonization efforts of Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon, a wealthy Spanish noble from Toledo, who attempted to establish a settlement at the Guale province of Florida in 1526. The settlement of six hundred settlers included enslaved Africans from Santo Domingo. In the fall of 1526, Ayllon had died from disease and the settlement was quickly broken up by a unified insurrection of imported African slaves and recently captured native slaves. **26** This began a legacy of Florida native and African slave alliance and cooperation that lasted for several hundred years.

On April 12, 1528, exactly fifteen years after Juan Ponce De Leon first set foot on the Florida coast, Narvaez landed on the Florida west coast around Tampa Bay, in the vicinity of several native villages and homes. On April 16, he took formal possession of Florida and threatened a local village if they failed to submit to the King and convert to Christianity. Narvaez spoke aloud the *requerimiento* to the bewildered natives, which was the essential summary of Spanish colonial and religious policy:

“I, Panfilo de Narvaez, cause to be known to you how God created the world and charged St. Peter to be the sovereign of all men, in whatever country they might be born. God gave him the whole world for his inheritance. One of his successors made it a gift to the King and Queen of Spain, so that the Indians are their subjects. You will be compelled to accept Christianity. If you refuse and delay agreeing to what I have proposed to you, I will march against you; I will make war upon you from all sides; I will subject you to obedience to the Church and His Majesty; I will obtain possession of your wives and children, I will reduce you to slavery. I notify you that neither His majesty nor myself, nor the gentlemen who accompany me, will be the cause of this, but yourselves only.” **27**

One historian admitted: “Disinclination of the natives to yield immediately to these demands doubtlessly led to many acts of cruelty to which the expedition was guilty.” **28** The day after their arrival, the Spaniards went along the coast and found nothing but empty and abandoned huts “because the people had gone away that night in their canoes.” The next day, they encountered some natives but couldn’t communicate with them without an interpreter. Cabeza de Vaca recalled: “But they made many signs and threatening gestures to us and it seemed to us that they were telling us to leave the land, and with this they parted from us without producing any confrontation and went away.” **29** The following day, the Spaniards made an incursion into the interior, taking four natives captive who led them to a local village. There the Spaniards discovered “many crates belonging to Castilian merchants, and in each one of them was the body of a dead man, and the bodies were covered with painted deer hides.” The Franciscan priests in the expedition misconceived these burial tombs as idolatrous practice, so Narvaez had them destroyed. The Timucians possessed some gold that they had obtained from Spanish shipwrecks off the coast. When Narvaez inquired into its origins, the natives cleverly told him that there was a great quantity of gold in the powerful Apalachee province to the north, hoping to divert the expedition into a trap. **30**

Using captured natives as guides, Narvaez set out in search of the Apalachee with three hundred troops, including forty cavalry. Crossing the Withlacoochee River in central Florida, they confronted a party of two hundred Timucuan warriors. When the natives appeared threatening in their gestures, the Spaniards took five or six captive, who led them to their homes nearby where a large provision of maize fed the half-starved men. The captive guides continued to lead the way to Apalachee. After crossing the Suwannee River in northern Florida, the Spaniards found themselves in the Apalachee province and the natives were notably hostile at the entrance of the unwelcome guests. After the Spaniards reached the main village of Apalachee, they seized the women and children when they couldn’t find the warrior men. The warriors returned to the town two hours later and requested that the Spaniards hand over their families. They did so, but Narvaez unwisely continued to hold their head chief captive, which provoked the Apalachees to war. The very next day, the Apalachee warriors initiated hit-and-run guerilla strikes on the Spaniards. Cabeza de Vaca recalled that the Apalachee had “attacked us so boldly and swiftly that they were able to set fire to the lodges we were in. But as we sallied they fled and took refuge in some lakes very close by... The following day Indians from a village on the other side came and attacked us just as the first group had done.” The warriors surrounded the Apalachee capital that the Spaniards inhabited,

wounding and killing men and horses whenever they went for water by shooting arrows from their safe position in the marshes.

As the Spaniards became surrounded on all sides, unable to evacuate their immediate vicinity, it soon became apparent that not only were the tales of gold a lie, but if they remained any longer in the province they would meet their demise. The Spaniards made a desperate retreat to the sea after a month's stay in Apalachee. As the Spaniards made their way through a chest-deep marsh, the Apalachee showered arrows onto them from behind the fallen trees that littered the swamp. In this skirmish some of the Spaniards were wounded despite their armor "which was not enough to protect them." For all the Europeans bragged about their superior military power, it all came to nothing in the Florida swamps against the Apalachee warriors. Cabeza de Vaca recalled:

"There were men that day who swore they had seen two oak trees, each as thick as the calf of a leg, shot through and through by arrows, which is not suprising if we consider the force and dexterity with which they shoot. I myself saw an arrow that had penetrated the base of a poplar tree for half a foot in length. All the many Indians from Florida we saw were archers, and, being very tall and naked, at a distance they appear giants. Those people are wonderfully built, very gaunt and of great strength and agility. Their bows are as thick as an arm, from eleven to twelve spans long, shooting an arrow at 200 paces with unerring aim." **31**

In a battle of man against machine, the superior strength, skills, and agility of the Apalachee overwhelmed the technologically advanced Spaniards. The Narvaez expedition confronted native resistance the entire way through their nine days march to the coast. When they reached the native village of Aute, they found the huts burned and the harvest left untouched, the inhabitants having quickly abandoned the town from news of the oncoming expedition. At this time, only 240 troops remained out of the original four hundred that Narvaez had brought with him to Florida. The famished men feasted on the abundant supply of corn left behind and continued their march to the sea after a two days rest. For over a month they labored on building ships to escape Florida and return to safety, sporadically harassed by natives. The Spanish were powerless against the Apalachees. When ten of their men were killed gathering shellfish, they could do nothing about it as the arrows, "that they shoot with such skill and strength," could have easily pierced their armor. On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, over five months after the expedition had reached Florida, 193 men tightly packed into four ships embarked from Florida into the Gulf of Mexico. While at sea, the numbers of the expedition rapidly decreased. Only

eighty men remained after hunger, thirst, disease, and storms ravaged the expedition. A hurricane shipwrecked the remaining men to the shore of Mexico, where the numbers of the expedition continued to dwindle until only three of the original members were still alive four years afterwards. **32**

### **Hernando de Soto: The Harbinger of Death**

Batolome de las Casas spoke of Hernando De Soto in his classic 1542 work *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*:

“He and his companions-in-arms have been responsible for some of the worst atrocities ever seen in the new world. It is my belief that God has already called him to account as He did those who preceded him. . . Their leader did, indeed, meet his end in Florida, but the brutes who were with him were able to give us an account of the dreadful atrocities that he and, after his miserable death, they committed among the poor, harmless natives – atrocities which fully justify the assessment given above. Their account of the Florida expedition underlines the general principle I enunciated earlier: that the longer men have operated in the New World and the more they have become accustomed to the carnage and butchery around them, the more brutal and the more wicked have been the crimes they commit against God and their fellow-men.” **33**

When Hernando De Soto first arrived to Peru, Francisco Pizarro’s expedition was maneuvering to exploit the civil strife between two competing monarchs for the throne of the Inca Empire. The Spaniards ruthlessly massacred thousands of Peruvians, imprisoned King Atahualpa, and plundered the vast riches of the Inca Empire. The Incas gathered gold to secure Atahualpa’s liberty. When there were reports of a native insurrection, the conquistadors executed King Atahualpa. De Soto received his portion of the gold. **34** After the Inca conquest, De Soto became uninterested in personal wealth, being from the noble class and having accumulated sufficient wealth in his exploits throughout the Americas. De Soto had also actively participated in the bloody but lucrative conquests of Panama and Nicaragua. His expedition to Florida was for his own prestige, honor, and the greater “glory” of the Spanish Empire. It was believed that a province could be found in the interior of North America possibly even greater and wealthier than the Inca Empire. De Soto thus sought the position of *adelantado* of Florida, offering to give up his



stake in other profitable ventures to cover voyage expenses and dedicate his services to the Spanish Empire. As Rodrigo Rangel, De Soto's secretary, later noted in his narrative of the expedition:

“The governor was very given to hunting and killing Indians, from the time that he served in...the provinces of Castillo del Oro and Nicaragua, and he also found himself in Peru and took part in the imprisonment of Atabaliba, where he became rich...he carried and put in a safe place in Seville about one hundred thousand pesos of gold; and he decided to return to the Indies only to lose them along with his life, and to continue the bloody tactics of time past, which had been his practice in the aforementioned places.” **35**

De Soto undertook the expedition in 1539 with the authority from King Charles V “to conquer, pacify, and populate the lands that there are from the Province of the Rio de la Palmas to Florida.” **36** On May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1539, De Soto's expedition, comprised of 620 men and 223 horses, entered into the vicinity of Charlotte Harbor. Almost immediately the expedition was spotted out by the natives along the coast and smoke signals began to rise to warn all the surrounding towns that the intruders were present. **37** The members of the De Soto expedition quickly recognized some characteristics of Floridian natives that had been recorded in the accounts of the Narvaez expedition. “The Gentleman from Elvas,” a Portuguese captain of De Soto's expedition, recalled:

“The Indians are exceedingly ready with their weapons, and so warlike and nimble, that they have no fear of footmen; for if these charge them they flee, and when they turn their backs they are presently upon them. They avoid nothing more easily than the flight of an arrow. They never remain quiet, but are continually running, traversing from place to place, so that neither crossbow nor arquebuse can be aimed at them. Before a Christian can make a single shot with either, an Indian will discharge three or four arrows; and he seldom misses of his object. Where the arrow meets with no armour, it pierces as deeply as the shaft from a crossbow.” **38**

The narrative of Rodrigo Rangel, another participant in the expedition, seems to confirm this account as well. When Captain Juan Ruiz Lobillo set out with forty soldiers into the interior and attacked some settlements, they took with them two native women, “and in order to rescue them, nine Indians followed him for three leagues shooting arrows at him, and they killed one Christian and wounded three or four without his being able to

do them damage, although he had arquebusiers and crossbowmen, because these Indians are so agile and such fine warriors that in any nation of the world they would be seen as men.” **39** It once again appeared that superior skills, tactics, and knowledge of the terrain would beat out superior technology. When a captive native gave information about a native settlement at Ocita, De Soto went there and found the town deserted:

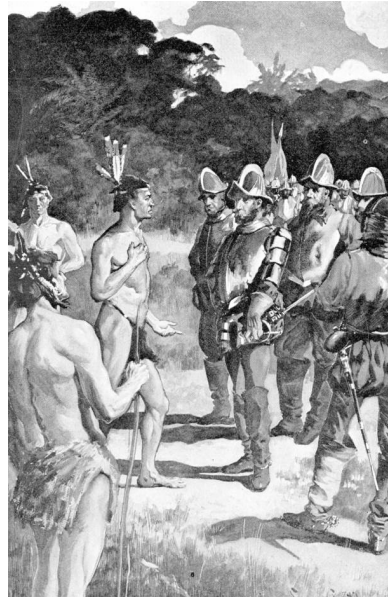
“He burned the town, and he set the dogs on an Indian he brought as a guide...to set the dogs on an Indian is to make the dogs eat them or kill them, tearing the Indian to pieces. The conquistadors in the Indies have always used greyhounds or fierce and valiant dogs in war...Therefore, that guide was killed in that way, because he lied and guided poorly...The Governor sent another messenger to the cacique Orriparacogi. [The messenger] did not return because an Indian woman told him that he should not, and for that she was thrown to the dogs.” **40**

That many joined the expedition for slaves and gold was clearly visible. While the African slave trade was still in its early stages, native slaves were a main incentive to recruit large Caribbean landholders for the voyage. A wealthy Cuban aristocrat Vasco Porcallo de Figueroa joined De Soto principally “to get slaves for his plantations and mines, finding, after some incursions, that no seizures could be made, because of dense forest and extensive bogs, he determined to go back to Cuba.” **41** In the expedition’s first encounter with some native interpreters, the Spaniards inquired if “they had any knowledge of any country where gold and silver might be found plenty.” The native emissaries answered in the affirmative that gold was present in the Ocale province, to which De Soto immediately set out for, only finding a deserted town with sufficient maize for three months provisions. **42** De Soto himself took no time in arrogant posturing, attempting to exercise power over native Floridians by holding their caciques hostage and committing massacres. De Soto’s trademark was well-established in his prior participation in the conquests of Peru and Central America. Yet the tactic would not prove so successful against the resilient native population of Florida.

When the Spaniards reached the province of Caliquen, they heard word from some of the natives that they were approaching Apalachee, “of Narvaez having been there and embarked,” and some members became notably nervous. “Every mind was depressed at this information,” recalled a participant in the expedition, “and all counseled



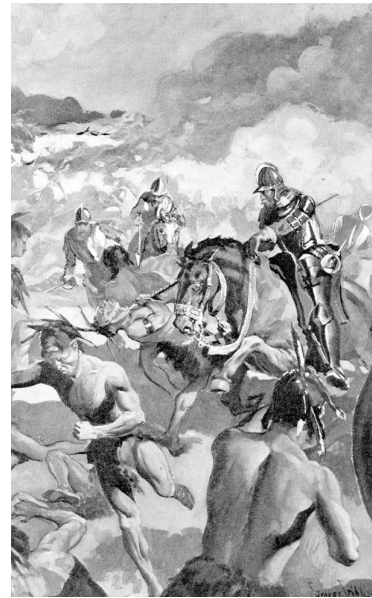
Engraving of De Soto and his men with a greyhound. Source: *De Soto and his men in the land of Florida*, Grace E. King, 1906.



Engraving of De Soto's men and Vitachuco. Source: *De Soto and his men in the land of Florida*, Grace E. King, 1906.



Engraving of Hernando De Soto in the Florida wilderness, Source: *De Soto and his men in the land of Florida*, Grace E. King, 1906.



Engraving of the Battle of Mauvila, March 1540. Source: *De Soto and his men in the land of Florida*, Grace E. King, 1906.

the Governor to go back to the port, that they might be lost, as Narvaez had been, and to leave the land of Florida.” **43** De Soto bluntly refused. The Spaniards seized the cacique of Caliquen and set forth to the feared Apalachee province. Along the way to Apalachee, some native emissaries from the cacique of Uzachil, brother of Caliquen, came to De Soto offering peace and begging him to set the chief free. When it was heard De Soto refused, seven caciques under the dominion of Uzachil joined together and sent a message to De Soto saying that they wished him to free the chief, promising their friendship and to fight with them against their great enemy, the Apalachee. Yet the chiefs were afraid to come to the Spanish camp, fearing that they too might be imprisoned. **44** When the Spaniards reached the town of Napetaca, fourteen to fifteen emissaries came out and plead with De Soto to release Caliquen, to which De Soto replied that he would hold the cacique until he reached the town of Uzachil. However, De Soto, forewarned by a native informant, believed that the natives of the town were plotting a surprise attack to retrieve Caliquen and ordered his men to arm and mount themselves in preparation and to attack once the trumpet was sounded. **45**

On the day that the plotted attack was supposed to occur, 350 to 400 warriors appeared in the camp, taking refuge in a nearby thicket and sending out two of their men to demand the cacique. De Soto went out with Caliquen and conversed with the emissaries for a short time as his men stationed themselves throughout the town awaiting the sound of the trumpet. When the trumpet sounded, the Spanish soldiers came out from the homes in a surprise attack, killing thirty to forty native warriors in a long and fierce skirmish. While the native warriors defended themselves ferociously, they were eventually defeated and driven back to two large lakes where they took refuge. The Spaniards encircled one of the lakes, unable to surround both, and poured down crossbow fire onto the warriors as they swam about dodging the arrows. The Spaniards, depleted of their ammunition, kept vigilance on the lake all night. Whenever the natives noisily swam to the shore in an attempt to escape, the mounted Spaniards quickly dashed into the water and the warriors were forced to swim back into the interior of the lake. This continued all night until the natives, exhausted and verging on hypothermia, had all completely surrendered by four o’clock in the morning. Yet twelve of their principle warriors refused to surrender and had to be literally dragged out of the water. **46** Three hundred warriors were taken captive overall, five or six caciques being among them. **47**

All of the captives were immediately chained and divided as slaves among the Spaniards the very next day. The natives, still determined to rebel, gave the lead to an interpreter who was to strangle De Soto as soon as he came to speak to him. Once his plot was discovered, he gave a blow to De Soto’s face so hard that blood splattered out of his

nose. The captives suddenly rebelled in a general uprising, making a furious break for freedom. The warriors grabbed any weapon in their sight with the determination to murder their masters or the first Spaniard they confronted. The “Gentleman from Elvas” gave a vivid account of the uprising:

“The Indians all rose together. He who could only catch up a pestle from a mortar, as well he who could grasp a weapon, equally exerted himself to kill his master, or the first one he met; and he whose fortune it was to light on a lance, or a sword, handled it in a manner as though he had been accustomed to use it all his days. One Indian, in the public yard of the town, with blade in hand, fought like a bull in the arena, until the halberdiers of the Governor, arriving, put an end to him. Another got up, with a lance, into a maize crib, made of cane, called by Indians *barbacoa*, and defended the entrance with the uproar of ten men, until he was stricken down with a battleaxe.”

#### 48

Only two hundred natives survived after the uprising was subdued. The most-fit, young warriors were divided among those who had the best chains and were vigilant enough to maintain control over them. The rest were bound to a post in the middle of the town and shot to death with arrows. **49** After the massacre, De Soto proclaimed: “Oh help me God, and if only those lords of the Council were here so that they might see how His Majesty is served in these parts.” Rodrigo Rangel, De Soto’s secretary, made another conclusion: “But it is because they know it...that they have commanded the tyrannies and cruelties to cease, and to have better order in the pacification of the Indies...so that...the consciences of the conquistadors are at peace, and the natives of the land are not maltreated.” **50**

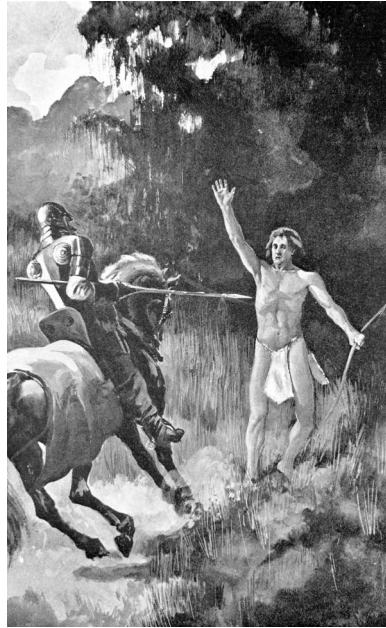
Word of the massacre quickly spread out among Floridian tribes, causing entire towns to evacuate their populations to the swamps at news of the incoming invaders. The town of Uzachil was found empty of its inhabitants once the Spaniards reached there. They plundered the crop supply left behind and sent out a detachment to capture the natives, seizing and enslaving a hundred men and women who fled. A member of the expedition noted: “They were led off in chains, with collars about the neck, to carry luggage and grind corn, doing the labor of proper servants.” **51** But the native warriors would not so easily submit as slaves to the Spaniards: “Sometimes it happened that, going with them for wood or maize, they would kill the Christian, and flee, with the chain on, which others would file at night with a splinter of stone.” **52** In the town of Agile, a

tributary to Apalachee, a woman was taken captive by a man named Herrera, “who was alone with her and behind his other companions, and she seized him by genitals and held him very fatigued and submissive, and perhaps if other Christians had not passed and aided him, the Indian woman would have killed him.” **53**

When the De Soto expedition finally reached the Apalachee province, they received what could only be considered a hostile reception, having first been ambushed after crossing the Suwannee River and then finding the first town of the province, Uitachuco, left burning by its dispersed inhabitants. De Soto set forth to the main Apalachee town of Anhayca Apalache and found sufficient provisions there to set up camp for the winter. But now the Apalachee were engaged in a similar campaign of guerilla warfare that the Narvaez expedition had endured, entering into daily skirmishes with the encamped Spaniards. By December, after occupying the province for two months, the Apalachee “had become so bold that they would venture up within two crossbow-shot of the camp to kill our people,” according to a participant in the expedition. **54** Another participant of the expedition recalled the winter in Apalachee felt like “a thousand years” to all the men. **55** Expecting to find gold and silver, instead they found a beautiful, abundant, and fertile region, enough to supply them for the winter but nothing to furnish their appetite for the precious metals. **56**

As the Spaniards scoured the Apalachee, they committed numerous atrocities on its inhabitants, including the murder of an important cacique. A Spanish captive of the Calusa would later note: “The Spaniards, on their way, hung the cacique of Abalachi, because he would not give them provision of maize for the journey; or, as the Indians of the town of Abalachi say, because their cacique had around his neck some large pearls.” **57** Most of the captives taken from Napetaca died during the winter from the harsh conditions. The Apalachee warriors repeatedly struck at the Spanish encampment during the winter, setting the occupied town on fire twice. If any were seized prisoner, they didn’t deny they were an Apalachee under the fear of death. An observer noted: “When they were taken and were asked from whence they were they replied proudly: ‘From whence am I? I am an Indian of Apalache.’ And they gave one to understand that they would be insulted if they were thought to be of any other tribe than the Apalaches.” **58** If the Spaniards cut off their hands or noses to torture them, “they did not show more feeling than if each one of them was a Mucio Scevola, a Roman.” **59**

A legacy of indigenous resistance to European encroachment was ingrained in the Floridian native population during the expeditions of Panfilo de Narvaez and Hernando De Soto. From the beginning of European conquest, Florida’s indigenous people set the precedent for centuries of resistance to white domination. Guerilla war was



Engraving of De Soto's men finding an Indian. Source: *De Soto and his men in the land of Florida*, Grace E. King, 1906.

perfected centuries before the Seminole wars by these tribes, who would later incorporate under the Seminole Nation. Military officers in the Second Seminole War would take note of the Apalachee and Calusa remnants as two tribes that had integrated into the Seminole Nation and participated in the devastating Seminole guerilla strikes against the US military. Florida's dense swamps, marshes, and forests made highly mobile, small parties of guerillas more powerful than large-scale armies of invaders, nullifying their superior technology and numbers. Sebastian de Canete recalled the ferocity of Florida's warriors:

“The arms they ordinarily carry are bows and arrows, wooden clubs, and they are so skilled and spirited that in a skirmish that De Soto had in Macula, where they killed 25 soldiers of his, was an Indian who went looking for the most-valiant and best-armed Spaniard in order to kill himself with him.” **60**

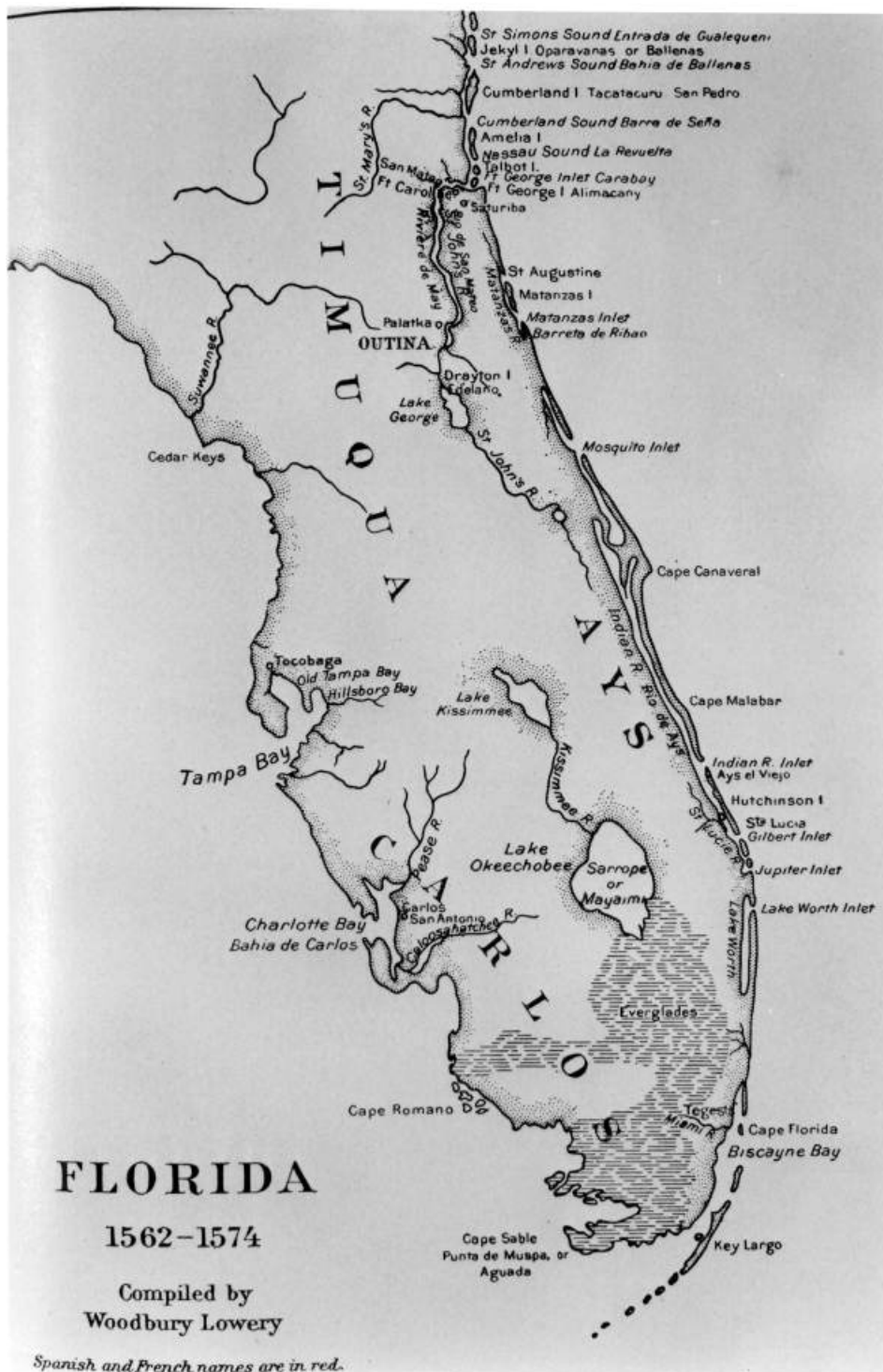
In early March 1540, a little more than nine months after the expedition initially landed in Florida, the Spaniards moved north into present-day Georgia in search of Yupaha, a province where gold was rumored to be abundant. **61** De Soto, much like every single one of his Spanish predecessors, failed to conquer the tactical, skilled, and resolute native population of Florida. He would die on the banks of the Mississippi River, never succeeding in his inglorious attempt at conquering the Southeastern portion of North America.

### **Spain's First Florida Colonization Failure and Indigenous Resistance (1565-1571)**

“Although initially organized for strong resistance to the intruders,” wrote historian Kathleen Deagan, Florida natives were “subdued in large measure by the end of the sixteenth century” due to “the combined effects of population loss, mission efforts, and the collaboration of the caciques with the Spaniards.” **62** But the Spanish conquest of Florida does not deserve such a sweeping statement. After initial native contacts with the Ponce De Leon in 1513, Vasquez de Ayllon in 1526, Narvaez in 1528, and De Soto in 1539-1542, epidemics toppled or severely weakened the native chiefdoms of Florida, as throughout much of the Southeast. The mighty Timucua chiefdoms, which had numbered 750,000 in population prior to European contact, had dwindled down to 135,000 by the time St. Augustine was established in 1565 – an eighty percent population loss. **63** Subsequent colonial expeditions into the Southeast and the establishment of St. Augustine in 1565 increased European-native interaction and the spread of European pathogens. But despite extensive population loss, social disruption, and political fragmentation, Spanish domination over the natives of the Southeast necessitated violent conquest and was limited to strategic chiefdoms. Crippling pandemics did not do the work of conquest for the Spanish. In fact, “only a fraction of the tribal groups in the Southeast developed into full Spanish provinces,” counters historian Amy Bushnell, “partly because Spain’s limited resources limited Spain’s grasp to the more strategic regions, and partly because Christian practice was incompatible with seasonal nomadism.” And while those strategic chiefdoms in Florida and the Southeast were undoubtedly weakened by diseases, beleaguered by bearers of Christianity, and bribed by gifts, “they were also, one-by-one, conquered.” **64**

That conquest was necessary to subjugate Florida’s natives is indicated as early





Map of Florida, 1562-1574, compiled by Woodbury Lowery. Source: *The Spanish Settlements within the Present Limits of the United States*, Woodbury Lowery, 1906.

as 1573, when Pedro Menendez de Aviles requested permission from the Crown to conquer and enslave the natives of southern Florida after his initial colonization efforts failed. Although his petition was denied, brutal and efficient repression soon became necessary to “pacify” the defiant native chiefdoms of Spanish Florida. **65** After his years in captivity among the Calusa, Hernando D’Escalante Fontaneda, in his 1575 memoir, concurred that the natives of South Florida “never will be at peace, and less will they become Christians.” He suggested that the successful conquest of Florida required enslavement and genocide: “Let the Indians be taken in hand gently, inviting them to peace; then putting them under deck, husbands and wives together, sell them among the Islands, and even upon Terra Firma for money, as some old nobles of Spain buy vassals of the king. In this way, there could be management of them, and their number become diminished.” This would make way for Spanish settlers to make “some stock farms for breeding cattle” and to safeguard the Spanish vessels carrying gold and silver along the Florida coast. **66**

Shortly after the establishment of the *presidio* of St. Augustine in 1565, *adelanto* Pedro Menendez de Aviles set up a string of small forts and garrisons at every deepwater harbor from southern Florida all the way to present-day Port Royal, South Carolina. Jesuit missionaries were also stationed at each fort around the peninsula. After the numerous failed conquistador expeditions, Florida had gained a reputation as a savage and backward region, lacking any of the enticements of wealth, mines, and rich resources that drew the Spaniards to other locations in the Americas. But for the Spanish Crown, the aggressive settlement and fortification of Florida meant a strategic establishment for the safeguard of its Caribbean and Latin American colonies from the continuing threat of British and French incursion. This included military fortification along the coast to protect the Fleet of the Indies from enemy assault as it traveled through the Bahama Channel, carrying the gold and silver wealth of Mexico and Peru to replenish the Crown’s coffers. To this affect, Menendez de Aviles endeavored to discover the mythical cross-peninsular waterway that would allow the Fleet to take an alternative route and avoid the dangerous path through the Bahama Channel.

Historian Eugene Lyons detailed more of what Aviles had in mind for his Florida colonization scheme: “[Florida was] an enterprise which promised lands, revenues, high titles, and expectation of exalted service to God and prince...in such an undertaking, moreover, there would be honor and profit, lands and offices enough for the whole circle of kinsmen and friends in the Menendez orbit.” **67** Underneath all of these visions of Spanish colonization in Florida was a large subordinate native population that adopted Spanish religious, social, and cultural values and provided tribute in the form of slave

labor on extensive estates. When Menendez petitioned for the title and lands of a marquis, he imagined the economic empire of Hernando Cortes “founded by Indian labor and tribute which probably amounted to 30,000 pesos in value annually by 1560. This income permitted further investment in stock-raising, sugar production, money-lending, and mining ventures, while Indian and Negro slaves worked the agricultural properties.”

**68** This vision of Florida as a frontier opportunity for a small European elite to reap profits at the expense of a large dark-skinned labor force would replay itself again and again.

But what Menendez found in Florida was that the French settlers had already established a degree of influence with the natives, who were too well-organized to affect a total conquest with his insufficient numbers. He established garrisons and missions right alongside the various peninsular natives without disturbing their rights to the land. Nor did he endeavor to immediately change their religious and political systems. Menendez was limited to a system of *rescate*, or trade with “unpacified” natives, a far cry from subjugation. In South Florida, the Spanish set up forts and missions next to the Ais of Indian River Inlet, the Tequesta of Biscayne Bay, the Calusa of Charlotte Harbor, and the Tocobagas of Tampa Bay. To the north, Menendez established forts next to the eastern and central Timucua. But the Jesuit missionaries that were distributed out to every garrison and fort in Florida soon found their conversion efforts were contravened by the presence of the soldiers. The poor provisioning of the garrisons implied the arrogant Spanish belief that the natives would supply them. The soldiers at the garrisons were to barter goods for food with the natives, but local villages were unwilling to exhaust their moderate surplus to provision the troops. The “subjects” of “King Outina” had mocked Laudonniere’s soldiers who were trying to trade their shirts for fish, suggesting that if what they had was so valuable, they should eat it. **69** So instead the Spanish soldiers raided the local villages for food and supplies, beating and killing natives, and abusing their women. As Jesuit priests insisted that natives abandoned their old rites, ceremonies, and traditional beliefs, they began to sense that conversion to Christianity would mean the total alteration of their culture.

The additional problem of native seasonal relocation pattern, described as “primitive migratory habits” by Spanish missionaries, only allowed the Jesuits to reside among them and instruct them for several months out of the year. After missionaries were killed or thrown out at every single spot in the peninsula, Jesuit Father Rogel concluded that forcefully assembling the natives into sedentary farming towns was a necessary prerequisite for instilling Spanish religious, social, and cultural values in the native population, as well as for provisioning the local Spanish forts:



Painting of Father Pedro Martinez Strangled and Drowned. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

“In order to obtain fruits in the blind and sad souls of these provinces, it is necessary first of all to order the Indians to come together, and live in towns and cultivate the earth, collecting sustenance for the entire year; and after they have thus become very settled, then to begin the preaching. Unless this is done, although the religious remain among them for fifty years, they will have no more fruit than we in our four years among them, which is none at all, nor even a hope, nor the semblance of it.” **70**

But there were two reasons, Rogel admitted, why this would be an extremely difficult task:

“The first that they have been accustomed to live in this manner for thousands of years, and to take them out of it is like death to them; the second, that even were they willing, the poverty of the soil and its rapid exhaustion will not admit of it; and so it is that they themselves give this reason for their scattering and change of boundaries.” **71**



Painting of Father Pedro Martinez Strangled and Drowned.  
Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

One by one, the Spanish forts and garrisons fell to native uprisings. The first signs of “Indian troubles” came when the Timucua killed Father Pedro Martinez in 1566, producing Florida’s first Jesuit “martyr.” But between 1569 and 1570, the colonization of the Florida peninsula came to a complete halt. The Potanos of central Florida slaughtered a regiment of thirty troops. The eastern Timucua tribes, with the aid of French privateer Dominique de Gourges, captured Fort San Mateo and two outlying blockhouses along the St. John’s River. Captain Juan Pardo twice made excursions into parts of present-day North and South Carolina, across Georgia, and into Alabama, setting up a string of inland forts with the goal of establishing a road that led all the way to the silver mines of



Florida Indians capturing shipwreck victims, ca. 1707. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

Zacatecas, Mexico. The Spanish soldiers that Pardo had left behind at each garrison began to force the local native towns to provision and supply them. By early 1568, the natives eventually fell upon the forts and massacred the soldiers. <sup>72</sup> On the Florida west coast, the Tocobagas slaughtered the twenty-four man garrison at Tampa Bay. The natives there reported:

“The reason why they killed these Christians...was...because the Spaniards who were there were very mean-spirited. And they say that they put their hands on everyone except for the king and his captain general. And also, as their food rotted on them, it ran out earlier than those were to resupply them expected to. I believe that

with the hunger they began to be more of a burden and bothersome to the Indians than they would have preferred to [have been].” 73

On the Florida east coast, the Ais assaulted the two-hundred man Spanish garrison of Santa Lucia at the Indian River south of St. Augustine and expelled them by 1570. Afterwards, the Ais maintained hostilities against the Spanish. In the winter of 1570-1571, Menendez de Aviles, Father Superior Antonio Sedeno, and fifteen or sixteen companions on their way to Havana were shipwrecked off of Cape Canaveral and barely escaped death at the hands of the Ais. 74 When Menendez reached Spain in 1573, he requested permission from the Council of the Indies to go to war with the Ais and other southern Florida natives, and sell them as slaves to cover the expenses of conquest and settlement in Florida. He reported: “the great injuries and deaths caused by certain Indians of the coast of Florida, in virtue whereof it was fitting that they be declared slaves, whereby he could continue the conquest and settlement of that province.” 75 His petition took a year and half to reach the Council and was then denied.

In 1566, Menendez de Aviles and his Jesuit companions formed friendly relations with the Tequesta when they shipwrecked off of Biscayne Bay. The Jesuits took the cacique’s nephew to Havana to educate him in Spanish customs and traditions, and took the cacique’s brother to Spain where he was converted to Christianity. In 1567, Menendez returned and established a mission and a garrison at Tequesta, leaving thirty soldiers and Jesuit brother Francisco Villareal to instruct them in Christian doctrine. But when the soldiers executed the uncle of the cacique for a trivial offense, the Tequesta revolted, dismantled the crosses, burned down their huts, and retreated into the forest. From there they held the path by which the Spaniards went to draw water and killed a large number of the soldiers. Villareal and the survivors withdrew for the time being. When the chief’s brother returned from Spain as a newly converted Christian, the Tequesta welcomed the mission back. Nevertheless, the Spanish garrison became a considerable burden over time as the soldiers forced the Tequesta to provision them out of their meager store of food. Christianizing the upper orders of native society also failed to influence the native commoners and the mission and garrison were completely abandoned by 1570 when the Tequesta rebelled and killed several soldiers. 76 In contrast to the warm reception that Aviles and his Jesuit companions received only several years earlier, Captain Alonso de Lobera and four of his men were killed and many others wounded as their ship approached Tequesta in 1574. 77

After Menendez de Aviles departed from Carlos in the spring of 1567, relations between the Calusa and the Spaniards began to deteriorate. Father Juan Rogel began his missionary work in Calusa in March 1567 but was not able to even begin speaking or preaching to the natives until July. Then he noted: "While Carlos was alive, I never had the opportunity, nor did he give it for me to able to teach anyone the things of our holy faith." **78** During the reign of Carlos, Rogel reported that he could not even "go outside of the fort...farther than a stone's throw from it" for Carlos "had arranged with certain of his servants to kidnap me" because "I discredited and spoke evil about his idols." **79** In June, the Spaniards learned that Chief Carlos was planning an assault on the garrison and Captain Francisco de Reinoso called to him near the fort and killed him outright. **80** The Spaniards appointed a new chief, who they called Don Felipe, at the head of the Calusa. But because Felipe was "on such good terms with us," reported Rogel, "some of his vassals have attempted to kill him [and] these he has punished." "And thus, with the support that he has from the Spaniards," continued Rogel, "he makes himself feared and is served by all of his vassals." **81** In another report, Rogel noted that Felipe's rule depended on repression of internal dissent: "Many of his [Don Felipe's] captains and vassal chieftains so hate him that, were it not for the favor and support of the Christians, long since he would have been killed. Due to this support not only is he free, but has even put to death over fifteen vassal chiefs who tried to kill him." **82** This was the breaking point on whether he would convert to Christianity or not. The Spaniards were hoping that a successful conversion of the Calusa would have a domino effect on southern Florida and bring all the local tribes under Spanish rule. Felipe relied on Spanish support to retain his rule, but this depended on whether or not he would convert. To be officially recognized as a Christian, he would have to abandon the traditional customs that his vassals expected him to follow, particularly the marriage of his sister-in-law, which would compromise his domestic rule. Felipe eventually refused to convert to Christianity

"because it is expedient for him to show to his vassals and to his neighboring kings that he is the legitimate king of this kingdom and because to that end during his childhood they taught and instructed him in all the things that it is expedient for the king to know about the cult and veneration of the idols, if he were suddenly to forsake the idolatry at the beginning of his reign, the aforementioned kings and vassals would say that he was not a legitimate king, as he did not know what kings are obliged to know; that for this reason he had forsaken the cult of the idols and had received the Christian law." **83**



So to consolidate his support at home, Felipe eventually turned on his Spanish allies and directed several attacks against the Spanish garrison at Carlos. In response, Aviles commissioned his nephew Pedro Menendez Marques to “work justice” on Don Felipe. Marques reported that he had “beheaded the said cacique and twenty other Indians among the most guilty.” But the Calusa apparently did not tamely submit as Marques and some of his men returned wounded. **84** Calusa backlash against the death of their two successive leaders forced the Spanish to withdraw from the fort and mission by June 1569. With the death of so many of their principle men, the Calusa rose up, burned their main village, and fled to the forest. **85** While internal instability and political rivalry among the Calusa elite allowed the Spanish to make some headway in controlling the tribe, they failed to consummate their rule on account of the political maneuvering of individual Calusa leaders and defiance of the Calusa majority. Native resistance had now successfully repelled Jesuit missionaries in southern Florida and delayed the evangelization of central Florida. As Spanish missionary and military efforts in south and central Florida came to a halt, the conquest of Florida’s natives was directed more to the north in the province of Guale, who resided along the present-day Georgia coast. In 1571, Menendez de Aviles, in a letter to King Phillip, contemplated why his southern Florida forts and Jesuit missionary efforts had failed: “Indians as a rule are better friends to the French, who let them live in freedom, than to my people and the religious who restrict their way of living; and the French can accomplish more with them in one day than I in a year.” **86**

In June 1569, Father Juan Rogel now directed missionary efforts to the natives of Guale, who lived along the coast of present-day Georgia, hopeful that they would prove more receptive to Christian indoctrination than the Calusa. Finding that the Guale already passed his moral qualifications, Rogel endeavored for six months to diligently learn their Muskogean language. But after three months of preaching, the time for gathering acorns arrived and the natives “scattered throughout those forests, each one to his own place, and came together only at certain feasts, which they held every two months, and this was not always in one place, but at one time and at another in another place.” Frustrated but undeterred, Rogel attempted to follow the Guale around and preach at these occasional gatherings and feasts, but to little avail. When spring came, Rogel suggested that they plant enough ground to remain in one place and gave them hoes to aid in cultivating larger fields. The Gualeans accepted this gift but all excluding two villagers persisted in spreading out, planting fields as far as twenty leagues away from their main town. Their reason was, as Rogel understood, because the soil was so poor that it was quickly exhausted, making it necessary to constantly find new grounds to cultivate.

After eight months of preaching, Rogel was confident that the Guale well-understood the Christian doctrine and began to admonish them to leave their idols behind and convert. “When I began to treat of this,” Rogel recalled, “so great was the vexation and hatred which they received of my words, that never again would they come to listen to me; and they said to my people that they were very angry and did not believe a thing I said, since I spoke ill of the devil.” Rogel apparently associated one of their deities with the devil, which made his Guale audience unreceptive to his preaching from that point on. When the Jesuits abandoned the mission in Guale in July 1570, only seven Guale had been baptized, four children and three adults, all on their deathbeds. Rogel determined to leave the Guale behind when he learned that Capt. Juan de la Vandra, commander of the starving Fort San Felipe, ordered four of the chiefs to send some canoe-loads of corn to the fort. He also quartered forty soldiers among the natives to await the arrival of supplies. Rogel now saw the failure of all his work. If he remained behind, the natives would either turn to him for protection he could not give or revolt and kill him with the others. In either case, their hostility would nullify any further missionary efforts on his part. Sure enough, these grievances mounted and provoked an uprising in Guale shortly after the Jesuits departed. **87**

### **The Unconquered Calusa**

In July 1743, Franciscans Joseph Maria Monaco and Joseph Javier Alana of Cuba reported their experiences, in great detail, with the natives of southern Florida and the Keys:

“The reception that they gave us was very rude...According to their way of thinking, this matter of becoming Christians has no other significance than the receiving of the sacramental water with these conditions [for doing so]: that, without doing their work, the king our lord is supposed to support and cloathe them;...that the superstitions that they are full of are allowed to remain in place; and last, in the teaching of the children, no punishment at all is to be used. [This was] the first condition that the chief proposed to use in the name of all... Their bold proposal of these conditions is born of their being convinced that in admitting our religion in any manner, they are doing us a great favor. They went so far as to say to us that if we were to have to build a church in their village, we would have to pay a daily wage to the Indians, and that if Spaniards were to have to come to settle they would have to

pay tribute to the cacique of the lands, which belong to him, he said, and not to the King of Spain.” **88**

This was after southern Florida natives were largely decimated by Creek and Yamasee raids, reducing the entire South Florida population to only five hundred natives, including 180 Calusa. If the small remnants of southern Floridians still persevered in preserving their cultural and religious traditions, what chance did Franciscan missionaries have when the Calusa were still a major power in South Florida?

Prior to Ponce De Leon’s fatal return to Florida in 1521, the Cordova expedition landed in South Florida in the vicinity of the Calusa in 1517. Among the expedition was Anton de Alaminos, pilot for Ponce De Leon’s first voyage in 1513. Alaminos found himself in a familiar location and recognized the landing spot as Charlotte Harbor on the southwest coast of Florida, where had previously landed with Ponce de Leon. When the soldiers went in search of water, they received a surprise attack from the Calusa. Bernal de Diaz, best-known as chronicler for Cortes in Mexico, reported: “These Indians carried very long bows and good arrows and lances and some weapons like swords, and they were clad in deerskins and were very big men. They came straight on and let fly their arrows and at once wounded six of us, and to me they dealt a slight arrow wound.” The Spaniards resisted the assault and killed twenty natives, but Cordoba would die ten days later from his wounds in Cuba. **89** In the early 1500’s, a wave of Taino refugees from the Caribbean forewarned the Calusa of the foreign intruders and their brutal tactics of conquest. The Calusa sent out a Spanish-speaking native to stall Ponce de Leon’s expedition before an organized assault repelled the Spaniards. Prior to 1517, illegal slave-raiding excursions had been launched from Cuba and were said to have captured three hundred Florida natives. **90** The additional enmity ingrained in the Calusa from these slave raids spelled out a death sentence for Cordova in 1517 and Ponce de Leon in 1521. It appears that as early as this first encounters with the Spanish, the tribe formed a conscious policy of isolation and resistance against European colonialism. For the next two and half centuries, the Calusa managed to preserve their traditional cultural customs and religious beliefs against aggressive Spanish missionary efforts. The Calusa remained one of the few tribes in Florida that wasn’t converted to Christianity or subjugated to Spanish rule for the entire period of Spanish colonialism in Florida.

Yet the drastic effects of the European presence on Floridian natives can be put into perspective with the Calusa, who resided in south Florida for several millennia but practically disappeared only three hundred years after the Spanish made their first

*entrada* into Florida. The Calusa were originally a Muskogee tribe that migrated from Georgia. They were hunter-gatherers but lived in a sedentary, complex society. Although they didn't produce an agricultural surplus, the Calusas were able to develop a complex social hierarchy because they obtained subsistence from the rich inshore food resources of the southwest Florida coast. **91** The Calusa were almost a mini-version of the Aztecs with their polarized social hierarchy based upon the religious status quo. In fact, a Spaniard described their head ruler, Carlos, in terms of the renowned Aztec ruler: "the greatest of the kings, with the renown of Montesuma." The Calusa was said to "masters of a part of the country" extending from the Keys all the way up to Lake Okeechobee. The chief exacted tribute from local tribes much like the Aztecs. The natives around Okeechobee were said to have paid tribute to the Calusa in "fish, game, roots, deer-skin, etc." The natives of the Keys were also subjects of the Calusa, as was a chief who lived "four or five days journey from Calos" near Cape Canaveral. **92** Thus the Calusa were by far the supreme native authority in South Florida and held onto their monopoly of power all the way until 1711. It was reported by a 1612 Spanish expedition that the Calusa had seventy towns under their rule and a great many more that paid tribute to them out of fear. **93**

After the failed missionary activities in Calusa territory from 1567-1571, one captive Spaniard recalled that "Christianity was forbidden among them." **94** The Calusa proved violently resistant to Spaniard conversion attempts. In 1549, three Dominican priests were killed in a missionary excursion to South Florida. This was in the wake of three failed Spanish military expeditions. Following the failed missionary excursions, "it seemed as if death guarded the avenues to the country." **95** In 1565, Pedro Menendez de Aviles sailed up the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of Florida, setting up small military outposts and garrisons in native villages to establish military and political power over native peoples. During this time period, the Jesuits preached in ten or eleven different sites. In five of these locations, outright hostility from the natives prevented prolonged missionary occupation, but all eleven of these sites were to fail over a seven year period. The Spaniards killed two of the Calusa kings in order to suppress the tribe, but Calusa hostility drove out the Spanish garrison at Charlotte Harbor. After seven years of attempting to colonize South Florida, the Jesuit missionaries gave up and left in 1573. **96** A missionary excursion that went down into southern Florida in 1680 found that the Calusa dominated all the towns in the southern part of the peninsula and forced them to pay tribute to their chief, who was known as "Not loved." **97** The missionaries were unable to make much progress because South Florida natives feared the Calusa threat of chiefly assassination if the Spanish were allowed to penetrate into the Calusa territory. **98**

After their mass conversion in 1608, the chiefs of Tocobaga, Poyoy, and Calusa began harassing the newly Christianized Timucuan towns in central Florida. This was until 1612, when Captain Juan Rodriguez de Cartaya made Timucua safe for Christianity with a gunboat excursion up and down the Gulf Coast of Florida. The Spanish captain recorded that he had “pacified” every chief from the Calusa to the Apalachee with a gunboat “built on the river going to the provinces,” and “he reduced those chiefs to the obedience of Juan Fernandez de Olivera in the name of Your Majesty, in everything respecting the religious on the frontier.” Cartaya claims that because he understood “the nature of Indians,” he was able “to subject that coast to peace for the first time, when it formerly had attracted many ships of enemies.” Even the Calusa chief Carlos, “the most powerful of all that coast,” sent word that “he wanted no more war with Christians.” The conquest was concluded with peace treaties ratified by the exchange of gifts. **99** Yet in 1614, the Calusa sent a fleet of three hundred canoes to the province of Mococo in modern-day Tampa Bay where they slaughtered five hundred Spanish-allied natives in two towns and sent the twelve wounded survivors to St. Augustine as a warning for the Spanish not to interfere. **100** Sometime in 1688, the Calusa chief sent out word that he was willing to accept Franciscan missionaries and convert to Christianity. **101** But in 1697, when the Calusa discovered that conversion would not bring them the kind of gifts they had been led to expect, they stripped the missionaries of their clothing, food, and ornaments, abandoning them on Matecumbe Key. **102**

How the Calusas met their end can be attributed to several causes, primarily a dwindling population from European diseases and political fragmentation, which made them vulnerable to British-backed Creek and Yamasee raids in Florida at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their population was originally recorded at 20,000 on the first census of 1560. But by 1650 it was believed that only three thousand natives remained under Calusa dominion. **103** By 1695, the Calusa chief was only in control of two thousand natives, although many of their towns were still in their original locations along the southwest Florida coast. **104**

But it was the colonial conflict between Spanish Florida and the British Carolinas, as well as the growing native slave trade in the Southeast, that brought forth the complete decimation of the Calusa. While the Calusa had managed to resist European conquest for over two centuries, they were overrun and decimated by a string of Creek and Yamasee slave raids in only seven years. Between 1704 and 1706, British-allied Creek and Yamasee slave raids completely tore apart the Apalachee, Guale, and Timucua provinces of northern and central Florida. For these two years, the mission system to the north bore the brunt of the assaults and raids. But the complete genocide of northern and

central Florida by 1706 left the Calusa and other southern Florida natives now open and vulnerable. The British-backed slave raids made their way deep into the heart of the southern peninsula. **105**

In 1705, Carolinian “Indian trader” Thomas Nairne reported: “we the Indians and colonists have these past two years been entirely knifing all the Indian towns in Florida.” **106** Nairne described one of these raids in the form a map with a legend that shows how he and a band of 33 Yamasee raiders took the inland waterway down into Florida, traveled south along the St. John’s River, and disembarked at central Florida’s Lake District, where they headed deep into south Florida “to go a Slave Catching.” They fought two skirmishes, killed thirty-three warriors armed with spears, and captured thirty-five slaves. **107** In 1708, Nairne reported that Florida was depopulated of its natives, that the Yamasees were “now obliged to goe down as farr on the point of Florida as the firm land will permit,” and that “they have drove the Floridians to the Islands of the Cape, have brought in and sold many hundreds of them, and dayly now continue that trade so that in some few years thay’le reduce these barbarians to farr less number.” **108** From 1704 to 1711, refugees fled north to St. Augustine or south to the Florida Keys, and as many as ten thousand natives were captured and enslaved for the British markets, ultimately resulting in a thorough depopulation of South Florida. Spanish assistance didn’t arrive until 1711, when two Spanish ships transported 270 refugees in the vicinity of Miami and the Florida Keys to Havana. But within three months, two hundred of the refugees died from a plague of typhus and smallpox. The remnants were dispersed about Cuba. **109**

The migration of South Florida native refugees either north to the protection of St. Augustine or south to the Florida Keys meant a considerable reduction in available slaves for the Carolinian market. By 1712 and 1713, British slave raiders began to enslave their own Yamasee and Lower Creek allies, which resulted in the 1715 Yamasee uprising against the British Carolinas. The disaffected Yamasees and Lower Creek allied with their former enemies the Spanish and the Apalachee, took refuge at St. Augustine, and repopulated much of northern Florida. Although British-allied Creeks continued to make slave raids into Spanish Florida, the buffer of Yamasee settlements to the north provided a brief respite for South Floridian natives. **110** By 1748, it was estimated that only five hundred natives continued to occupy South Florida, including 180 Calusa. **111** However, by 1757, the entire Florida peninsula had become overrun by British-allied Creeks who began a series of devastating attacks against the South Floridian natives inhabiting Miami and the Keys. The few survivors of a 1757 assault abandoned the peninsula south to Havana. On May 17, 1760, the final blow was delivered by a raiding

party of Creeks in Key West, who burned their village and boat, and destroyed their canoes and fisheries. The sixty to seventy remaining survivors evacuated to Cuba, signaling the end of native occupation of South Florida. **112**

### **The Guale Revolts (1573-1601): Attempts to “Remove such a Heavy Yoke”**

Franciscan missionaries first arrived to St. Augustine and Santa Elena in 1573 and two years later began evangelization efforts in the native chiefdoms of Guale and Orista. The friars endured none of the hardships that the Jesuits had faced only five to six years earlier. Instead they found that just by “touching a bell” they could “draw a great crowd of men, women, and children.” The Spaniards were elated that the cacique of Guale and his wife, as well as all of his followers, converted and were baptized at Santa Elena. Governor Diego de Velasco and his wife showered gifts onto the Guale to ratify their new Christian alliance. Spanish treasury official Bartolome Martinez, later writing an official testimony of the early missionary efforts, clearly saw right through the Guales’ motives:

“The chief was named Don Diego de Valdez [sic] after the General, and his wife was named Dona Maria Menendez after the General’s wife, Governor Pedro Menendez’s daughter. These were their godparents and paid for the greater part if not all of the presents which the illustrious gentlemen gave the Indians that they might become Christians.” **113**

The Guale understood this as reciprocal gift-giving. The mass Guale conversion and baptism were not intended to be an authentic profession of Christian faith, but a gift to the Christians in return for gifts, part of the native process of large-scale gift-exchanges to ratify political alliances. The Guale were appeasing Spanish missionary efforts and receiving gifts in return, believing that the Spaniards were political equals and allies rather than overlords. What Spanish officials styled as “tribute” was actually the native end of the gift exchange. This is why the Spanish misunderstanding that the Guale conversion signified a willing subordination on their behalf led to adverse consequences. Only a year after the Guale converted to Christianity, a traumatic revolt tore apart the fragile Spanish missionary gains in Florida. The 1576 revolt was the native response to various long-held native grievances: the quartering of troops in their towns, unpaid labor, the unjust “tribute” of maize and other supplies, and the seizure of their valuables.

Governor Diego de Velasco understood that the gifting was mutual between the Guale and Spanish, but hypocritically used this understanding to justify an attempt to snatch a *brazas* of pearls from the Guale cacique, who then swallowed them. In addition, Velasco and Captain Alonso de Solis took several brazas of native “money” and some canoas from the natives without compensation. The Spanish began to demand more labor and provisions without providing anything in return. The cacique of Guale complained that the “Spanish had made him Christian in order to make him serve and steal his property.”

**114** The very concept of paying tribute was enough to provoke Guale hostility, as it broke the process of mutual gift-exchange, the glue that bonded their political alliance. The failure of nearly every Spanish fort and garrison in Florida only several years earlier could be attributed to the unwillingness of native chiefdoms to enter into one-sided gift-giving circles. **115**

In 1576, a virulent epidemic broke out throughout the Spanish colonies, claiming two million native lives and spreading to Florida. **116** The depopulation left Guale and Orista lacking farmers to till the soil and laborers to service the Spaniards, so they refused to meet the Spanish food and labor demands. The revolt was sparked when the Guale nobility revolted against their kowtowing cacique and fatally wounded him with an arrow shot. Although the Guale chief was “half in revolt himself,” Captain Alonso de Solis handed out severe punishments for murdering their Christian lackey. He stabbed the chief’s brother for “his much talking,” hanged the chief’s nephew and heir, beat a native of middle status, and cut off another’s ear. He garroted the chief’s son Perico who fired the fatal arrow himself. **117** Solis was said to have murdered three caciques, “they being very important Indians, much thought of in the land,” including one named Humalo who had even visited Madrid. **118** The severe repression backfired and sent all of the native provinces under Spanish rule into a frenzy. At the time, an escort of three royal treasury officials, with a notary and five soldiers, were traveling up the inland waterway with the payroll,

“and near the village they call Guale they stopped to talk with the Indians. One of them, who was the cacique, told them that they should land, and eat and rest themselves...and they did so: and the moment they landed, the Indians of the said village killed them all, for of the said nine persons not one was left alive.” **119**

In July, the local Orista village refused to supply Fort San Felipe, being short of provisions, and a detachment of twenty-two men was sent to take them by force. But





Timucua Warfare, engraving by Theodore De Bry based on the drawings of Huguenot artist Jacques Le Moyne, ca. 1564. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

once they reached there, the natives convinced the men to lay down their arms on the grounds that their women and children were afraid they were going to be killed. Once they did, the natives ambushed and killed the entire command. Captain Solis was dispatched from Santa Elena, but was ambushed and killed with eight of his soldiers. The Guale and Orista then commenced a well-organized, two-thousand man strong siege on San Felipe, killing several men inside and forcing the Spaniards to withdraw to St. Augustine. Afterwards, the natives overran the fort and burned it down. **120** San Felipe was eventually restored and renamed San Marcos in 1579. From there, Governor Pedro Menendez Marques waged a war of terror and repression against the Guale and Orista rebels. In that year alone, his troops burned down twenty towns and destroyed their standing crops, food stores, and canoas for 45 leagues up and down the coast and inland as far as north-central Florida. **121** He attacked the rebel stronghold and fortified town of Cocapoy, twenty leagues from San Marcos, capturing the cacique, his mother, a son, and the son's wife and burning alive forty natives in their homes. **122** The brutal scorched-

earth tactics successfully routed the rebels and both sides agreed to a truce by late 1579.

**123**

The peace failed to last though. In 1580, two thousand Guale retook San Marcos in an apparent attempt to shift their alliance from the Spanish to the French. Shortly after the Spanish reestablished themselves at the fort, the Guale once again revolted in 1582 – an official report in July feared that “there was no remedy for it.” **124** After a truce was forged in 1583, another Guale uprising broke out from 1584 and 1585, confining the Spaniards into San Marcos fearful of going out for food and water because the natives were killing any Spaniards they found. **125** In 1586, the English privateer Sir Francis Drake destroyed the fort and pillaged the settlement of St. Augustine, but obtained little more than what goods he could buy from the natives of a local village, who had looted the city before Drake could. **126** In 1588, after twelve years of almost constant war with the Guale and Orista, the settlers at Santa Elena left for the rebuilt St. Augustine, which was now chosen as the main *presidio* of Spanish Florida. **127** The Guale and Orista could now reclaim their homelands and return back to their lives after twenty years of Spanish missionary efforts and military occupation. This was despite the fact that the Floridian natives were now suffering from the Cape Verde Island fever that had transmitted from Drake’s ships. **128** For seven years, there were “no churches or convents and few signs of Spaniards” in Guale. In San Pedro, the only Christian native town, they lived “without Mass or sacraments” because “in all Florida there was only one cleric, very old.” **129** After twenty years of missions and military conquest, there was little evidence that the Spanish had ever even set foot in Guale or Orista, who had both proven completely impervious to Spanish religious and cultural systems. This all changed in 1595, when the caciques of both Ais and Guale promised to accept missionaries, send laborers to St. Augustine, and report the presence of foreigners. Franciscan missionaries entered the chiefdoms, erected churches, diligently learned the Ais and Guale languages, and began the task of conversion where their predecessors had failed. **130**

In 1597, native unrest simultaneously broke out across Florida. The Ais refused to let the Spanish soldiers land in their territory because they took what they wanted from their food store without compensation. Governor Mendez de Canzo retaliated with an unprovoked attack on their main village of Surruque, killing seventy unoffending men, women, and children. This expedition enslaved fifty more to be distributed out among the settlers of St. Augustine. **131** The Calusa also repelled the unwelcome Franciscans from their territory. **132** A much more far-reaching revolt broke out in Guale, turning back Spanish missionary gains in the province and throwing off Spanish authority for four long years. What was the cause of the sudden Florida native revolt against Spanish rule?

Floridian natives were hard-hit from an epidemic that broke out in the summer of 1596. One possibility was that the measles epidemic in central Mexico spread shipboard to Florida. Smallpox was also an epidemic during this time. But it was also possible that the bubonic plague had now reached Florida. From 1592 to 1593, an outbreak of the bubonic plague in London reached Mexico and the Pacific Coast, causing a serious biological disaster for all of the “frontier tribes.” As natives were clearly aware that the diseases emanated from the whites, the plague generally “triggered a Native American nativist movement.” **133** Missionary activities had supposedly “reduced the Gualeans to a state of docility, or acquiescence.” **134** But all it would take was a triggering incident to unleash their hidden resentment. In September, trouble began when the Franciscans in the province pushed their limits. The friars repressed long-held Guale marriage customs and interfered with tribal hereditary rights. In the Guale town of Tolomato, Friar Pedro de Corpa ordered a cacique Juanillo, eldest son and heir to the cacique of Guale, to give up all of his wives but one, publicly reprimanding him because “although he was a Christian, he conducted himself worse than a heathen.” Already humiliated at the public reprimand and unwilling to give into Christian monogamy, Juanillo refused. So Father Corpa, in conjunction with Father Blas de Rodriguez, deprived him of his hereditary rights when it became his turn to serve as temporary head of the tribal council. In his place, the friars chose a Christianized native “Don Francisco,” who was more attentive to their demands. **135**

Juanillo fled the village and returned several days later, “bringing numbers of Indian braves with their bows and arrows and bedecked with large feather headpieces,” who murdered Father Corpa in the middle of the night. The Christian lackey Francisco also joined in the revolt. When word spread of the act, the majority of the tribe, “who felt themselves no less oppressed than the cacique’s son,” assembled the next day to hear Juanillo speak. Juanillo encouraged them to join his revolt:

“The friar is dead. He would not have been killed had he let us live as we did before we became Christians. Let us return to our ancient customs and prepare to defend ourselves against the retribution the governor of Florida will attempt against us. If he has his way, on account of this friar, it will be as severe as if we had done away with all of them. Because of this friar we have killed, he would attack us the same way he would on behalf of all of them.” **136**

Juanillo's speech revealed the deep resentment that the Guale harbored against the Spanish missionaries:

“Let us restore the liberty of which these friars' have robbed us, with promises of benefits which we have not seen, in hope of which they wish that those of us who call ourselves Christians experience at once the losses and discomforts: they take from us women, leaving us only one and that in perpetuity, prohibiting us from changing her; they obstruct our dances, banquets, feasts, celebrations, fires, and wars, so that by failing to use them we lose the ancient valor and dexterity inherited from our ancestors; they persecute our old people calling them witches; even our labor disturbs them, since they want to command us to avoid it on some days, and be prepared to execute all that they say, although they are not satisfied; they always reprimand us, injure us, oppress us, preach to us, call us bad Christians, and deprive us of all happiness, which our ancestors enjoyed, with the hope that they will give us heaven. These are deceptions in order to subject us, in holding us disposed after their manner; already what can we expect, except to be slaves? If now we kill all of them, we will remove such a heavy yoke immediately...” **137**

“The multitude agreed with this view” and prepared for an all-out offensive against the Spanish missions. The rebels decapitated the dead friar, placed his head on a spike as a trophy of their victory, and threw his body in the woods where it was never found. Then they scoured the province murdering every single friar they found and razing the missions to the ground. This revolt demolished the fragile mission system of Spanish Florida. The rebels killed five of the friars in the province, only sparing one missionary who they enslaved. **138** Next they passed to the town of Topiqui where Friar Blas Rodriguez resided in the local mission. Having taken part in depriving Juanillo of his hereditary rights, he was the obvious next target after Corpa. The rebels charged into the mission and informed the friar that they had come to kill him. They conceded the friar his request to say mass before doing so. After he was finished, the natives attacked him with clubs and axes, throwing his body outside for the animals to eat. **139** The next town was Assopo where a Friar Miguel de Aunon and a Friar Antonio Badajoz resided. They were aware of the oncoming rebels and began to say mass and administer the sacrament to each other. The friars prayed in anticipation of their murderers. Four hours later, the rebels arrived, immediately killing Antonio with the first club swing and delivering two fatal blows to Miguel. They once again threw their bodies outside for the animals. **140**

The native rebels quickly left to the next town of Asao where a Friar Francisco de Velascola resided. They entered the town only to find, with great disappointment, that Francisco was visiting St. Augustine and wouldn't return for several days. They hid in the bushes at the river bank where the friar would embark on his return. Once Francisco arrived to the set destination, the natives surrounded him and took him by the shoulders, delivering multiple blows with clubs and axes until he was dead. **141** The rebels headed out to the town of Ospo where a friar Francisco Avila resided in the local mission. Hearing the noise outside of his door in the middle of the night, he retreated into the countryside under the cover of dark. Although he hid himself in some bushes, the natives managed to pierce his shoulders with three arrows. They would have killed him if one of the rebels hadn't intervened and taken the friar's poor clothing for his own use. They bounded the naked friar and took him back to the towns as a slave. **142** There he suffered ten months of harsh imprisonment. "A leading Indian woman" convinced the Guale chief to give the Spaniards their hostage Father Avilo for her son who was held as a laborer in St. Augustine. **143**

As the revolt gathered more steam, it looked as if it would snowball into a complete destruction of the Franciscan missionary gains in Florida. Natives throughout Guale gathered to destroy the missionaries and their native lackeys. They commenced an attack on the Christian island town of San Pedro with over forty canoes. But as the rebels approached the island they found a supply ship in the harbor where they planned to disembark. They didn't know that the ship only carried one soldier and a handful of sailors. As the rebels doubted whether or not to push forward, the Christianized cacique of San Pedro took advantage of their confusion to counterattack. A greater number of canoes repelled the rebel assault. The chief triumphantly collected a number of the enemy's canoes and received many presents of gratitude from the friars. The rebels who weren't able to retreat in their canoes jumped ashore to land where they would eventually starve in the woods. **144** To repress the revolt, treasury official Bartolome Arguelles suggested that Governor Canzo send their loyal native allies and the Spanish troops in a campaign against Guale "to follow the coast and rivers and seize their canoas in which they go about to the islands for food, and burn their villages and cut down their maize and other crops, and capture some of them." **145** These were the tactics Canzo would now apply. He renewed the collective punishment strategy and brutal slash-and-burn policy that had proven so effective in repressing the Guale revolt twenty years earlier. Because the rebels were hidden in the swamps waiting in ambush, Governor Canzo ordered their towns, cornfields, and their granaries to be burned, creating a famine that decimated much of the tribe: "he succeeded only in burning their maize fields, for the aggressors

retreated to the swamps and the mountains hindered punitive measures except for the hunger that immediately followed the field-burning, from which many Indians died.”

**146** Father Luis Geronimo de Ore recalled the brutal tactics that had “pacified” the province of Guale:

“Since all the Indians were hidden in the woods, the governor could neither punish nor get in touch with them. They burned the maizefields and foodstuffs of the Indians...On this account and due to what followed, during the subsequent years they had no maize harvest. Moreover since they were removed from the sea, they could neither fish nor gather shellfish, with the result that they suffered great hunger. Though the Indians sowed, it was little, while the Spaniards destroyed it ever year, by which they understood it was a punishment of God for having killed the fathers.”

**147**

By 1601, the majority of rebels had surrendered, excluding Juanillo, Francisco, and a large number of their followers - all who had initiated the uprising. Governor Canzo agreed to pardon the rebels who surrendered if they agreed to fight against the remainders and organized an expedition against the last rebel stronghold of Ysusinique. The remaining rebels had established themselves there and procured sufficient provisions and weapons to defend themselves. They bravely repelled the first attack on the town. The second attack was a general assault, which successfully destroyed the town, killing and scalping Juanillo and Francisco along with twenty-four of their principle followers. The few rebels left were captured and enslaved. **148** In the aftermath of the revolt, the mission system in Guale was little but ash and ruins. But over the several years that followed, the Franciscans made successful efforts to restore the missions in the province. After successfully “pacifying” the natives, it devoted effort to aid and rebuild the devastated missions. The Gualeans remained under the “heavy yoke” of Spanish rule until their numbers were almost completely reduced, and were then virtually eliminated, with every other Floridian tribe, by the British-backed Creek excursions at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The Apalachee Revolt of 1647**

In 1676, Fray Alonso Moral, who had served for thirty-three years in Florida's missions, gave a vivid depiction of native suffering under the oppressive *repartimiento* system:

“All the Natives of those provinces suffer great servitude, injuries, and vexations from the fact that the governors, lieutenants, and soldiers oblige them to carry loads on their shoulders to the Province of Apalachee and to other areas and also to bring loads from those regions to the fort of St. Augustine. And it usually happens that to enhance their own interests they pretend that this work is in Your Majesty's service, without paying them what is just for such intolerable work. And if now and again they give them something for that reason, it is a hoe or an ax or a cheap blanket or some other thing of such slight value to pay for their work, which involves carrying a cargo on their shoulders from the fort to the Province of Apalachee, which is eighty leagues distant, and the same return. . . . And in addition to this, in order to employ them further, they detain them in St. Augustine for as long as they wish . . . with very short rations, such as giving them only two pounds of corn a day and giving them for pay, at the most, one real for each day of work, which sum is usually given them in the form of old rubbish of little or no value or utility to them. Add to this the further vexation or injury of being snatched by force from their homes and villages, not only for tasks at the fort but also for work for private citizens, and this in the rigor of winter (when they come naked) or in the middle of summer, which is when they are most occupied in the labor of their crops on which solely depends not only their sustenance and that of their wives and children but also the victuals necessary for the relief of the garrison. . . . Each year from Apalachee alone more than three hundred are brought to the fort at the time of the planting of the corn, carrying their food on their shoulders for more than eighty leagues with the result that some on arrival die and those who survive do not return to their homes because the governor and the other officials detain them in the fort so they may serve them and this without paying them a wage. . . . This is the reason according to the commonly held opinion that they are being annihilated at such a rate.” **149**

How were the once proud and powerful Apalachee reduced to this state of humiliating degradation and poverty? It was through conquest and the unbearable “terms” of “pacification” under Spanish rule. Even when missionaries were first welcome into the Apalachee chiefdom, the caciques refused to consent to large numbers of their best men being forced hundreds of miles away to labor for the Spaniards. While they did

provide laborers to carry burdens and supplied St. Augustine with abundant provisions, this exploitative and devastating system could not be enforced on Apalachee until after the Spanish adequately conquered the “province.” Afterwards Apalachee’s most important commodity became its human labor.

The paid labor draft, or *repartimiento*, was a system of labor tribute that required common native laborers for construction on the civic projects or work in the maize fields surrounding St. Augustine, as well as the wheat fields, or *haciendas*, that individual Spanish settlers established in the native provinces. The *repartimiento* system subjected the Apalachee, Timucua, and Guale to a labor draft that seasonally forced hundreds of common native laborers to work for the “public good,” but was abused for the profit of private individuals, mostly wealthy settlers, officials, and political cronies. In the short-term, the labor draft system bolstered the individual authority of caciques over their peoples and gained them the competitive benefits of Spanish power and protection against rival tribes and chiefs. In the long-term, it increased direct interaction with the Spanish and quickened the flow of European pathogens to native populations, exploited native labor to exhaustion, directly threatened tribal status system by siphoning away principle warriors to labor at St. Augustine, and sped up the “race to the bottom” through increasing political fragmentation. But it was the majority of native commoners who felt the most adverse affects of burden-bearing and labor tribute. Historian Amy Bushnell noted:

“The logistical problem of getting all the supplies to all the doctrineros and, no less important, of getting deerskins and rescates to and from the ports, was apparently insoluble without using human beings as beasts of burden. The caciques cooperated, objecting only when the burdening affected them. The commoners, for the time being, did as they were told. When the opportunity came, they would simply walk away-from the convent, the Castillo, and the council house-for theirs would be a rebellion against all the authorities: friars, governors, floridanos, and caciques.” **150**

Prior to the Apalachee revolt of 1647, this is what occurred in Guale. When the government’s “Indian fund” depleted, there was no money to pay *repartimiento* laborers. Yet the Spaniards continued to demand native labor. So in 1645, the Guale commoners abandoned their towns en masse - a revolt against the friars, the Spanish government, and their own chiefs. This general strike of Guale commoners served as a precursor to the



Apalachee revolt two years later. A report from St. Augustine feared that the revolt would spread to the other mission towns:

“For some years now they have been behaving suspiciously, which we blame on the poor collection of the situados and the shortages in what Your Majesty customarily gives them annually. Two years ago many of those in Guale abandoned their towns (that of Satuache totally) to retire among infieles, setting a poor example to other Christians. We have them just about reduced to their pueblos and doctrinas now and some of the ringleaders have been brought to this presidio. This, Sire, demands a remedy, for this presidio cannot conserve itself without the services of these natives.” **151**

Between fifty and a hundred thousand Apalachee resided on the Florida panhandle and present-day lower Alabama before Ponce de Leon arrived in 1513. The chiefdom of Apalachee was approximately located between the Aucilla and Appalachian rivers in present-day Leon County, with its center at present-day Tallahassee. By 1608, European-introduced diseases had reduced their population more than fifty percent to 36,000. From 1607 to 1633, missionaries that made way into Apalachee received friendly invitations from many chiefs to establish a permanent presence in the province. **152** With their reduced population and strength, some of the Apalachee caciques apparently considered the Spanish potentially valuable allies for their protection and strength. But the majority of native commoners were opposed to a missionary presence in their territory and the Apalachee chiefs were unable to impose upon their subordinates for quite some time. The Franciscans were forced to delay the establishment of missions in Apalachee because “some of the Indians obey their chiefs poorly.” In 1612, the Franciscans requested more soldiers from the King so that “the chiefs with the favor and aid of your majesty could subdue their Indians.” **153** The Franciscan efforts to restrict polygamy and casual sexual unions also provoked Apalachee hostility. Fray Luis Gerónimo de Oré stressed the need for soldiers in the province: “In Apalachee the priests are not able to have peace with the Indians for there is much for which they should be taken to task; for instance the extirpation of their immoral practices which are of the worst kind.” **154** The Franciscans triggered a revolt in Guale only twenty years early by attempting to ban traditional customs and marginalizing chiefs that disobeyed. Now they were forced out of Apalachee on two separate occasions for the same arrogant demeanor. But by 1633, the Spanish finally established a missionary

presence in the country. One thousand Apalachee were baptized within the first five years of the Franciscan missionary presence. **155**

The Spanish garrison of St. Augustine is notable for being an undermanned, underequipped, unsettled, and impoverished outpost of the Spanish Empire. Spain colonized Florida for its wider strategic utility in the Gulf and Caribbean rather than for its potential raw material exports. While the Spanish failed to develop any sort of self-sustaining plantation economy in Florida, this is because they arrogantly believed that they would control and direct the labor of the surrounding native provinces, which would accordingly supply the settlement with cheap labor, goods, and supplies. The lack of Florida's internal development required an extensive support system to sustain St. Augustine. This meant complete dependency on other Spanish colonies and, ultimately, the interior native provinces for subsistence and labor. Although this occurred to a limited extent in Guale and Timucua, the realization of a large native labor force and fertile agricultural fields supplying the food and labor needs of the Spanish city were not met until the missionaries entered Apalachee.

Around the time that missionary efforts began in Apalachee, the Guale and Timucuan provinces around St. Augustine were severely diminished in numbers, unable to adequately provision the *presidio* with food or labor. St. Augustine's food and labor shortages had grown more frequent. Cuba and the other Spanish colonies had also become increasingly unreliable in their shipments of food and supplies. But the entrance of missionaries into Apalachee soon made way for the Spanish government to meet its economic and strategic needs and interests. Initially Franciscan missions in Apalachee relied on provisions from St. Augustine and native burden-bearers to carry food and supplies to the missionary *doctrineros*. So the friars could dine on their favorite Spanish dishes instead of Apalachee food, dozens of native commoners were forced to make round-trip excursions hundreds of miles away to St. Augustine carrying burdens on their backs like pack-mules. And as long as their chiefs enjoyed the gifts and privileges of Spanish alliance, and were themselves not affected by the burdening, they didn't complain. In 1637, a port was established at Apalachee Bay to import supplies from Havana. But the port of San Marcos was a distance from the *doctrineros* and still required native burden-bearers to carry supplies to the missions. **156** The first soldiers were dispatched to Apalachee in 1638, possibly to repress some minor "Indian disturbances" caused by opposition to burdening. Barcia noted of that year: "Indians of Apalachee warred on the Spaniards, and the governor of Florida opposed them with few men. But despite the small number of men the governor was able to secure from the fort, he

humbled the Indians' pride, forcing them to withdraw to their provinces, where he continued to pursue them to good effect.” **157**

In 1639, everything changed. In what was a year of food shortage at St. Augustine, a frigate sailed from the city for two weeks in an eight hundred mile excursion to Apalachee Bay and returned with corn and other foods. Thereafter, Apalachee, with its rich grain and maize fields, became more of a supplier than a receiver of goods. Not only could Apalachee now feed St. Augustine but also produced enough maize and beans, hogs, chicken, and dried turkey to sustain the growing population of Havana. Apalachee quickly became the trade hub of Spanish Florida to the detriment and growing opposition of the natives. Government officials, friars, soldiers, and traders in Spanish Florida all began to reap the profits of exploiting the cheap labor and trade opportunities available in the province, which culminated into a number of abuses resulting in the devastating revolt of 1647. **158**

By 1643, only eight Apalachee chiefs had converted to Christianity out of forty overall, hardly a sufficient percentage calling for the drastic increase in the Spanish presence that was occurring. **159** In 1645, Governor Salazar established a large wheat and cattle *hacienda* on the eastern border of Apalachee - on lands belonging to chief of Asile. From this *hacienda*, cattle roamed onto Apalachee maize fields and destroyed their crops. The soldiers also forced native laborers to work without pay and provide them a portion of their produce. Although the port had opened at San Marcos to relieve the natives of burdening, there was increasing demands of native labor to carry provisions and supplies to and from St. Augustine for the missions, the soldiers, and the governor's *hacienda*. **160** The friars attacked the Florida governors for seeking to personally profit at the expense of the natives:

“Unbounded greed has been the lodestone that has guided wills of the governors Damian de Vega, Benito Ruiz de Salazar, and Nicholas Ponce, predecessors of don Diego de Rebello, and the target of which they have aimed in placing a lieutenant and soldiers in the province of Apalachee; the objective was none other than their private interest and convenience, without heeding those pertaining to the service of your majesty and the welfare of the Indians. The one in particular about whom this can be said, more than about his predecessor, is Governor Benito Ruiz. For, that he had soldiery in the aforesaid province was (as is evident) in order to have people there for the utility and work of the hacienda, which he had on the lands of the chiefdom of Asile (alongside those of Apalachee) to the injury and loss of the Indians

and very much against the will of the cacique, who, to the degree that he tolerated it, did so because he saw that it was done with the powerful arm of the governor.” **161**

In 1651, the King acknowledged that although “the haciendas would be useful in the future for sustenance” of the colony, that “up to now they have been a great burden on the Indians-an obstruction to the newly converted and a hindrance to the reduction of the infidels.” **162** He implied that Salazar’s *hacienda* provoked the 1647 revolt and called for governors and officials to put a stop to native abuses as they obstructed missionary efforts. Efforts of the government to purchase mules to replace native bearers immediately after the revolt also indicate that excessive burdening from the *hacienda* played a significant factor. **163**

But it was reported that the friars were involved in abusing and exploiting their converts as well. The friars worked them without pay and arbitrarily and excessively abused them without cause, randomly beating and kicking them in spurts of rage and anger. They would only permit the Apalachee to sell their goods through the missions, who would purchase cheap and sell high to the Spanish soldiers on the pretext that the “profits were reserved for God.” The friars also imposed harsh restrictions on native social traditions. They had prohibited the Apalachee from playing their ballgame and engaging in ceremonial dances that were interpreted as pagan customs. A report on the causes of the revolt later found that “the Indians strongly asserted that they were not slaves and should not have to submit to such indignities. They especially resented this treatment because they were Christians and had obeyed all the Father’s orders.” **164** These restrictions incensed many of the Apalachee, especially the non-converts and recent converts who comprised most of the rebels. The growing Spanish presence increased their fears that they would be forced to adopt these new ways.

On February 19, 1647, tensions finally erupted and demolished the Spanish presence in the province. The rebels, comprised of non-converted Apalachees, Chiscas, and recent converts, murdered eight Spaniards during an evening celebration at the mission San Antonio de Bacuqua. Three of Apalachee’s eight friars were killed and the other five escaped with the assistance of the Christian natives. All eight of the missions were burned along with the crosses. The rebels also murdered the governor’s deputy Claudio Luis De Forencia along with several of his family members. The soldiers were able to escape because they were just outside the province attending to the wheat fields at the governor’s *hacienda*. Thirty soldiers, under the command of Captain Don Martin de Cuevas, were hastily dispatched from St. Augustine to quell the rebellion, enlisting the



“Outina’s Order of March,” engraving by Theodore De Bry based on the drawings of Huguenot artist Jacques Le Moyne, ca. 1564. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

help of about five to six hundred Timucuan warriors on route to the province. But the rebel numbers had expanded to somewhere around five to eight thousand by this time. Three leagues before they reached Apalachee, the Spaniards and their Timucuan allies were ambushed, finding themselves “unexpectedly surrounded in a forest by their enemies.” A fierce battle ensued for about nine hours and eventually denigrated to hand-to-hand combat. Three thousand Apalachee rebels perished in the clash. A large number of Timucuan warriors also died along with ten to twelve Spanish soldiers. Captain Cuavas nearly died from an arrow wound in his thigh. Both sides retreated from the severe casualties and the Spanish made their way back to St. Augustine, leaving eight soldiers on the border of Apalachee “in case they tried to enter in the villages of the province of Timucua.”

The Spanish government panicked, fearing that the revolt might spread into the other native provinces and that the pacification of Apalachee could last “many years.” Although the Spaniards were temporarily driven from Apalachee, the rebels were disheartened by their crushing losses and the quick, unexpected Spanish response. The Apalachee rebels were counting on the labor demands of planting time to prevent the recruitment of loyal Timucuan and hoped to recruit more Christian Apalachee and other non-converted natives before confronting the Spaniards. Hearing that the rebels were weakened, Francisco Menendez Marquez, returning from “pacifying” Guale, crossed into Apalachee with a small force of 21 soldiers and sixty Timucuan to prevent the revolt from spreading to the “friendly Indians.” After a month, with the assistance of loyal Christian Apalachee, he persuaded the rebels to surrender and hand over their leaders. Twelve of the leaders were hung and another 26 were sentenced to labor on public works at St. Augustine. The rest of the tribe, Christian and non-Christian alike, was subjected to the *repartimiento* system for the first time. **165** In the years following the revolt, the mission system was restored full force in Apalachee. The wave of conversions increased after the revolt and the Apalachee became fully entrenched and dependent on the mission system. The chiefs met their labor quotas for the *repartimiento* and even supplied warriors for the Spanish militia. The end result of Apalachee’s “pacification” was that they became more extensively Christianized than any other chiefdom east of the Mississippi.

### **The Timucuan Revolt of 1656**

When Franciscan Father Martin Preto attempted to contact the Timucua, in 1606, at the short-lived Santa Ana *doctrina* (church town), the reception he received was less than cordial. The aging medicine man of Potano could recall when De Soto made his way through the region almost seventy years before and had seized and enslaved his *cacique*. When Preto approached the chief in the council house, the chief “turned to the wall and told the others to throw [Preto] out. Meanwhile he foamed at the mouth and with great anger scolded the chief men because they had consented to allow [Preto] to approach where he was.” **166** While Preto claimed to have converted many thousands in his excursions into Timucua, it’s notable that none of these occurred at the Santa Ana *doctrina*. **167**

Prior to European contact, the populous Timucua of central Florida numbered anywhere from 750,000 to one million. By 1596, their population was reduced ninety

percent to 75,000 and declined to 36,000 by the 1613-1617 pandemic. **168** In 1567, the Timucuan province of Potano drove out the Spanish garrison, disrupting initial Spanish colonization efforts. After years of hostile relations with the Spaniards, a 1584 expedition decimated the Potano and drove them out farther west. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Franciscan missionary efforts moved west of St. Augustine and pushed into central Timucua. The Franciscans made their way first into Potano in 1607. The following year, Martin Prieto and another friar were invited to mediate the three-year war between Apalachee and the Timucuan province of Utina. While their mediation proved successful, the price the friars exacted was

“to go and visit all his [the cacique’s] towns and to throw down to the ground all the idols the places contained. Starting with the place where he was and which is now called San Martin, we burnt twelve images in the center of the plaza; then we went to four other places and in each one of them we burned six images.” **169**

While the Timucuan willingly accepted the Franciscans, the friars implemented a degree of coercion in Christianizing the natives. As missionization was underway, they continued to stamp out native social traditions. Some questions in Fray Francisco Pareja’s 1613 *Confessionario*, a guide written for friars to use in Timucua, read:

“Being pregnant, have you killed the unborn or wished to kill it by taking some drink and striking yourself or squeezing your belly to choke it as you used to do?”

“Have you some [black female] slave or servant as your mistress?”

“Have you believed that when the blue jay or another bird sings, that it is a signal that people are coming or that something important is about to happen?” **170**

But the strength of Christianization in the province depended not only upon the repression of traditional customs and beliefs but also of unconverted political adversaries that threatened the new converts. The Calusa and other southern Florida natives began to harass the Timucuan chiefdom of Potano almost immediately after missionaries entered the province in 1608. That year, Governor Ibarra heard reports “from the interior, from the province of Potano, that a great number of pagan Indians are coming upon the Christian natives to make war on them, and so that they will not understand the limited

number of people I have, I will come to their rescue with all the best artifices that I can.” He dispatched soldiers to assist the Potanos in defending themselves. In 1611, seventeen missionized Timucua were murdered on the “River of Cofa” while bringing supplies to a friar. Under the command of Captain Alonso Diaz, soldiers were sent to retaliate, killing every hostile native they captured. Tocobaga’s and Pojoy’s chiefs were among the casualties. **171** In 1612, Captain Juan Rodriguez de Cartaya made a gunboat excursion up and down the Gulf Coast to make Timucua safe for Christianity. The Spanish captain recorded that he had “pacified” every chief from the Calusa to the Apalachee with a gunboat “built on the river going to the provinces,” and “he reduced those chiefs to the obedience of Juan Fernandez de Olivera in the name of Your Majesty, in everything respecting the religious on the frontier.” Cartaya claims that because he understood “the nature of Indians,” he was able “to subject that coast to peace for the first time, when it formerly had attracted many ships of enemies.” Even the Calusa chief Carlos, “the most powerful of all that coast,” sent word that “he wanted no more war with Christians.” The conquest was concluded with peace treaties ratified by the exchange of gifts. **172**

From 1606 to 1630, a wave of missionization spread over Timucua. Why were Timucuan caciques willing to subordinate themselves and their vassals to the Spanish Crown? It could be argued that the Timucuan chiefs were not so much prostrating themselves before the Spanish, but accepting the Spanish missionary presence to bolster their own local and regional power, despite their loss of overall political supremacy. If one cacique forged a political alliance with the Spanish, the others necessarily followed suit. Failure to do so was to allow other leaders and caciques to gain the upperhand in regional politics. The pledge of allegiance to the Spanish Crown allowed caciques to control the flow and distribution of trade goods, including European iron, clothing, and beads. These trade goods served as symbols of social rank and reinforced the internal political power of leaders who controlled access to these items. Such a system played a significant role in chiefly power in the prehistoric era, making the control and distribution of Spanish goods a continuation of the existing system. But while caciques may have had in the mind the personal benefits resulting from missionization and Spanish alliance, the burdens and responsibilities that came with such a relationship, particularly the Spanish demands for labor and loss of chiefly autonomy, outweighed the benefits in the long-term. While the caciques tolerated the *repartimiento* system, burden-bearing, the quartering of soldiers, and the incorporation of Timucuan warriors into the Spanish militia - all burdens on their vassals - the gradual erosion of their own chiefly power would result in the Timucuan revolt of 1656. **173**



Less than a decade after missionaries entered Potano, the unforeseen consequences of Spanish vassalage had emerged as “great plagues and contagious diseases” wiped out half of the converted population over a four-year period. This was reportedly bubonic plague transmitted shipboard from Central Mexico. **174** A two-year yellow fever epidemic broke in 1649, decimating both Spaniards and natives. **175** In the winter of 1654-1655, a smallpox epidemic simultaneously broke out in the provinces of Guale, Timucua, and Apalachee. Governor Rebolledo reported: “almost half of the people of the said province of Timucua had died.” **176**

By the mid-seventeenth century, frequent Timucuan contact with Spanish soldiers and friars had severely depopulated the province, not only from European-introduced epidemics but starvation, overwork, and fugitive outflow. Incorporation into the Spanish colonial system spelled out demographic collapse for the Timucua. To transport supplies and provisions to St. Augustine, native commoners were often forced to carry burdens on their backs for the hundred league journey. Burden-bearing normally “resulted in some dying on the roads in times of cold [weather], and there was a Christian Indian woman who, having had a male child, killed him without baptism in order not to see him made a slave.” To escape the unbearable labor, “in which they refuse and resent so much,” native commoners “absent themselves from among the Christians, and many others leave it off and refuse to be [Christians] in order not to experience similar labor.” **177** Fugitive outflow, caused by aversion to the colonial labor system, played a significant role in depopulating Timucua. In 1630, Fray Alonso de Jesus noted the severe impact of burdening on the Timucuans. To relieve the burdeners, he requested:

“that Your Majesty order that we be provided with the pack animals that seem to be necessary, from the horses that there are in the land, so that they might carry the hardtack, wine, and the rest of the things that Your Majesty gives us as charity for our sustenance, and I swear at present that six will be sufficient in the provinces of Timucua, inasmuch as the Indians that are occupied in the said ministry and service of carrying them have suffered and suffer grave disturbance and notable damages, by the distance of the road being so long and difficult, since the nearest *doctrina* to this presidio is more than thirty leagues from it, and the last more than seventy, for which the said Indians, with the burden, the ruggedness of the land, and their miserable condition, arrive so injured and disturbed that they usually remain unable to be able to work, and some lose their lives, for which cause many of the missionaries, their hearts distressed at seeing the children that they engendered in Jesus Christ, Our Lord, ruined and wounded with the toilsome burden, do not dare to send for all their

provisions, from which results another, not lesser, damage, and it is that the said missionaries sicken and lose their health.” **178**

Prior to the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic in the winter of 1654, Governor Rebolledo observed that *repartimiento* laborers were already dying from exhaustion and starvation en route to St. Augustine:

“some of the said Indians, by it being during the rigurocity of the summer, frequently fall ill, and these are customarily given [food] and sustained on the account of His Majesty, because in lacking this recourse and charity they would die miserably from hunger, lying on the roads, as I am informed has happened some years when they lacked this aid on account of the royal warehouses not having enough to supply, and it has likewise happened that some Indians have died on the roads and in the uninhabited areas [*despoblados*] on account of the said lack, not having been able to dispatch them with sufficient food until entering in their lands.” **179**

The devastating smallpox outbreak in 1654-1655 halted the flow of *repartimiento* labor from Timucua, Guale, and Apalachee. Foreseeing a severe shortage in St. Augustine’s maize crop, Governor Rebolledo ordered a ruthless labor raid on the neighboring province of Ybiniyutti on the upper St. John’s River. His orders to Captain Antonio de Arguelles were to take his soldiers to “the province of Ybiniyutti” and “enter into the places of its infidels and take out the people he can from each place, in accordance with the numbers he might see in them,” both infidels and “some fugitives who have absented themselves from the word of the Gospel,” and bring them to work the soldiers’ fields. This action was necessary because the soldiers could not support their large families with “only the ration given them from the royal storehouses.” **180**

After the British seized Jamaica in May 1655, Rebolledo feared they would next make an attack on Florida, calling forth five hundred natives from the provinces to protect St. Augustine. In addition, Rebolledo demanded that the warriors and laborers carry seventy-five pounds of corn on their back each on the one hundred league journey to St. Augustine. When the Timucuan chiefs rejected that the native *principales* should be made to carry supplies on their backs like common laborers, Rebolledo, ignorant of the Timucuan class hierarchy, insisted on this demand. Already stretched thin from vast population losses and scarce maize reserves, and the chiefs weary of the Spanish threat to their authority and the tribal status system, this was the last straw for the Timucua. By the

late spring of 1656, a revolt soon broke out in the province. The caciques generally agreed not to obey the order and to violently resist if the Spaniards were to enforce it. When Lucas Menendez, cacique of San Martin, determined to take up arms against the Spaniards, he was joined by the rebellious caciques of Sante Fe, San Francisco de Potano, San Pedro, Potohiriba, Machaba, San Francisco de Chuaquin, Tarihica, San Matheo, and several others. Menendez ordered his followers to kill all secular Spaniards, sparing the friars. The rebels killed one soldier at Asile, the location of a Spanish wheat *hacienda*, and another at San Pedro. The next to die were a Spanish servant and a Mexican Indian camped on the west of the Suwannee River on a journey to the Spanish *hacienda* in Potano. The largest group of rebels under Menendez raided the Spanish *hacienda* in Potano, killing another Spanish soldier along with two African slaves. They then retreated to the western Timucua-Apalachee border, fortified a palisade, and awaited Spanish reprisal. **181** Father Gomez de Palma, a veteran missionary in Timucua, wrote to a fellow friar on the immediate cause of the revolt:

“I have been here in Florida for 46 years seeing the labors and persecutions of the poor Indians, who have been such faithful vassals of His Majesty since Hernando de Soto discovered the land, but never have I seen them so unfortunate as under this governor, creole of Cartagena. He oppresses and mistreats them, forcing them to come here to St. Augustine from Apalache, 100 leagues away, burdened as if they were mules or horses—something that in the time of their infelicity was not done with those whom they call *indios principales*, who among us are *hidalgos* and *caballeros* and major councilors.

They responded to a messenger from the governor that they could not obligate the *indios principales* to go burdened, that there were vassals to do that, . . . and they killed three or four *espanoles*, supposing that this would soften the governor and those of the *presidio*.” **182**

The Timucua rebels did not assault and destroy their missions like the Guale and Apalachee had, they just simply abandoned them. For eight months, the runaways “attended only to their dances and the business of war” and left the friars sitting in their convents “suffering, vilified by most of the Indians, destitute of necessary food.” **183** In September, after months of revolt, Rebolledo dispatched Sergeant-Major Adrian de Canizares y Osorio with sixty infantry men and two hundred Apalachee warriors to Timucua. Osorio brutally repressed the uprising, hanging eleven of the rebel caciques in

public areas throughout Timucua. The *repartimiento* draft was enforced as a term of amnesty for the remainder of rebels. **184** To escape Spanish reprisal and harsh terms of surrender, refugees from Timucua and Ustaca spilled over into Apalachee and began fermenting unrest in the province. When Rebolledo visited Timucua in 1657, he ordered all the Timucuan and Ustacans who had recently migrated to Apalachee to return to the province within fifteen days under the threat of a hundred lashes and four years labor on the fort, male and female alike. **185** With many villages depopulated from refugees and head chiefs executed, loyal Spanish-allied Timucua chiefs were now emplaced as provincial leaders. The Timucuan province was now restructured to fit the needs of the Spanish colonial system. After the revolt, Timucua was transformed from a dispersed, native-based settlement to a simple chain of populated way-stations along the overland route between St. Augustine and the Apalachee province, signifying the complete integration of the Timucua into the Spanish colonial system. **186**

The leaders of the Guale militia, having sat around St. Augustine waiting for a military campaign to start, feared that their towns were now in danger of assault from refugee Timucuan and determined to go home. Rebolledo, perceiving this action as insubordination, confiscated their weapons and told the caciques that they would receive no more gifts from the king. After a year without their customary gifts, five Guale caciques addressed themselves to the king:

“It has been a long time now that going about bare we have been ashamed to see ourselves, Christians, assisting with the offices in the churches as naked as barbarians.... In the past, according to what we hear from our fathers and grandfathers and we ourselves experienced for some years, the governors of these provinces and other espanoles loved, consoled, and favored us, and gave us the limosna that Your Majesty, God save you, ordered in a cedula that we be given, and treated us like fathers, speaking to us as to sons. Now, Sire, everything is to the contrary, and the only goal of the governor and other espanoles, citizens of this presidio, [seems to be] to wipe us out, turning us and our vassals into their slaves and feudatories.

It has been our custom since we became Christians to come together every year, each pueblo as it was able, to work and dig a great sabana that they said was of-Your Majesty, and when the task was finished, the governors returned all the indios, our sons and other vassals. [Now] we have more vassals in the service of the governor and the soldiers than we have in our towns.

For this reason, and the pestilences, we are nearly out of people: the wives lack husbands, the sons lack fathers, and the fathers lack sons. There are pueblos of ours that do not have 16 indios, and more than 60 unmarried women who cannot marry because all the bachelors (not to mention the casados who serve the soldiers) are detained-in the service of the governor and espanoles. Many of those found serviceable to espanoles have been given plazas of soldiers against Your Majesty's orders, . . . and when others want to return to their pueblos, their masters punish them and detain them by force.

The soldiers, Sire, who come with an order of the governor will not show it to us, and therefore if the governor orders that they take 30 men for the cavas, they take 40 and put the extra ones in their [own] fields and-services. If he orders that we succor them with a certain amount [of provisions], they ask for much more to keep it for themselves. In this manner- they order and govern us like absolute lords, and if we ask them to exhibit the governor's order in order to comply with it, they say that they do not want to, that the governor has ordered that they be given (it), and often they lay hands on us and treat us like dogs....

We the micos, tunaques, and caciques of this Province of Guale have determined among ourselves to relate this to Your Majesty, . . . asking that as our true father, king, and lord-who must, we judge, love us-you have mercy on us and free us from these many injustices.” **187**

## **British Genocide of Floridian Natives**

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish realized that St. Augustine lacked the adequate means to defend itself from the growing threat of a British invasion. As Spanish labor was altogether lacking and the rebellious provinces “pacified,” the Spaniards were easily able to increase the number of laborers drafted through the *repartimiento*. In 1671, just a year after the British founded Charles Towne, the Spanish began construction of the fort Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine. For 24 years this fort weakened the Florida native population by reducing the native laborers to death, exhaustion, and starvation, while increasing the flow of European diseases to their provinces. The natives primarily conscripted were the Timucua, Apalachee, and Guale, provinces that were now successfully “pacified.” The indigenous kinship network and status system gradually

deteriorated and broke up with the absence of many male *principales* at work to build the defenses of St. Augustine. The natives were not accustomed to the hard manual labor that came along with building a heavily fortified defense like San Marcos. At times there were three hundred Apalachee laborers working on construction at St. Augustine. Besides the native laborers “who always lived on a bare subsistence level,” there were indigenous conscripts brought in from Mexico, black slaves, and Mexican and Cuban “ne'er do wells.” The laborers at the Castillo were the poorest in the impoverished city of St. Augustine. **188**

Periods of deadly epidemics frequently decimated the native labor force. They received miniscule compensation, significantly less than their Spanish counterparts, and only a small provision of maize for subsistence. Sometimes they were only given trinkets that, although had exchange value between natives, were inadequate portions to actually use for trade. African slaves were at times imported for construction work on the fort but native laborers bore most of the burden. Black slaves were only imported in periods of labor shortages due to the growing mortality rates among native workers. **189** The fort was finally constructed in 1695. It would prove successful for years to come in repelling piratical raids and full-scale attacks from their British Carolinian neighbors. But the Apalachee and other Floridian natives profited little for their contribution to the Spaniards. Their towns were inadequately defended to protect them from the large armies of British and Creek invaders who would eventually ravage their provinces. Not only did the Spanish Florida government fail to provide their subordinate native converts with necessary fortifications and soldiers, but they were even denied the necessary weapons and munitions. While the Spaniards at St. Augustine squeezed the life and labor out of every Floridian tribe under their dominion for over a century, they could not even return the favor by protecting them from complete annihilation.

In 1699, several Apalachee chiefs petitioned the Spanish King to redress their grievances, listing numerous horrors perpetrated on their province by wealthy Spanish families given permits to settle in San Luis. Years before the British-backed Creek raids into the Apalachee, the province was already diminishing in numbers from Spanish oppression. The Apalachee were suffering considerably from wealthy Spanish settlers who disrespected tribal traditions, exploited native labor, and dispossessed natives from their homes. Settler families were allowed to exploit the natives with impunity. Captain Juan Fernandez de Florencia, deputy governor and superior magistrate, along with his brother-in-laws, permitted their livestock to roam onto Apalachee fields, inflicting “considerable injury.” The Apalachee chiefs assured the Spanish King that they had sought redress from “various sources” but had not received it since “they are so powerful,

and we are without a person to protect and defend us.” The chiefs could not possibly perceive how true these words really were.

Juan Caterina, the deputy governor’s wife, “gave two slaps in the face” to the chief of San Luis because he had not brought her fish on one Friday, obliging the village to provide six native women for grinding everyday without payment for their work (as well as requesting a native to come and go from her home every day with a pitcher of milk). The deputy and his brothers-in-law compelled the *mico* of la Tama, skilled in tanning, to prepare skins for them without pay for his work, provoking him to leave San Luis for British St. George. The chiefs noted: “From his revolt we are disconsolate, for fear others may follow him.” Apalachee laborers were forced to build homes for the new settlers who dispossessed them from theirs. The chiefs reported: “The natives of San Luis are found withdrawn a league into the woods, for their places have been seized for the Spaniards.” Many Apalachee, fleeing the continuous labor on the deputy governor’s extravagant home, sought refuge in the province of Guale, which was now largely under British control. **189**

In the early 1700’s, North Florida’s tribes were severely diminished. They were completely under the foot of European dominion, desolate, impoverished, and unprepared to defend themselves from the Creek invaders to the north. The geopolitical contest and colonial rivalry that marked the relations between the British Carolinas and Spanish Florida meant native death. The British Carolinas, with their Lower Creek and Yamasee allies, sought to wipe out the pro-Spanish tribes in northern Florida to make way for a takeover of Spanish Florida. By 1702, the raids and excursions made by the British-allied Creeks against the Apalachee and Timucua provinces had become more frequent and deadly. On May 20, 1702, a force of Lower Creeks, reportedly led by British officer, entered into the village of Santa Fe and burned down the mission. After three hours of fighting, the Timucuas repelled the invasion with only few casualties. The Adjutant Deputy of the province gathered a small party of Timucuas and gave pursuit of the Creeks for six leagues, and then they themselves were routed. Only one of the warriors made it out alive while ten warriors were killed and the rest were captured. **190**

In the several years preceding the raid, the British-allied Lower Creeks had made numerous assaults on the Apalachee and Timucuan provinces, but this was the final straw. The Timucua and Apalachee assembled a force of eight hundred warriors to retaliate against the Creeks and British, authorized by the Spanish Florida governor to attack the Carolinas. But at the Flint River, a force of one thousand Creeks and British ambushed the Apalachee expedition and completely routed the excursion, killing or capturing the entire force of Apalachee warriors and Spanish soldiers. In response to the



“A Fortified Village,” engraving by Theodore De Bry based on the drawings of Huguenot artist Jacques Le Moyne, ca. 1564. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

invasion, Carolinian Governor Moore attempted to invade St. Augustine with about six hundred soldiers and six hundred Creeks, but he was turned back when he found that his light artillery couldn't pierce through the walls of the strongly fortified Castillo de San Marcos. **191** While the British were the offenders in this conflict, no European power, whether Spanish or British, tremendously suffered from the tit-for-tat raids and excursions. Whites, being only officers, always comprised the minority of the warring regiments, while the native allies did the majority of fighting and dying. Both Spanish and British native allies would suffer overwhelmingly in numerous skirmishes, battles, and conflicts to expand and strengthen their colonial allies. Yet even the natives who sided with the victors were not truly the winners as it was only a matter of time before they themselves were eliminated by European expansion, colonial conflict, and native slavery. The Spanish themselves remained virtually safe and protected within their



Castillo constructed at the expense of countless native laborers, as those very laborers were slaughtered in their relatively defenseless mission towns.

The final blow came in the winter of 1703 to 1704. A large force of British soldiers and Creeks laid waste to the Apalachee, Timucua, and Guale provinces of Spanish Florida. Carolinian Governor James Moore led a force of one thousand Creeks and fifty British volunteers to the Apalachee province, hoping to procure native slaves, retrieve runaway slaves, and wipe the area clean of its inhabitants. The devastation was great enough to completely alter the demographics and power seat of North Floridian tribes. The few pockets of natives that remained after the genocidal assaults were minimal, extremely impoverished, completely powerless, and dependent on the Spanish. The British-Creek expedition captured and enslaved many Apalachees to meet the growing demand for native slaves in the Carolinas. In 1703, Moore's excursion went about Spanish Florida pillaging the countryside, killing many natives and enslaving over five hundred. **192** Moore next attempted to strike at the heart of the Apalachee province and decimate the population.

On January 25, 1704, the British-Creek excursion arrived at the Apalachee town of Ayubale at sunrise and immediately met resistance from the inhabitants crowded within the local fort. The Apalachees resolutely fired arrows at the invaders who were taking cover behind a large mud-walled house. The Apalachee warriors vigorously fought until two o'clock in the afternoon, when their munitions completely ran out. The British and Creeks burned down the mission and then advanced on the nearby fort. In the skirmish to take the fort, fourteen British soldiers were wounded while 25 Apalachee warriors were killed. The British successfully seized the fort and captured 84 Apalachee taking refuge inside, 26 of whom were warriors. Fifty Creeks and three British soldiers were killed in the day's action. The following day, Captain Juan Ruiz de Mexia entered Ayubale at the command of about thirty Spanish soldiers and four hundred Apalachee, surrounding the British and Creek invaders. The Spanish forces briefly repelled the invaders but were themselves defeated after running short of ammunition. The Spanish and Apalachee killed six or seven British soldiers and 168 Creek warriors. In turn, the British and Creeks captured eight Spanish soldiers and killed at least two hundred Apalachee warriors. The most populated town of the Apalachee province was now successfully conquered. **193** The Apalachee captives were burnt alive and the mission friars brutally executed. A survivor reported the aftermath of the battle:

“As it relates to the deaths of the Indians, whom they burned, he knows their number exceeded forty, who, tied to stakes, were set afire, until they died. They cut off the head of Father Fray Juan de Parga, and the pagans brought it to the council house. This he heard told by the captives, because he was not there, having withdrawn with other soldiers. He heard say that to an Indian of San Luis, called Antonio Enixa, they applied fire slowly from morning until his death nearly at sunset.” **194**

Some Apalachees joined the Creeks as they scoured the province. While most probably joined out of fear of being wiped out, some had real grievances with their treatment as “vassals” of the Spanish Florida government. First and foremost, they no longer felt as if they should pledge allegiance to “allies” that would leave them to die like animals. **195** As the British-Creek excursion proceeded throughout the Apalachee province, it captured five garrisoned towns of Apalachee who surrendered without condition. The invaders were accompanied by the people of seven Apalachee towns who they held in bondage. They had completely destroyed the people of four other towns who attempted to resist. **196** By July, only two hundred Apalachees remained out of eight thousand that previously inhabited the province, “and these are prone to leave, some to the woods and others to the enemy.” **197** As the invaders made their way through the province, the Apalachee were “hastily fleeing to the woods.” Apalachee Deputy Manuel Solana warned them that they would perish if they did so, suggesting that they take refuge at the presidio where they would have lands and cattle. The betrayed Apalachee angrily replied to the Spanish official:

“They were weary of waiting for aid from the Spaniards: that they did not wish merely to die; that for a long time we had misled them with words, [saying] that reinforcements were to come, but they were never seen to arrive; that they know with certainty that what the pagans say, will happen as they say, because all that they have said up to now has been done, and because they have believed us, they have [now] finished [with] us; and that if we do not believe what the pagans say, that we who remain in the blockhouse, they well know, remain to die; that if they go, it will not be to the Spaniards, and if they remain until the return of the enemy, it will be in order [to go] against us, and they will burn us within the blockhouse, while they escape with their lives. And that in the matter of going to the presidio, they neither wish that, for they would have there the same risk should the English surround the fort, and they care not but to go to the woods or to the isles of the sea, each one to where God will aid. This is the decision with which they have replied to me.” **198**

The Apalachees no longer wished to wait for Spanish help. They knew that the Spaniards would not spare anything to protect them. By the time the British and Creeks left the province, they had captured thirteen hundred Apalachee and a hundred of their slaves. **199** Governor Moore victoriously reported the absolute devastation inflicted on the Apalachee tribe:

“The Indians now having a mighty value for the whites. Apalatchia is now reduced to so feeble and low a condition, that it can neither support St. Augustine with provisions, nor distrust, endamage or frighten us: our Indians living between the Apalatchia and the French. In short, we have made Carolina as safe as the conquest of Apalatchia can make it.” **200**

Spanish officials noted that the Creeks would occupy the province, “since it is now free from the Apalachee.” **201** Some four hundred of the Apalachee escaped farther west under the protection of the French at Mobile. A town called Chapeto numbered about two hundred and had previously settled near Pensacola. When they came to the French requesting their assistance, they told them they left the Spaniards because “they did not give them any guns, but that the French gave them to all of their allies.” **202**

The Apalachee, Timucua, and Guale provinces were essentially depopulated. Parts of the Mayaca and Jororo were also wiped out. By 1708, only three hundred natives remained in the aforementioned regions. These refugees were desolate and reliant on the Spanish for rations. They were still routinely killed and captured by Creek excursions from the Carolinas. **203** The British slave trade in the Southeast pre-United States manipulated and divided native tribe against tribe in a slave-raiding frenzy. Capital accumulated from exporting natives slaves was used to fund plantations and purchase Africans, not necessarily for native labor. Native people from different tribes were involved in different aspects of plantation life, mostly working slave patrol and tracking down fugitive slaves. Various reasons exist for the involvement of natives in their own long-term decimation, but the most important include short-term survival, profits, and gains from British colonial alliance. If a tribe didn’t become slave raiders for the British, they risked the possibility of becoming potential victims of enemy slavers allied with the British. However, natives were not the main beneficiaries of African enslavement or the British slave trade of natives in the Southeast colonies. The British Empire only strengthened its hold over native tribes through division and built capital necessary for

the foundation of an expansionist settler society. It wouldn't be long after the British raids on the Apalachee province when the British native allies found themselves on the receiving end of the Southeastern slave trade.

## Chapter 2

# Spanish Florida: A Refuge of Freedom (1687-1803)

### Forming a Nation: The Free Black Settlement at Fort Mose

In 1693, King Charles the Second of Spain pronounced a revolutionary edict offering freedom for fugitive slaves seeking refuge at St. Augustine:

“It has been notified ... that eight black males and two black females who had run away from the city of San Jorge, arrived to that presidio asking for the holy water of baptism, which they received after being instructed in the Christian doctrine. Later on, the chief sergeant of San Jorge visited the city with the intention to claim the runaways, but it was not proper to do so, because they had already become Christians....As a prize for having adopted the Catholic doctrine and become Catholicized, as soon as you get this letter, set them all free and give them anything they need, and favor them as much as possible. I hope them to be an example, together with my generosity, of what others should do.” **1**

Prior to this Spanish edict, slaves had been exploiting Florida’s remoteness, sparse settlement, thick swamps, and potentially friendly indigenous inhabitants to make a break for liberty for some years. Florida had a legacy of native and slave insurrection going back to some of the first Spanish attempts at colonization and settlement in the peninsula. In 1526, Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon, a wealthy Spanish noble from Toledo, attempted to establish a settlement at the Guale province of Florida. The settlement of six hundred settlers included enslaved Africans from Santo Domingo. In the fall of 1526, Ayllon had died from disease and the settlement was quickly broken up by a unified insurrection of imported African slaves and recently captured native slaves. **2**

In December 1603, seven African slaves fled St. Augustine and found refuge in the Ais tribe, who inhabited the Indian River Inlet of southeast Florida. Five of the fugitives were picked up by the Spanish slave patrols but the other two escapees married Ais women and received the protection of the tribe. Runaway slaves already seemed aware that intermarriage was a way to form stronger relations with native allies,

guaranteeing their protection through intimate family and social ties. The Spanish pressured the Ais to return the fugitives and tried to entice them with gifts. When this failed, the Spanish kidnapped their main interpreter Chico and brought him to St. Augustine. Chico agreed to help the Spanish recover their slaves. Once again, gifts were sent to the cacique of Ais to lure him to St. Augustine, but to no avail. The Ais cacique accepted the second offering of gifts but remained at Ais with the two harbored fugitives. After two years of failed negotiations with the Ais, the Spanish sent a third offering to the cacique and urged him to come to St. Augustine. The head chief finally caved in, returning the two blacks to the Spanish as a gesture of good diplomacy and alliance. **3**

This lesser-known event foretold centuries of natives and blacks cooperatively defending each other from whites, as Floridian natives and runaway slaves continued to integrate and develop somewhat of a mutual affinity. But it also indicates the ambiguous relations between natives and escaped Africans, and the uncertainty that fugitive slaves must have felt when they fled into unknown “Indian Territory.” Indigenous people could have assisted them in escape, harbored them into their settlements and incorporated them into their tribes, turned them back over to their European masters, or all of the above. “As for those slaves who escaped toward the west into Indian country,” noted historian Peter H. Wood, “the prospect of total absorption into a compatible culture had to be balanced against the risk of betrayal, captivity, or death.” **4**

In 1670, Britain established the colony of Charles Town in the Carolinas, marking the beginning of a fierce and long geopolitical contest in the Southeast between Spanish Florida and its British neighbor to the north. The original charter of the Carolinas included St. Augustine and much of Florida, setting off a jurisdictional conflict over “debatable borderlands” between Spanish Florida and the British Carolinas that proceeded for almost the following hundred years. The development of the plantation economy in the British Carolinas depended entirely on a growing African slave labor force. To undermine the stability of the slave-based colony, Spanish Florida adopted a new strategy through its fugitive slave policy. Rather than officially, the fugitive slave policy developed naturally and gradually as a tactic to undermine the British Carolinas. Throughout the 1680’s, Spanish Florida commissioned detachments of Spanish soldiers, native allies, and free black mulattoes on slave raiding expeditions against the Carolinian frontier plantations.

In September 1686, the Spaniards “came to Carolina about one hundred and forty strong, plundered the Governor's house and carried off twelve of the slaves.” **5** The expedition was made up of “Spaniards with negroes and Indians.” Apparently the fugitive slaves taken in the expedition were never returned. Carolinian governor Joseph Mourton

demanded that the Spanish return the slaves, but Governor Quiroga replied that he “cannot deliver them up without an order from the King of Spain.” **6** In March 1687, “a hundred and fifty-three Spaniards, Indians, and Mulattos” burned and plundered seven homes on the Carolinian frontier in retaliation for a piratical assault on Spanish Florida. **7**

On February 24, 1688, Governor Quiroga reported the arrival of fugitive slaves with eight males, two females, and an infant child who escaped the Carolinas by boat. English accounts list the name of the eight male fugitives as Conano, Jesse, Jacque, Gran Domingo, Cambo, Mingo, Dicque, and Robi. **8** Quiroga assigned two of the males to work for a blacksmith and the others to work construction on the Castillo de San Marcos. The women worked as domestics for the governor himself and all the workers were paid for their wages. An English sergeant major arrived the following fall to retrieve the fugitives but Quiroga refused to turn them over on the grounds that the ex-slaves had converted to Catholicism, married, and were usefully employed. **9** By 1689, the Lords Proprietors of Carolina were already instructing Governor James Colleton to employ measures to prevent slaves from deserting to St. Augustine. **10** Newly imported slaves, largely from the African West Coast, began to run away en masse once word spread that Spanish Florida refused to return fugitive slaves back over to their masters in the Carolinas. For this, among other reasons such as strategic location, trade access and imperial competition, the British desired to seize Spanish Florida.

Slaves had more opportunities for freedom as the geopolitical exertion of Spanish Florida’s colonial rivals made the sparsely populated territory more dependent on free people of color for defense. But other than the strategic advantages of providing refuge to runaways, the Spanish held a significantly different conception of slavery than Anglo planters in the British colonies. The rigid legal codes that prevented breathing room under a system of chattel slavery were virtually absent under Spanish law and custom. Slaves were viewed as human beings with certain inalienable rights, not property to be utilized and dispensed with as pleased. It was simply Spanish custom, dating back to the Middle Ages, that everybody’s soul was equal before God regardless of social status. It was a long-held Spanish belief that slavery was an unfortunate and accidental condition, in wide contrast to the predisposed, perpetual nature of chattel slavery. Spanish religious and social values promoted honor, charity, and paternalism towards the “miserable classes,” which included the enslaved. Owners were even held responsible for educating their slaves. Slaves were granted certain legal rights and protections. If a slave complained to the courts of abuse and mistreatment and the complaint was verified, then the slave was to be sold off to another master and never returned or sold back to the original owner. Likewise, a master who tried to split up a slave family had his slaves

confiscated and transferred elsewhere. These legal mechanisms prevented much of the arbitrary, unregulated abuse of the chattel system in the British colonies.

The liberal characteristics of the Spanish slave legal system gave slaves the ability to “work the system” and achieve their freedom through their own merits and actions. A slave had the right to own and transfer property, initiate lawsuits, and obtain loans; which, in accordance with a liberal manumission policy, granted them the right of self-purchase. Spanish Florida enforced the Spanish law *coartacion*, meaning that any slave who acquired five percent of his own value could demand his freedom after promising to gradually pay off his former owner for the remaining 95 percent. This very liberal manumission policy made it possible for a large free black class to eventually form and thrive in the Spanish American colonies. A number of aspects of Spanish Florida slavery also mitigated some of the most oppressive features of chattel slavery: 1) It was organized by a task system, giving slaves more free time to engage in social and economic activities 2) Slaves were able to utilize the resources of both the frontier and coast to their advantage 3) There was never a massive slave trade, given that Spain never developed an extensive plantation system in Florida 4) The paternal mode of plantation management prevailed. Taking this into consideration, the Spanish Crown’s promise of freedom for British slaves escaping the Carolinas is not as surprising as it may seem at first glance.

A British voyager to Amelia Island and St. Augustine in 1817 wrote extensively about the contrasting nature of Spanish slavery with that of the Anglo colonies on its border:

“To the honour of the Spanish character in this and in all other of their colonies, their treatment of the negroes presents a striking contrast to the disgraceful and morbid selfishness of the possessors of this unfortunate race in other countries. Here the Negro is at least considered as a social animal, susceptible of the pains and joys of existence, who has a soul admissible into the presence of the deity, for his religious duties and moral conduct they feel bound to provide. The attachments of this degraded class of human beings to their owners, are, in this province generally strong, the sensibilities of our nature are not outraged by those continual and disgusting scenes of severity...Here they continue long in one family, grow up with the rising generation, partake of their sports, sympathise in their griefs, and become identified with every member of their families. Manumission to them brings no alleviation of misery, for they have never known other than kind treatment, the lash is seldom heard on their plantations, the cry of their sufferings is rarely borne upon



the winds of heaven...On the extensive continent of Spanish America, the Indians and negroes are amalgamated with the creole population, and it is not as in our Colonies, and in the States of North America, an insurmountable barrier of exclusion from society, that the individual has a taint of African origin...The laws oblige the proprietor to feed his negroes, and clothe them with two suits annually; whether the crops are good or bad, whether success or misfortune attend the master, the slave may demand compliance with the laws, an infraction of which incurs the penalty of release of service.” **11**

Beneath the intense colonial rivalry between Spain and Britain were the slaves and native tribes of the Southeast who felt the repercussions and exploited the colonial conflict in ways that differed greatly from European colonists. Even fugitive slaves rationalized their alliance with Spain on the grounds that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” as a slave declared in the Stono Revolt. **12** The colonial feud involved the native tribes of the Southeast into a prolonged war that brought forth widespread devastation. As the Spanish undermined the stability of slavery in the Carolinas through its fugitive slave policy, Britain found its own tactic to weaken Spanish rule in Florida: the decimation of its vulnerable native allies. The 1704 British-Creek expedition to destroy Apalachee and other native provinces in Spanish Florida “added very much to our strength and safety,” reported Carolinian Thomas Nairne, “by reducing the Spanish power in Florida so low, that they are incapable of ever hurting us.” “Drawing over to our side, or destroying, all the Indians within 700 miles of Charlestown,” Nairne continued, “makes it impracticable for any European Nation to settle on that Coast, otherwise than as subjects of to the Crown of Great Britain.” Nairne reported exactly what the British excursion did to the indigenous people of Spanish Florida:

“our Forces intirely broke and ruin’d the Strength of the Spaniards in Florida, destroy’d the whole Country, burnt the Towns, brought all the Indians, who were not kill’d or made slaves, into our own Territories, so there remains not now, so much as one Village with ten Houses in it, in all Florida, that is subject to the Spaniards.” **13**

The raid on Apalachee also served another purpose. Perhaps it was no coincidence that the British raids on the Apalachee province occurred after the Spanish governor’s orders that the Apalachee harbor all fugitive slaves: “Any negro of Carolina, Christian or not, free or slave, who wishes to come fugitive, will be [given] complete

liberty, so that those who do not want to stay here may pass to other places as they see fit, with their freedom papers which I hereby grant them by way of the king.” **14** The depopulated northern Florida left few indigenous settlements where fugitive slaves could seek refuge. On the other hand, the introduction of mass indigenous slavery was not without its adverse consequences to the Carolinian plantation economy. Paradoxically, Carolinian slaves were sometimes guided down into Florida by runaway Apalachee slaves returning to their homelands. **15**

In 1715, the Yamasees, many who had played primary roles in the destruction and enslavement of Apalachee, rose up against the British in a general native insurrection. “The immediate cause of the uprising was the misconduct of some English traders,” notes Native American anthropologist John R. Swanton, “but it is evident that the enslavement of Indians, carried on by Carolina traders in an ever more open and unscrupulous manner, was bound to produce such an explosion sooner or later.” **16** This represented a significant turning point for the Southeastern tribes. The Yamasees and Lower Creeks, once enemies to the Spaniards and destroyers of Apalachee, sought an alliance with Spain and unified with the Apalachee slaves in opposing British rule. After the brief Yamasee War, northern Florida was repopulated by native settlements, providing a renewed “Indian territory” for fugitive slaves to seek refuge and a buffer zone of protection for their journey to St. Augustine. The Yamasees and Lower Creeks now carried out expeditions from St. Augustine where they killed British settlers, burned plantations, and carried off their African slaves. A British Carolina report steamed at the loss of slave “property” in the uprising:

“The slaves themselves at length, taking advantage from those things, deserted of their own accord to St. Augustine, and upon being Demanded back by this Government, they were not Returned, but such rates paid for those that could not be concealed as that Government was pleased to set upon them.” **17**

The incensed British planters angrily protested the Spanish government for this violation of accepted standards and sent multiple agents requesting that the Spaniards return their “property.” In 1716, Major James Cochran was sent from the Carolinas to demand that the Spanish government return the slaves who were captured or ran away during the Yamasee War, but to no avail: “Their refusing to deliver up those slaves has encouraged a great many more lately to run away to that place.” **18** In 1720, a captain and twenty men were garrisoned at the inland water passage from St. Augustine to prevent any further slaves or white servants from deserting. The report complained:

“Spaniards at St. Augustine haveing encouraged the Indians under their Governmt. to come and murder and plunder H.M. subjects in Carolina and themselves harbouring rebbells, fellons, debtors servants and negro slaves, putting this Governmt. under a necessity of keeping a force and some thousand pounds yearly charge to gaurd ye frontiers.” **19**

In December 1722, a joint committee of the South Carolina Assembly convened to discuss the problem and suggested increasing the reward for capturing fugitive slaves. To guard against spies encouraging slave defection, the committee also considered “a law be passed to oblige all Persons possessing Spanish Indians and Negroes to transport them off the Country.” **20** In 1723, Governor Nicholson of the Carolinas wrote to the governor at St. Augustine with surprise that a messenger Capt. Wilson was treated with such contempt when he made demands for some of the runaway slaves and that a party of natives raided Charles Town, killed some whites, and stole a slave. **21** A Carolina mission to Florida in 1726 to negotiate the return of fugitive slaves accomplished little. Shortly afterwards, the House Assembly received a petition from Thomas Elliot and several other planters near Stono requesting government action to retrieve “fourteen slave runaways” that fled to St. Augustine. **22** The Spaniards, along with their native and black allies, began making numerous slave raids onto the British colonial settlements, devastating the frontier plantations. On June 13, 1728, Governor Middleton of the Carolinas wrote to the Duke of Newcastle:

“I am sorry we are obliged so often to represent to the Government the difficulty we labor under, from the new situation of St. Augustine to this place, whom without any regard to peace or war, do continually annoy our Southern frontiers. The hostilities they commit upon us may be rather termed robbery, murders, and piracies, they acting the part of bandittis, more than soldiers, their chief aim being to murder and plunder. We formerly complained of their receiving and harboring all our runaway negroes, but since that they have found out a new way of sending our own slaves against us, to rob and plunder us; They are continually fitting out parties of Indians from St. Augustine to murder our white people, rob our plantations and carry off our slaves, so that we are not only at a vast expense in guarding our Southern frontiers, but the inhabitants are continually alarmed, and have no leisure to look after their crops. The Indians they send against us are sent out in small parties headed by two three or more Spaniards and sometimes joined with negroes, and all the mischief they

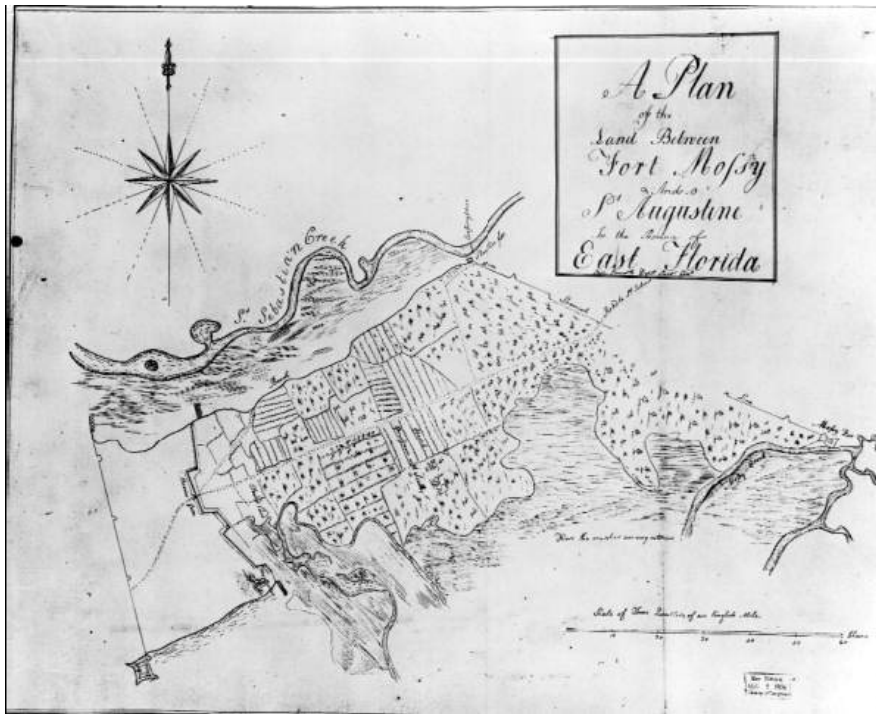
do, is on a sudden, and by surprise: and the moment they have done it, they retire again to St. Augustine, and then fit out again, so that our plantations, being all scattering, before any men can be got together, the robbers are fled, and nobody can tell how soon it may be, or where they intend to make their next attempt.” **23**

Carolinian slaves, mostly recent arrivals from Angola, joined the numerous marauding excursions of Spaniards, free blacks, and Yamasees, leaving with them to St. Augustine. In retaliation for such raids, British colonel John Palmer led an attack on St. Augustine in 1728. The black militias bravely defended the city and repelled the invaders, causing Governor Benavidas to free the soldiers in reward for their service. **24** The Angolan slaves, Portuguese-speaking, were particularly able to take advantage of the underground slave network that was established by blacks in St. Augustine because of the characteristics that the Portuguese and Spanish languages closely shared. That Catholicism had been well-established by missionaries in Angola meant that Angolan slaves in the Carolinas generally understood the Spanish Crown’s offer of Catholic protection. A report from Georgia on the Stono Revolt noted:

“Amongst the Negroe Slaves there are a people brought from the Kingdom of Angola in Africa, many of these speak Portugueze [which Language is as near Spanish as Scotch is to English,] by reason that the Portugueze have considerable Settlement, and the Jesuits have a Mission and School in that Kingdom and many Thousands of the Negroes there profess the of Roman Catholic Religion.” **25**

The slaves that plotted and joined the Stono Revolt were largely Portuguese-speaking Angolans. A bilingual Portuguese and English-speaking slave named Jemmy, who had been recently imported from Angola, learned of Spanish Florida from an English-literate slave and then informed the others. The revolt was then spearheaded by twenty Angolan slaves led by Jemmy. **26**

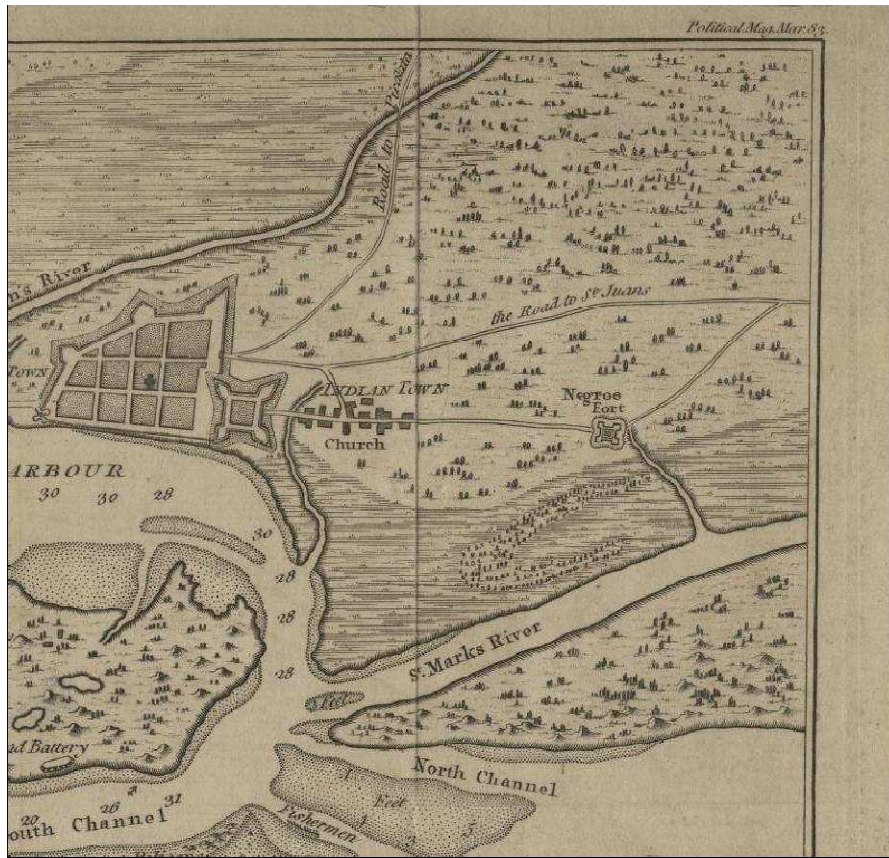
In 1732, Georgia was officially chartered as a buffer zone between the Carolinas and Spanish Florida. In 1735, it was instituted as an all-white free state “for rendering the Colony of Georgia more Defencible.” **27** The Earl of Egmont noted that if slavery had been established in Georgia at the onset of the colony, “there would not be 50 out of 500 [slaves] remaining in two months time, for they would fly to the Spaniards.” **28** William Stephens, the colonial secretary of Georgia, agreed that any slaves in Georgia



Plan of the land between Fort Mossy (Mose) and Saint Augustine, ca. 1765-1775.  
Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

“would march off when they pleased” to Florida “under that strong Temptation of the Spaniards.” **29**

As runaway slaves continued flocking to St. Augustine, the Spanish government increased their rights and freedoms. The ties between the Spanish and runaway slaves were strengthened as the blacks pushed the Spanish to come through with their promise of liberty. On March 3, 1738, the refugee slaves demanded their complete liberty on the authority of royal edicts. On May 31, Governor Mantiano fulfilled the promise of the King’s edict and granted them unconditional freedom. Even with the King’s edict, they had not been truly granted their liberty up until this time. **30** In that same month, a group of slaveholders from the Carolinas assembled to meet Mantiano and demand that he return their slaves. Mantiano regretfully claimed that he was under no authority to return them and referred them to the King’s orders. **31** In 1738, Mantiano granted a settlement for the runaway slaves about two miles north of St. Augustine and named it Gracia Real de Santa Teresa De Mose, or Fort Mose. Its strategic location made it essential for the defense of St. Augustine. Mantiano hired a Spanish military officer,



Plan of the town and harbour of San Augustin, 1783. Source: *Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library – University of Georgia Libraries*.

Don Sebastian Sanchez, to oversee the construction of the settlement. A young Franciscan priest was appointed to advise the freedmen in religious matters. **32**

In some sense, the free black settlement was formed in almost a similar fashion to the tribal mission outposts characteristic of Spanish Florida, being only semi-autonomous. The blacks were expected to farm and provide a portion of their crop for the sustenance of St. Augustine. On November 21, an additional 23 runaways arrived at St. Augustine. **33** Even though the freedmen that established the settlement numbered only 38, Mantiano was optimistic that they could form a successful village. The total population of men, women, and children eventually numbered somewhere around one hundred. The free blacks at Mose incorporated into their community incoming fugitives, natives from local villages, and urban slaves from St. Augustine. **34** In the mean time, the

free blacks ensured the King that they would faithfully defend St. Augustine to the fullest extent: “That we shall at all times be the most cruel enemies of the English; and that we shall risk our lives in service to Your Majesty until spilling the last drop of our blood in defense of the Great Crown of Spain and Our Holy Faith.” **35** A report from the Carolinas gave the most detailed description of Mose:

“This fort...made in the middle of a Plantation for Safety of the Negroes against Indians; it was 4 Square, with a Flanker at each Corner, banked Round with earth, having a Ditch without on all sides, Lined round with Prickly Palmetto Royal, and had a well and a House within, and a lookout.” **36**

Mose was the first free black settlement in North America. In the mean time, the British Carolinas were imagining that the maroon uprisings of Jamaica had now arrived at their doorstep. A fugitive slave notice around this time referred to the free black community at Mose as a “nation,” a term that was largely applied to the black maroon settlements that constantly revolted in Jamaica: “As there is an abundance of negroes in this Province and as there is [an] abundance of that Nation, [my runaway] may chance to be harboured among some of them.” **37** In December 1738, Captain Caleb Davis went down to St. Augustine to retrieve nineteen of his slaves who abandoned his plantation in Carolina all at once: “He saw all of his said Negroes now at San Augustin, who laughed at him; and on his applying to the Governor, he told him, that it was the King of Spain’s Orders.” **38** Davis’ nineteen slaves were among “50 other Slaves belonging to other Persons inhabiting about Port Royal” that “ran away to the Castle of St. Augustine” in November 1738. **39** Over time, the Spanish sanctuary fermented slave insurrection in the Carolinas. The Spaniards even commissioned emissaries to secretly inform Carolinians slaves about the reception of freedom for fugitive slaves at St. Augustine. A report from the Carolinas noted the effect of the Spanish Florida governor’s proclamation: “The Success of those Deputies being too well known at their Return, Conspiracies were formed and attempts made by more Slaves to Desert to Augustine, but as every one was by this time alarmed with apprehensions of that nature, by great vigilance they were prevented from succeeding.” **40** Georgia governor James Oglethorpe noted the climate of fear this offer of liberty produced:

“I beg your instructions what I should do in this matter of the Negroes, for if the Spaniards continue to protect the runaway slaves Carolina will be entirely ruined,

their wealth consisting in slaves, amongst whom there is a general inclination to liberty; and a revolt among them where they are protected by a Spanish garrison lying on the same continent will be much more difficult to quell than the rebellion of the Jamaica Negroes.” **41**

In August 1739, a native ally reported to Mantiano that the English had attempted to establish a fort as a means to prevent slaves from deserting the Carolinas with the labor of one hundred slaves. Paradoxically, the slaves revolted, killed all of the English soldiers, hamstringed their horses, and then fled. The English sent two large bodies of native slave-catchers to track down and recover the rebels. Four slaves were reported to have been seen in an Apalachee village before they disappeared. The blacks were reported to have encountered several Apalachee natives in the woods and asked them for directions to St. Augustine. **42**

On September 9, 1739, a group of twenty Carolinian black slaves assembled near the Stono River and marched to St. Augustine in hopes of the Spanish promise of liberation. Along the way they burned several plantations down and killed 23 whites. Their numbers grew to anywhere from sixty to a hundred as more slaves defected from the ashes of the reduced plantations. The slave revolt, which officially became known as the Stono Rebellion, was successfully suppressed before the insurrectionists could reach Spanish territory. A report concluded: “The Negroes would not have made this Insurrection had they not Depended on St. Augustine for a place of Reception afterwards was very certain.” **43** Before they began their march to freedom, the slave insurrectionists avidly discussed escaping to Spanish Florida:

“Dellah, she took a newspaper from Mastah Boswell’s study, and Jemmy asked me to read it, which I did, tellin’ ‘em ‘bout slaves who fled to the Presidio at St. Augustine, Florida, was free. Jemmy listened real close when I read that newspaper. His eyes got real quiet. Then he told the others what I said in Portuguese.” **44**

In June 1740, 150 slaves revolted near the Ashley River just outside of Charles Town. Having no immediate weapons or food, it was assumed that the rebels would be quickly dispersed. Instead they grouped together and scoured the countryside for supplies. The Carolinas were abuzz at the imminent threat and quickly formed militias to round up the rebel slaves. They managed to capture fifty of the fugitives, whom they were hanging at the rate of ten a day. The fate of the fifty others remains unknown,

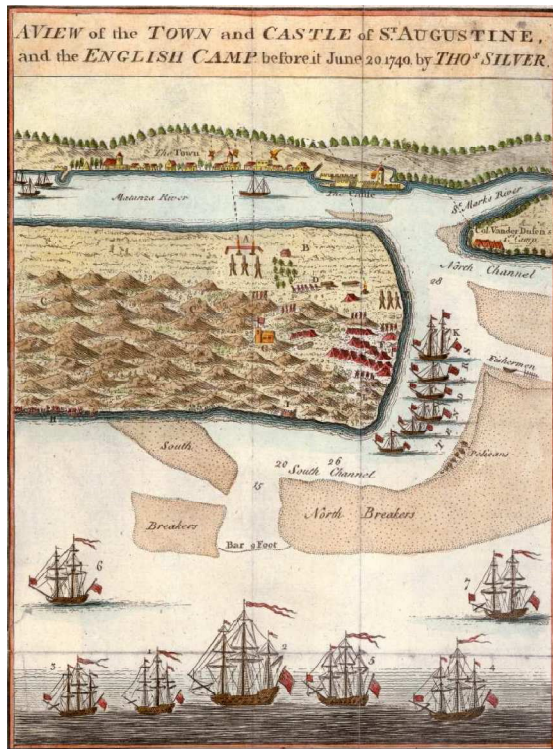




These two free black militia members include an officer from Veracruz (left) and a soldier from Havana (right), ca. 1770-1776, from *Artes de Mexico*, Joseph Heftner, 1968.

although St. Augustine was their likely destination. **45** This was also at the height of the war between the British colonies and Spanish Florida, when tensions and fears of slave insurrection were high and militias remained on constant alert of any suspicious activity among the large slave population. British Carolinian planters reacted to the growing threat of slave insurrection with increased repression against their own slaves and an avid determination to rid of the Florida sanctuary to the south. That the slave population in Carolina outnumbered whites four-to-one played no small part in this environment of repression and fear. To Carolinian whites, it appeared as if a general slave conspiracy was brewing underneath their feet, threatening to wipe out every single white man, woman, and child in the colony.

Unable to tolerate St. Augustine's offer of freedom any longer, the British declared war on Spanish Florida. To the Carolinas, St. Augustine was a "Den of thieves and Ruffians, Receptacle of Debtors, Servants, and Slaves, Bane of Industry and Society." **46** By late December, Georgia governor James Oglethorpe initiated attacks on



A view of the town and castle of St. Augustine and the English camp before it June 20, 1740. Source: *Florida Map Collections – George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.*

several of the outposts on the St. John's River west of St. Augustine. General Oglethorpe was abundantly clear about the main objective of the British excursion: "And I do further declare, that all Negroes which have deserted from South Carolina, which shall be taken in Florida during the said Expedition, shall be delivered up to their respective owners, on paying a Sterling per head to the Captors." <sup>47</sup> The Florida governor organized militias of Yamasee native allies, Spanish soldiers, and free blacks "of those who are fugitives from the English colonies." These militias were essential for making reconnaissance missions around the province and gathering intelligence on British movements. Blacks and natives were also employed in strengthening the defenses of the Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine in preparation for the British assault. Mantiano formed a regiment of fugitive blacks from Fort Mose who appointed their own officers, received the same pay and wore the same uniform as Spanish soldiers. <sup>48</sup>

In January 1740, the British gained several victories, capturing the Spanish forts Picolata and Pupo on the St. John's River west of St. Augustine. Oglethorpe garrisoned a force at Fort Francis on the St. John's River, which was strategically located at a necessary passing point for "disaffected Indians out of the Nation, or runaway slaves from Carolinas" traveling to St. Augustine. Now the only obstacle in the way of St. Augustine was Mose. The British blockaded St. Augustine from the coast and gathered their soldiers and native allies to siege the city. A full blockade was initiated to starve out the inhabitants. In May, a British lieutenant captured two blacks he found outside of St. Augustine who had withdrawn from the city due to the starving conditions. In the mean time, the pro-British natives made slave raids up and down the Florida coast, forcing Mantiano to withdraw the blacks from Fort Mose and into St. Augustine. **49** Col. John Palmer persistently volunteered to personally destroy Fort Mose with his own regiment, but General Oglethorpe repeatedly refused his request. In 1728, Palmer had been driven back by the black militias in his assault on St. Augustine and was particularly determined to avenge the humiliation he had received. Against Oglethorpe's orders, Palmer's regiment leveled the empty settlement and set up there for further attacks on St. Augustine. **50**

But the British forces found themselves without the necessary means to actually overrun the city. Over the previous decades, St. Augustine had improved its defenses in anticipation of a British invasion from the coast or inland. The town was entrenched with ten salient angles on each of which at least one cannon was mounted. Fifty cannon pieces were mounted on the nearly impenetrable Castillo de San Marcos, several of which were 24-pounders. The city was protected by a force of seven to eight hundred, consisting of 462 Spanish regulars and a nearly equivalent militia force of blacks, Yamasees, and whites. During the siege of St. Augustine, Mantiano also desperately begged the King to provide him with a 300-man black regiment from Cuba for assistance. While most of St. Augustine's population bunkered down in the Castillo for the siege, the free black and native militias carried on an intense guerilla war against the encamped British forces. **51** A British report claimed that many of St. Augustine's inhabitants were "mulattoes of savage Disposition" and that their militia forces were equivalent to the number of regular Spanish troops. **52**

The turning point of the war was the Spanish re-conquest of Fort Mose from Col. John Palmer's regiment that had garrisoned there. On June 25, Governor Mantiano detached a three hundred man regiment comprised of Spanish regulars, militiamen, Yamasees, and free blacks to dislodge the 170-man force of British and native allies at Mose under Palmer. The attack was initiated two hours before the British soldiers awoke



Artists' Rendering of the Battle of Fort Mose.

so that they could not prepare their arms for defense. The Spanish detachment quickly swept over the camp, leaving 68 dead and capturing 34 soldiers. The blacks brutally mutilated the bodies of dead soldiers. The English account reported in horror that the Spanish excursion cut off the heads and private parts of the dead and brought them back to St. Augustine in triumph. The Spanish account also includes a native prisoner at Fort Mose who had reported seeing Colonel Palmer dead and decapitated. This may have been the result of a pact that the fugitive slaves made with the Spanish King, promising to be “the most cruel enemies of the English.” At the end of the bloody battle, the blacks and Spanish retook Fort Mose. By July 10th, the British, finding their forces exhausted and their chances of taking St. Augustine minimal, retreated back to Georgia. **53**

Mantiano commended the free black militias for their bravery in protecting St. Augustine: “The constancy, valor and glory of the officers here are beyond all praise; the patriotism, courage and steadiness of the troops, militia, free negroes, and convicts, have been great. These last I may say to Your Excellency, have borne themselves like veteran soldiers. I especially commend their humble devotion, for without ceasing work by day, they have persevered by night with the care and vigilance of old soldiers...Even among the slaves a particular steadiness has been noticed, and a desire not to await the enemy in this place but to go out to meet him.” **54** The free black militias had successfully warded

off the full scale British invasion. Although Mose was destroyed in the 1740 siege, the free blacks would reside in St. Augustine for the next decade as free Spanish citizens. In 1742, they played a central role in the failed Spanish counterattack against Georgia. Afterwards, the British colonies and Spanish Florida were in somewhat of a stalemate. For the next two decades, the free blacks continued to repel isolated native and British raids against St. Augustine. **55**

In 1749, Melchor de Navarrete replaced Mantiano as governor of Spanish Florida and ordered Fort Mose to be rebuilt as a settlement for the free blacks in St. Augustine. **56** In 1752, Navarrete's successor Fulgencio Garcia de Solis met resistance from the free blacks in St. Augustine when he attempted to relocate them into the reconstructed settlement. The blacks claimed that they feared the attacks of pro-British natives, but the governor believed it emanated from their "desire to live in complete liberty." **57** It didn't occur to the Spanish governor that both could be possibly true considering that native parties were constantly scouring Spanish Florida for slaves. The free blacks of Spanish Florida wished to have freedom of movement and choice of residence, rights that their fellow residents in St. Augustine enjoyed, believing that their valuable militia service more than entitled them to basic rights of citizenship. While daily life at St. Augustine was far from glamorous, the hardships encountered at Fort Mose made daily living difficult. At Fort Mose they were little more than semi-free tributaries to the Spanish Florida government, while they were free citizens with rights in St. Augustine. Garcia de Solis lightly punished the two leaders of the resistance and threatened even worse punishment to any who would continue to resist. **58**

From the 1740's to the end of Spanish rule over Florida in 1763, slaves continued to run away from the Carolinas to the St. Augustine safeguard. Mose was abandoned in 1763 when Spanish Florida was formally ceded over to the British from Spain. A huge exodus of Spaniards, free blacks, and native allies left for Cuba to escape the prospects of British rule. **59** The introduction of British colonialism to Florida meant the establishment of chattel slavery and rigid race-based slave codes. During the period of British rule, some free blacks from St. Augustine, who had already long-established ties with natives in the Florida interior, were incorporated into the forming nucleus of the Seminole tribe. The organic formation of Oconeas, Lower Creeks, Yamasees, and various forms of native Floridian tribes, into what would later be called the Seminole Nation, had already incorporated runaway slaves from the late 17th century. Fugitive slaves escaping to the sparsely populated swamps of North and Central Florida would now find a safe-haven in the Seminoles rather than the provincial authorities.

## Indentured White Servants in British East Florida

British East Florida is notable for containing the largest population of white indentured servants in colonial American history. Questions of colonial competition, profitability, labor control, and race played important roles in determining the character of the labor system in the American southern colonies. Beliefs about African slavery, white labor, the tropical climate, and cultivating cash crops in the southern colonies were transmitted to the British colonization of East Florida following Spain's cession and departure in 1763. Nevertheless, this could be attributed to individual colonization schemes rather than a systematic effort on the part of the British colonial administration. As soon as Britain took possession of Florida, liberal land grants were advertised to induce British nobles and wealthy Carolinian planters to settle the territory. Governor James Grant arrived to East Florida from the Carolinas with a preconceived plan to transform the territory into a plantation province on the back of African slave labor. The model for East Florida was to be the black-majority Carolinas, essentially a large slave labor force producing cash crops to build the profits of a small planter class. Grant generally warned migrant planters that white labor was costly, disobedient, and would become unproductive in Florida's tropical climate, which he believed, like many others, required an African slave labor force. The climactic theory held that Africans were predisposed to labor amid the heat and disease of Florida's tropical climate, while white laborers grew sick and died under these conditions. **60**

Nevertheless, a large white indentured labor force would come to inhabit the territory, mostly through the initiatives of a handful of British planters who experimented with the notion that white labor in the tropical South could prove just as profitable, if not more so, than African slave labor. Fears of mass numbers of rebellious slaves populating the colony, racial prejudices, and faith in white labor characterized the British planter colonization experiments with white indentured servants. They reasoned that slave revolts in the Carolinas, Virginia, and New York, maroon communities, mass escapes to Spanish Florida, and general slave resistance had already disproven the "servile nature" of African slaves. Dr. Andrew Turnbull, in populating his planned New Smyrna colony with fourteen hundred Mediterranean farmers, wrote in mid-July 1768: "I believe that Gov. Grant laid out more money on cattle and Negroes than I intended. The expence for the cattle is a necessary and advantageous one, but I grudge that of the Negroes, as I see that it does not succeed in the extraordinary measures of it. Besides a Negro plantation is of all things the most unpleasant, and instead of peopling a country, often risks

unpeopling it. Governor Grant from spending two years in South Carolina, where they cultivate with Negroes, had prejudices in favour of that way of cultivating. But I think he will soon become a convert to our system from seeing the alertness, and quick manner of working of our people.” **61** British planters feared large numbers of Africans would taint the new colony and result in white outmigration as was the case in the slave-based British island colony of Barbados.

Several weeks into the settlement of New Smyrna, Turnbull’s white indentures, disillusioned with his false promises, revolted en masse and sought to escape the Florida territory. Grant’s warning of uncooperative white labor undoubtedly must have entered Turnbull’s mind at this time. But after crushing the revolt, New Smyrna’s successful indigo crop apparently disproved the unprofitability of white labor in Florida. Turnbull continuously claimed the South European laborers of his colony were superior to African slaves. **62** Indeed, the white indentured servants that came to largely inhabit the Florida colony would make notable acts of mass resistance against their brutally oppressive conditions and consistently revolt for their liberation under British rule.

After British acquisition of Florida, Lord Denys Rolle received the colony’s first land grant of forty thousand acres on the east side of the St. John’s River and named his planned colony Charlottia. On September 13, 1767, he arrived to Florida with three hundred impoverished, naked, and starving women – the vagrants and the “strolling poor” from the streets of London. He professed his intention for Charlottia was to forge an “ideal society” and reform his lower class captives, instilling in them values of “hard work” and “decency.” **61** Once his servants reached Charlottia, they first cleared the land for building a church and a churchyard before they even had a home or residence for shelter. After the town was completed, their shelter being rickety palmetto-thatched huts, they were set to a task system of labor tediously grubbing palmetto scrubs. **62** Rolle had initially promised his indentures half of the produce they could raise as an incentive. But the miserable living conditions and difficult labor of clearing the land quickly provoked discontent among the work force. Additionally, large numbers died from disease, hunger, and labor exhaustion. Bernard Romans recalled the high death rate that ravaged Rolle’s settlement:

“Rolles Town, Mount Royal, and three or four others of less note have seen too many wretches fall victims to hunger and ill usage, and that at a period of life when health and strength generally maintain the human frame in its greatest vigour, and

seem to insure longevity. Rolles-Town in particular has been the sepulchre of above four hundred such victims.” **63**

The high death rate and the constant outflow of runaways forced Rolle to import more than two hundred indentured whites during his tenure in Florida. **64** Rolle blamed his enemies, many of them local planters, for enticing his work force away. On the other hand, colonial governor James Grant argued: “Mr. Rolle does not consider that his own Conduct with regard to those Servants induces them to leave him sooner than perhaps they would do if they were treated in another manner.” **65** Grant relayed a report on the conditions under which his indentures suffered:

“Those people of course landed dissatisfied, and their Discontent was soon increased by bad living, and I am sorry to add by Acts of Injustice and oppression -for example, My Lord, some of the Servants by agreement were to have half the produce raised by their Labor, those people were set to work in a Pine Barren to Grub up Palmetto Roots, when they enquired of Mr. Rolle what advantage they could reap from such Labor, the answer I threaten'd to take away the License from the Publican and in short I obliged numbers of them at different times to return to his Plantation.

One of Mr. Rolle's managers called upon me and said overly [i. e. superficially] in Conversation, that his Master at times stopt People's Provisions who did not finish their Task-I told him that I thought Mr. Rolle did very right, for I believed they were a parcel of troublesome lazy people, I thought the man meant a Dinner or a Supper, but the Fact was stopping Provisions from whole Familys for ten days or a fortnight at a time, and that in a Wilderness where it was impossible for them to get anything to eat, unless it was in Charity from the other Servants out of their allowance.” **66**

In 1768, Rolle's indentures assembled and revolted, abandoning Rollestown to St. Augustine where they gathered in the streets to cry out against the injustices they had suffered. Grant reported the scene: “Disputes and Dissatisfaction at last run so high that they came off in a body and abandoned Mr. Rolle and the settlement-upon their arrival in Town they insisted upon being heard.” **67** A public hearing was called to allow the servants to make their case against Rolle. Their testimonies were so unfavorable to Rolle that the three justices felt that they should have been immediately discharged from their state of indenture. But the Florida governor feared ruling in favor of the indentured



servants because “servants getting the better of their Master would be a bad precedent, and might be hurtful to the future Settlement of the Province.” **68**

Grant would defeat a similar servant revolt on Andrew Turnbull’s plantation two weeks later. A close friend to the notion of aristocracy, despite his personal grudge against Rolle, Grant was interested in making East Florida desirable for investment for wealthy London nobles and Carolinian planters. As workers’ uprisings grew more frequent in the American colonies, Grant feared the spread of democratic behavior to the Florida colony. He recommended that the indentures return to their homes and obey their master, but advised Rolle to temper his oppressive practices in case he might provoke further discontent. **69** In 1769, eighty-nine of the indentures from Rollestown took a ship to Charleston at Rolle’s expense and vanished as soon as they reached the port. Even as Rolle continued to import white indentures, only two hundred laborers remained on his plantations by 1770. He eventually became discouraged with the unprofitable returns from the settlement and imported African slaves in their place. **70**

### **The Turnbull Settlement**

The largest settlement of indentured servants in British East Florida was the New Smyrna colony, a hundred thousand acre land-grant issued to Dr. Andrew Turnbull and his family. The forty thousand acre strip lying on the coast of Mosquito Inlet seventy miles south of St. Augustine was planned as the site of the main plantation. In August 1768, Turnbull arrived to Florida after recruiting over fourteen hundred indentured servants from the Mediterranean - Greeks from the Peloponesus, Italians from Corsica, and Minorcans from the Mediterranean island of Minorca. In his 1775 work *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida*, Florida surveyor Bernard Romans observed that Turnbull’s recruits had been relatively affluent, owning bountiful cornfields and vineyards in Greece and Italy, but “were deluded away from their native country” with Turnbull’s false promises of prosperity in British East Florida. **71** Turnbull’s terms of indentured service were initially favorable, covering the voyage expenses, providing good provisions and clothing, and offering fifty acre plots of land for themselves and twenty-five acres for their children after three years of service. If the indentures became dissatisfied with their service after sixth months, then he promised to send them back. The long four month voyage to Florida was arduous with many of the old and meek dying along the way. Over 28 died in just a single vessel. When they finally landed, a scourge of gangrene and scurvy wiped out a significant portion of the population. By

November, three months after landing, three hundred had died, mostly children and the old. **72**

Instead of an abundant land of promise, they found an empty wilderness. With no shelter other than palmetto-thatched huts the indentures were forced to build themselves, along with the severe rainy season in Florida that year, sickness and discontent increased. Finding little more than sand and palmetto, the laborers were immediately placed to work grubbing palmetto scrubs and clearing the land for cultivation. At best, their provisions were a quart of maize a day and two ounces of pork a week. While fish were plenty in the nearby lagoon, they were prohibited from fishing to supplement their diet. Romans vividly describes how the laborers were all forced to eat together in a mess hall and receive their provisions at the “beat of a vile drum,” while the “knavery of a providetor and the pilfering of a hungry cook” made their scanty meal “still more scanty.” In establishing the labor system, Turnbull went back on his initial contract terms. Romans elaborates: “He granted them a pitiful portion of land for ten years...at the end of the term it again reverts to the original grantor, and the grantee, may, if he chooses, begin a new state of vassalage for ten years more.” But many were even denied these grants and forced to the work the fields in “the manner of negroes.” **73**

In a few years, the indigo crop began to bring in 3,174 dollars annually. As the indigo crop grew more profitable, Turnbull grew more repressive. A few of the Italians were appointed as overseers and drivers, while the majority was “reduced to the most abject slavery.” While the settlers had brought good clothing with them, this was eventually worn. For the entire term of their service, the men were provided with only one blanket and one pair of shoes, while the women were given no shoes at all. In the last three years of their service, they were given no clothes at all other than they what they purchased at Turnbull’s store. The debts they incurred in acquiring necessities became an additional excuse to hold them in peonage. **74** Bernard Romans provided a vivid description of the mass suffering endured by the indentured laborers at the New Smyrna colony:

“Masters of vessels were forewarned from giving any of them a piece of bread or meat. Imagine to yourself an African (an expert hunter) who had been long the favorite of his master, through the importunities of this petty tyrant sold to him,— imagine to yourself one of a class of men, whose hearts are generally callous against the softer feelings, melted with the wants of some of these wretches, giving them a piece of his venison, of which he caught what he pleased, and for this charitable act disgraced, whipped, and in course of time used so severely that the unusual servitude

soon released him to a happier state; again, behold a man obliged to whip his own wife in public, for pilfering bread to relieve her helpless family; then think of a time when the above small allowance was reduced to half, and see some brave generous seamen charitably sharing their own allowance with some of these wretches, the merciful tars suffering abuse for their generosity, and the miserable objects of their ill-timed pity, undergoing bodily punishment, for satisfying the cravings of a long disappointed appetite, and you may form some judgment of the manner in which New Smyrna was settled.” **75**

On August 19, 1768, within weeks of their arrival, the laborers’ disillusion with the Florida colony turned to revolt. Two weeks earlier, Rolle’s white indentures had revolted and made their case to the St. Augustine court, only to be turned back and obliged to obey their master. Clearly the system wouldn’t address their injustices. Under the leadership of an Italian overseer Carlo Forni, three hundred Greeks and Italians gathered and broke into the storehouse, distributing the liquor, firearms, and ammunition among each other. Cutter, the most brutal overseer, attempted to stop them but the insurgents viciously attacked him in revenge for his “barbarities,” cutting off his ear and two of his fingers. The maiming they inflicted on him was so severe that he soon died from his wounds. Determined to escape to Cuba, the rebels proceeded to seize a ship stocked with provisions lying in the harbor. Forni threatened death to any of the Minorcans who would inform Turnbull of their actions. Believing that the revolt was a success, the rebels celebrated that night. Once Dr. Turnbull was informed of events, he requested the assistance of Governor Grant to hurriedly counter the rebels before they left for Cuba. The next morning, as the rebels sought to leave for Cuba, a detachment from the ninth regiment commissioned by Governor Grant routed the captured ship, causing the frightened rebels on deck to immediately surrender. But thirty-five men, including those who had initiated the uprising, had deserted the ship and hurried off in a rowboat at the sight of the British vessels. Two months later, they were found in a starving condition in the Florida Keys. In a St. Augustine court in January, three of the five accused for the worst crimes were pardoned. Two, Forni, the ringleader, and Guiseppi Massadoli, for killing Cutter, were executed as an example for the other three hundred. Turnbull would hold the three hundred men, women, and children in further peonage for participating in the revolt: “They shall pay every half penny of the Damage sustained in that affair before they get out of my hands.” **76**

The horrors of the colony continued after the revolt. Workers were often beaten excessively for trivial crimes. Black slaves were not only “chosen as the instruments of

diabolical cruelty,” but those on nearby plantations were paid to capture and return runaways. Black slaves “were often compelled to beat and lacerate those who had not performed their tasks, till they died. After scourging the skin from their backs, they were sometimes left naked, tied to a tree all night, for the mosquitoes to suck their blood. These usually swelled up ready to burst, with their tortures.” It seemed that Turnbull knew just how to divide white and black, creating animosity between the two groups in order to prevent them from successfully organizing. By 1770, half of the colony had died from disease, exhaustion, and punishment. By 1776, one thousand of the indentures had died, leaving only four hundred of the original migrants remaining. <sup>77</sup> By 1774, unrest among the indentures was growing. They began to run away at any chance they received, even signing petitions to the governor for their freedom. Rev. John Forbes reported that when Turnbull went to Charles Town to sell his indigo: “Many of his people's indentures are near an end and they are clamorous and talk loudly of leaving him. One of the discontents found his way to town and Collins was paid by Wilson to support them. The man was with some argument smuggled off. He complained of hunger, oppression, etc., and many more use the same style of language.” In May, responding to the petitions of the indentures, the Florida governor Patrick Tonyn made his way out to New Smyrna and “recommended obedience to the People.” <sup>78</sup>

Revolution in the Americas proved ominous for Turnbull’s colony. It was feared that the Georgia Patriots would invade British East Florida. “This information is very alarming,” wrote Captain Robert Bisset to Governor Tonyn, “especially with regard to Doctor Turnbull's people, a great many of whom would certainly join them.” Bisset planned to disarm the “suspected” workers at New Smyrna and warn all the plantations in the vicinity to keep up their guard. <sup>79</sup>

In May 1776, a young boy overheard the comments of several English aristocrats expressing the belief that if the people of the settlement knew their rights at St. Augustine they would not tolerate such servitude. The young boy relayed to his mother what he overheard. She then assembled a council of her friends to secretly head out for St. Augustine to report their conditions and demand justice. Three resolute and brave men were chosen for this task. The names of these Minorcans were Pellicier, Llambias, and Genopley. In order to account for their absence, they asked as a special favor if they could be given an extra amount of work to do in a specified time and if they completed their tasks early then they could have several days “to go down to the coast and catch turtle.” The three men finished their tasks early and set out that night to St. Augustine, swimming the Matanzas Inlet in the morning and reaching the city by sundown that same day. The three men consulted the provincial attorney-general Henry Young, informing

him of their conditions, their original contract terms, and their mistreatment. Young made their case known to Governor Tonyn who agreed to do justice for the indentured servants of New Smyrna and set them free if their case could be proven. Tonyn made it clear he desired to free them, “not only from a principle of humanity, but from policy, as I am credibly informed, that they have invited the Rebels in Georgia to come to their relief, and deliverance, and have promised their assistance.” **80** To take care of the revolt through legislation and courts would quiet down the unrest, but failure to take action could have resulted in a mass uprising of white indentures in the colony.

The envoy returned to New Smyrna and covertly organized the laborers to prepare for their march of liberation to St. Augustine. They assembled together and quietly left Turnbull’s plantations armed with wooded spears in case they met resistance from the overseers. John Lee Williams described this exodus: “They set off like the children of Israel, from a place that had proved an Egypt to them.” The workers were several miles off before the overseers realized that they had deserted the place. Some were so jubilant that they left with the workers, while the others informed Turnbull that the people had made a break for freedom in his absence. The overseers begged them to turn back, but to no avail. Once they reached St. Augustine, they were immediately given provisions and their case went before the judges. Hearing the testimonies of a handful of delegates picked to represent the body of indentures, Tonyn agreed to free them from their contracts and grant them lands in the northern part of the city. **81**

Having diverted the New Smyrna uprising, Tonyn later wrote to his superiors: “the American levelling principles have not been less alive here, than in other Provinces, Governors pulled down, and Government trampled upon, the attempts to that end in this Province, thank God have failed in their completion.” **82** Turnbull’s oppressive colony broken up, the servants of New Smyrna free and content, their unrest quieted, the British Florida colonial administration and judicial system prevented the potential spread of the American Revolution and the New Smyrna workers uprising from destroying the last vestige of British rule in the American colonies.

### **Formation of the Seminoles and Free Black Communities**

There are many misconceptions regarding not only the historical origins of the Seminoles but their racial and ethnic composition. The most elementary misconception is that the Seminoles were merely renegade Creeks who abandoned the Creek Confederacy for Florida to escape the influx of white settlers. This claim was mostly self-serving white

propaganda to justify US penetration into Florida and removal of the Seminoles from their homelands. After all, they weren't the "original inhabitants" of Florida. Wishing to hold their Creek neighbors accountable for the loss of their slaves into the Seminole territory, Southern planters also typically rejected that the Seminoles were an independent entity from the Creek Federation. What eventually formed into the Seminole tribe can't be considered as generally Lower Creek either. The Seminoles formed from an organic composition of Oconees, Miccosukees, Lower Creeks, Yamasees, and native Florida tribes. After the 1704 British-Creek attacks and raids on the Apalachee province, most of Florida's historic tribes became remnants of their former selves. With the absence of any dense settlement, northern Florida was essentially a vacuum to be filled by the indigenous tribes to the north. Yamasee, Apalachee, Yuchi and Lower Creek settlements formed in the void of northern Florida during the Yamasee War of 1715. This was the first wave of native migration from the north to inhabit and repopulate northern Florida. The Yamasees and Lower Creeks had formerly played primary roles in the 1703-1704 British raids that decimated the Apalachee province. But the oppression and exploitation of British traders caused the Lower Creeks to instigate the Yamasees to revolt. The enslaved Apalachees also joined them. In 1715, the Yamasees and Lower Creeks switched their alliance from the British to the Spanish and flocked en masse down to the Chattahoochee River. From there they made raiding excursions into the Carolinas and found protection and support from the Spaniards at St. Augustine and Pensacola. The Yamasees captured Carolinian slaves and incorporated them into their settlements. Fugitive slaves escaping the Carolinas to St. Augustine also found refuge in their towns. **83**

Just after the outbreak of the Yamasee War, the Oconee tribe left its old town on the Oconee River and settled among the Lower Creeks at the Chattahoochee, presumably to escape the encroachment of white settlers. But more than likely it was to escape the reprisal of whites following the general native insurrection at the outbreak of the Yamasee War. Sometime between 1730 and 1750, the Oconees, under their head chief Cow Keeper, migrated southeast from the Chattahoochee to the fertile Alachua Savannah of Florida. There they established their capital of Cuscowilla. The newly migrated Oconees soon found themselves in conflict with the Spaniards and their native allies, the Yamasees and Apalachees. Having the support of Lower Creek refugees and fugitives with whom they were confederated, the Oconees eventually obliterated the pro-Spanish Yamasees, weakened Spanish rule, and extended their control over much of Florida. The Oconee tribe is considered the nucleus from which the Seminoles expanded and grew. **84** The history of the Seminole Nation can thus be considered an extenuation of the history of the Oconee.

A quick analysis of the Oconee tribe can easily counter the myths about the Seminoles being outcasts, fugitives, or separatists from the Creek Nation. While the Oconee was undoubtedly confederated with the Lower Creeks, it was always on the outer bands of the Confederacy and had considerable autonomy in decision-making. They always inhabited the periphery of the Creek Federacy and were thus able to conceive themselves as an independent tribal entity. Additionally, the Oconees spoke the Hitchiti-dialect of southern Georgia, not Muskogee like most Creeks. **85** Their settlements extended farther south and west as an influx of Lower Creek refugees allied themselves with the Oconees against the Spanish and their native allies. The only detailed historical account of the Oconee tribe, and how it migrated and settled into Florida, was made by William Bartram in his 1773 travels through Florida:

“Our encampment was fixed on the site of the old Ocone town, which, about sixty years ago, was evacuated by the Indians, who, finding their situation disagreeable from its vicinity to the white people, left it, moving upwards into the Nation or Upper Creeks, and there built a town; but that situation not suiting their roving disposition, they grew sickly and tired of it, and resolved to seek an habitation more agreeable to their minds. They all arose, directing their migration southeastward towards the seacoast; and in the course of their journey, observing the delightful appearance of the extensive plains of Alachua and the fertile hills environing it, they sat down and built a town on the banks of a spacious and beautiful lake, at a small distance from the plains, naming this new town Cuscowilla; this situation pleased them, the vast deserts, forests, lake, and savannas around affording abundant range of the best hunting ground for bear and deer, their favourite game. But although this situation was healthy and delightful to the utmost degree, affording them variety and plenty of every desirable thing in their estimation, yet troubles and afflictions found them out. This territory, to the promontory of Florida, was then claimed by the Tomocas, Utinas, Caloosas, Yamases, and other remnant tribes of the ancient Floridians, and the more northern refugees, driven away by the Carolinians, now in alliance and under the protection of the Spaniards, who, assisting them, attacked the new settlement and for many years were very troublesome; but the Alachuas or Ocones being strengthened by other emigrants and fugitive bands from the Upper Creeks, with whom they were confederated, and who gradually established other towns in this low country, stretching a line of settlements across the isthmus, extending from the Alatomaha to the bay of Apalache; these uniting were at length able to face their enemies and even attack them in their own settlements; and in the end, with the

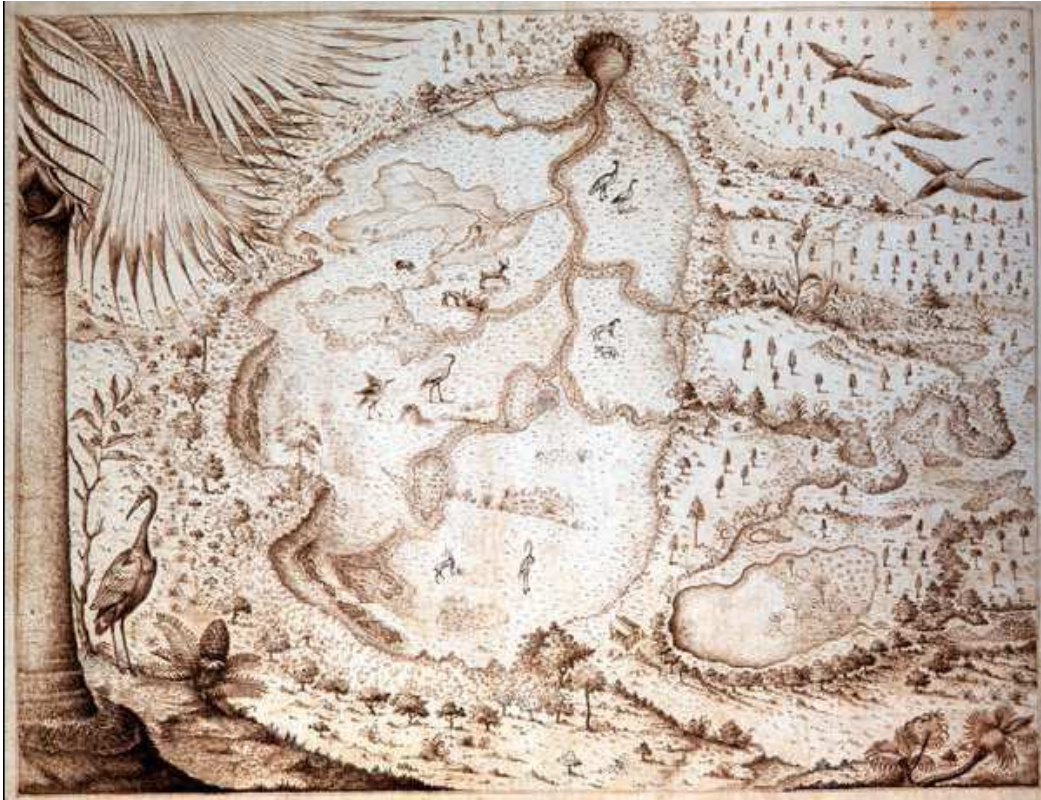
assistance of the Upper Creeks, their uncles, vanquished their enemies and destroyed them, and then fell upon the Spanish settlements, which also they entirely broke up.”

**86**

In 1773, William Bartram documented his excursions throughout the Southeast and wrote the first European account of Seminole culture and social structure. Bartram showed amazing foresight of the Seminole tribe, noting that their small numbers were actually positive for their environment if they were to resist any sort of enemy invasion. There were so many retreats and temporary dwelling places in their region, along with such an abundance of game and food, that they could easily subsist even if their structured settlements were destroyed. This would prove true in years to come as they were able to resist the US military through small numbers, vast territory, easily obtainable sustenance, and an infinite number of hiding places that no white man had previously chartered. Bartram romantically described the tribe:

“Thus they enjoy a superabundance of the necessaries and conveniences of life, with the security of person and property, the two great concerns of mankind. The hides of deer, bears, tigers and wolves, together with honey, wax and other productions of the country, purchase their clothing, equipage and domestic utensils from the whites. They seem to be free from want or desires. No cruel enemy to dread; nothing to give them disquietude, but the gradual encroachments of the white people. Thus contented and undisturbed, they appear as blithe and free as the birds of the air, and like them as volatile and active, tuneful and vociferous. The visage, action and deportment of a Siminole, being the most striking picture of happiness in this life; joy, contentment, love and friendship, without guile or affection, seem inherent in them, or predominant in their vital principle, for it leaves them but with the last breath of life. It even seems imposing a constraint upon their ancient chiefs and senators, to maintain a necessary decorum and solemnity, in their public councils; not even the debility and decrepitude of extreme old age, is sufficient to erase from their visages, this youthful, joyous simplicity; but like the grey eve of a serene and calm day, a gladdening, cheering blush remains on the Western horizon after the sun is set.” **87**





“The Great Alachua Swamp,” drawing by William Bartram in his 1773-1774 expedition to Florida. Source: *American Philosophical Society*.

Painting an idyllic picture, Bartram described the illustrious Alachua savannah that the Seminoles inhabited:

“The extensive Alachua savanna is a level, green plain, above fifteen miles over, fifty miles in circumference, and scarcely a tree or bush of any kind to be seen on it. It is encircled with high, sloping hills, covered with waving forests and fragrant Orange groves, rising from an exuberantly fertile soil. The towering *Magnolia grandiflora* and transcendent Palm, stand conspicuous amongst them. At the same time are seen innumerable droves of cattle; the lordly bull, lowing cow and sleek capricious heifer. The hills and groves re-echo their cheerful, social voices. Herds of sprightly deer, squadrons of the beautiful, fleet Seminole horse, flocks of turkeys, civilized communities of the sonorous, watchful crane, mix together, appearing

happy and contented in the enjoyment of peace, 'till disturbed and affrighted by the warrior man.” **88**

The Oconee tribe was initially introduced to Florida through their participation in British raids on the Apalachee province. During the Yamasee War of 1715, various tribes settled in Florida where the Apalachee had once inhabited, including Apalachee slaves who joined the Yamasees in their uprising against British rule. During the war, the Yamasees, Lower Creeks, and Apalachees brought runaway slaves and slave captives back to St. Augustine and incorporated others into their newly established settlements in southern Georgia and northern Florida. After the Oconees established their new settlement in the Alachua region of Florida around 1750, they, in confederation with other Lower Creeks, destroyed the Yamasees and incorporated their remnants under their realm. Lower Creeks, Oconees, and various other native factions from the north of Florida invaded and consumed the territory from 1750 to the end of Spanish rule in 1763. Through their continued inhabitation in Florida far from the Creek Federacy, the Oconee established itself as a completely independent tribal entity. The runaway slaves incorporated into the Yamasee, Apalachee, and Uchee settlements were also incorporated into the Oconees, who formed the Seminole nucleus. In fact, the name “Seminole” was understood as a corruption of *cimarron*, or maroon, the Spanish term used to refer to fugitive slave communities. **89** In some sense, it’s not inaccurate to describe the Seminoles as an “Afro-indigenous” federation.

The Seminole capital was the ancient town of Cuscowilla, although it was moved from its old location due to inhospitable conditions. The town contained thirty habitations consisting of two homes of equivalent size. The chief’s house was clearly superior to the other homes, dwarfing the rest of the town in its magnitude. The Seminoles maintained a dump some distance from their homes in order to keep the town healthy and clean. They usually maintained their plantations some distance from their towns as well in the rich fertile lands of the Alachua savannah. The plantations were worked and attended to by the whole community but every family had its own apportioned plot of land. A family would receive a portion of the common labor and assistance from the public granary until their harvest became ripe. Every family would set aside a small contribution of their crop for the public granary located in the center of the plantation. **90** The tribe was heavily influenced by Spanish culture in aspects of clothing, religion, and language. Some of the Seminoles fluently spoke Spanish and were baptized



“Mico Chlicco, the Long Warrior, or King of the Siminoles,” drawing by William Bartram in his 1773-1774 expedition to Florida.  
Source: *American Philosophical Society*.

to Christianity, adorned with tiny silver crucifixes. Bartram vividly described the first documented white encounter with the Seminole chief Cowkeeper:

“The chief is a tall well made man, very affable and cheerful, about sixty years of age, his eyes lively and full of fire, his countenance manly and placid, yet ferocious, or what we call savage; his nose aquiline, his dress extremely simple, but his head trimmed and ornamented in the true Creek mode. He has been a great warrior, having then attending him as slaves, many Yamasee captives, taken by himself when young. They were dressed better than he, served and waited upon him with signs of the most abject fear.” **91**



Seminole Town, ca. 1835, from the 1837 Gray & James series of lithographs on the war.

Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

In 1773, the tribal character was still primarily indigenous American. But after the American Revolutionary War, the runaway blacks from the Southern colonies found a sound refuge within the Alachua region of Florida. An unprecedented influx of runaway slaves was incorporated into the Seminole Nation. Throughout the period of the American Revolution, the British maintained Florida as a central post of operations in the Southeast. As British commanders promised freedom for runaway slaves, thousands fled the plantations to join the British side. Hundreds of runaway slaves congregated at the mouth of the Savannah River, invoking fear of a general revolt among colonial slaveholders.

During the Revolution, the East Florida Rangers, a British loyalist band, committed depredations on the Southern colonies under Thomas Browne. Browne was also the Southeast Indian Superintendent, which included the Creeks, Seminoles, and Cherokees. A number of blacks, natives, and whites served under his command. When runaway slaves fled to join the British army, sometimes Browne would be their commander. His forces captured and carried off runaway slaves. This largely contributed to the integration of blacks within the Seminoles and Miccosukees at unprecedented

numbers. Major General Charles Lee assumed command of Georgia's forces and expressed the importance of seizing East Florida as runaway slaves were deserting to Seminole territory for protection:

“I think I could ensure the reduction of East Florida, an object, though not equal with Canada, is certainly of very great importance. Here the measures of the Southern Indians are concerted and planned, their treaties negotiated and concluded; here they receive their bribes, for their murderous operations, and from, hence they are supplied with all the means and instruments of war: from hence they have lately made some alarming incursions into Georgia, carried off a considerable number of negroes, and not less than two thousand head of cattle: they have likewise thrown up a post on the river, St. Mary's, which, if suffered to remain, may prove extremely troublesome to Georgia, by affording a ready asylum to negro deserters.” **92**

At the end of the war, most of the blacks left with the British to obtain land and semi-freedom in the British colonies. Those who remained behind either formed maroon communities on the lower Savannah or fled farther inland to live alongside the Muskogee tribes. When the British fled their Florida colony, they took with them many of the fugitive slaves that escaped from the colonies during the war. However, 42 percent of all blacks in British East Florida - some 4,745 people - were unaccounted for at the conclusion of the evacuation. **93** Many of these blacks fled to the interior of north and central Florida where they formed maroon communities alongside the Chattahoochee River, the Miccosukee tribe, and the Alachua Seminoles. Some found refuge farther south to Tampa where they formed what came to be known as the Angola community. Although free blacks and runaway slaves formed the initial nucleus of the Seminole tribe, this was the first large demographic shift that reinstated the ethnic character of the tribe. **94** In 1784, Florida was returned to Spanish rule. The death of Cow Keeper, the diplomatic efforts of Spanish officials to win the alliance of the Seminoles, and the interests of the Seminoles and black maroons in preventing US acquisition of the territory all contributed to the warm relations that then developed between the Spaniards and the Seminoles. **95**

While black maroons were technically considered “slaves” of the Seminoles, black-Seminole social relations bore none of the attributes of traditional Southern chattel slavery. The black Seminole maroons lived in their own communities in proximity to the Seminole villages without much direct control from their Seminole “masters.” Prior to

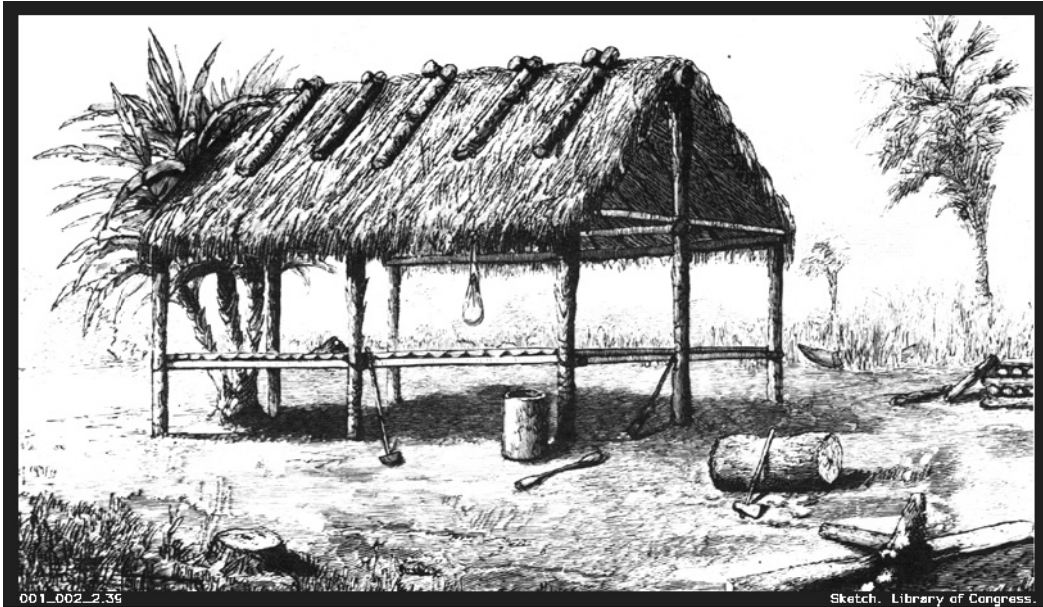
the Patriot War of 1812, the black towns were located nearby the main Seminole settlements – the Miccosukee Lake, the Suwannee River, and the Alachua Savannah. But the black settlement of Angola was almost forty miles away from the nearest native town. These towns enjoyed enough autonomy to earn the blacks the title of “allies” rather than slaves. The blacks were only obliged to provide a small portion of their harvested crop to their Seminole “masters.” But other than this paltry tribute, they were free to move about as they pleased. The two groups operated as defensive and economic allies working together out of their mutual interest against white settler land grabs and slave raids rather than as a master/slave relationship. General Edmund Pendleton Gaines confirmed the semi-feudal nature of the black Seminoles, labeling them “black vassals and allies.” **96** If anything, their black allies were nothing more than slaves in title, a necessity for protection against slave raiders eager to snatch them up and sell them into bondage, which was less likely to occur if a Seminole chief claimed them as legal property. Nevertheless, white slave raiders simply saw blacks that could be seized for a bargain price in “Indian territory” without any legal repercussions. Whether or not the blacks were several generations free or recent runaways made little difference to Southern slavers, who saw “blackness” as the equivalent to perpetual servitude.

The strength and influence of blacks in the politics of the Seminole Nation grew over the years and their resistance to emigration out of fear of returning to slavery aided the large faction of Seminoles who were determined to remain on their lands at all cost. During the Muskogee State of 1800 and the Patriot War of 1812, the free black Prince led the Seminoles and blacks in numerous operations, in which black guerilla ambush tactics earned them the reputation as the fiercest and most resolute fighters. During the time that the blacks occupied the Appalachicola Fort from 1814 to 1816, their Seminole allies were under their command and direction. By Jackson’s Florida invasion in 1818, the blacks became central to Seminole warfare against the whites and the black chief Nero held considerable influence in Seminole decision-making. By 1820, whites had already begun to recognize that the black maroon allies would be the largest obstacle to removing the Seminoles from Florida. The Seminoles relied largely on black resistance to enslavement to remain on their lands and combat the whites and vice versa. It’s up to interpretation whether the Seminoles provided fugitive slaves liberty for sustenance and military support, to undermine the whites, out of sentiments against the cruelties and brutality of Southern slavery, or all of the above. Both groups had a degree of self-interest in the alliance and whites eventually attempted to play on that to divide-and-conquer without much success. Nevertheless, the large black population eventually became influential political leaders, diplomats, co-workers, warriors, friends, family members, lovers, etc.,

and anti-slavery sentiments were probably harbored by a good portion of the Seminole Nation. Mutual affinity developed out of strategic alliance and common interest, making it not so easy to declare that the two groups had no sympathy for one another's plight.

While the size of the black maroon settlements grew over time from the constant inflow of fugitive slaves, in several instances mass influxes of fugitive slaves augmented their size, shape, and strength considerably. The vast majority of blacks that joined the British in the Revolutionary War, the Patriot War that saw large numbers flock from the Georgia plantations to Seminole territory, the slaves that flocked into Florida to seek British protection during the War of 1812, the "Negro Fort" along the Appalachicola River, and the slave insurrection that broke out in East Florida at the start of the Second Seminole War all changed the shape and nature of the Seminole Nation. Abraham, who would eventually become the main black chief, top diplomat, and head interpreter for the Seminole Nation, escaped with the British from Pensacola during the War of 1812, and fought at the "Negro Fort" and the battle of Suwannee. By the 1820's, whites began to notice his political power and influence within the nation. However, during the Second Seminole War, a runaway slave who was involved in the East Florida revolt in December 1835 was already holding a strong command position at the battle of Wahoo in November 1836. In each instance when blacks were introduced en masse, black political strength within the Seminole Nation grew simultaneously. As early as late 1836, General Thomas Jesup believed that the number of black warriors exceeded Seminole numbers. Next to their Hititchi-blood, Afro-ethnicity was undeniably the most important aspect of Seminole ethnic make-up, which meant the nation fell under the wider category of "Afro-indigenous."

The Seminoles were poor farmers and relied heavily on the blacks for subsistence, especially when they were constrained within the miserably poor reservation lands of south-central Florida. However, since the amount of agricultural tribute the Seminole chiefs took from the blacks was minimal, it never gave them more than what they needed for subsistence. The black towns and the inflow of fugitive slaves were largely slaves stolen from the African West Coast and brought to the Carolinas, and were familiar with generations of inherited rice cultivation techniques from Gambia and Senegal that proved effective in Florida's tropical climate. Their plantation fields would typically extend anywhere from two to twenty acres. When up to a thousand blacks inhabited the Appalachicola River banks, the string of plantations extended for almost fifty miles upriver. Such skill at clearing swamp land for raising rice, corn, beans, and other staple food crops allowed them to suffice during the famine that hit the Seminole



Drawing of Seminole chickee, 1887. Source: *American Historical Images on File: The Native American Experience*.

reservation, build up successful plantations at Angola and elsewhere, constantly produce surplus crops for exchange with Cuban traders, and generally live more prosperously than their Seminole “masters” whom they paid tribute to. The blacks could pay their small tribute to the Seminoles and still have enough surplus left over to exchange for guns, rum, and other desired goods. The black homes were similar to the palmetto-thatched huts of their Seminole allies, but larger, more elaborate, and wealthier.

While adopting many aspects of Seminole culture, including housing, dress, and communal property, the black maroons formed a distinct identity of their own. The blacks mainly spoke a dialect known as Afro-Seminole, a creole related to Gullah, which included mostly English expressions but incorporated words from African, Spanish, and Muskogee as well. The Christianity they practiced was a conglomeration of English Christianity, Spanish Catholicism, Seminole, and indigenous African traditions. The “ring-shouts” and call-and-response forms of worship they practiced were distinctly African. Their naming practices included traditional West African names, famous Biblical and historical names received from their former owners, and Seminole surnames.

97

In 1823, Horatio S. Dexter made observations on the black Seminole inhabitants:



“The Negroes possessed by the Indians live apart from them & they give the master half what the lands produce; he provides them nothing & they are at liberty to employ themselves as they please. The Indian Negroes are a fine formed athletic race, speak English as well as Indians & feel satisfied with their situation. They have the easy unconstrained manner of the Indians but more vivacity & from their understanding both languages possess considerable influence with their master.” **98**

The year before, William H. Simmons also took extensive notes on the unique social characteristics of the black Seminoles:

“The Negroes dwell in towns apart from the Indians, are the finest looking people I have ever seen. They dress and live pretty much like the Indians, each having a gun, and hunting a portion of his time. Like the Indians, they plant in common, and form an Indian field apart, which they attend together. They are, however, much more intelligent than their owners, most of them speaking the Spanish, English, and Indian languages. . . The partial union of wild and of social habits, as exhibited in the Negro settlements, presents a very singular anomaly, no where else, perhaps, to be met with. The gentle treatment they experience from the Indians, is a very amiable trait in the character of the latter.” **99**

Woodburne Potter observed the relaxed conditions of “slavery” that the blacks enjoyed under the Seminoles:

“His life among the Indians is one, compared with that of negroes under overseers, of luxury and ease; the demands upon him are very trifling scarcely ever exceeding eight or ten bushels, from the crop, the remainder being applied to his own profit: they live separate, and often remote, from their owners, and enjoy an equal share of liberty. The negro is also much more provident and ambitious than his master, and the peculiar localities of the country eminently facilitate him in furnishing the Indian with rum and tobacco, which gives him a controlling influence over the latter, and, at the same time, affords him an immense profit; so that it can be easily imagined that the negroes would in no manner be benefited by the change.” **100**



Engraving of black Seminole leader John Horse, or Gopher John, ca. 1840, from *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, John T. Sprague, 1848.

In 1826, Lt. George McCall took extensive notes on the main black settlement of Pelahlikaha, which he found to be “one of the most prosperous negro towns in the Indian territory”:

“We found these negroes in possession of large fields of the finest land, producing large crops of corn, beans, melons, pumpkins, and other esculent vegetables. They are chiefly runaway slaves from Georgia, who have put themselves under the protection of Micanopy, or some other chief, whom they call master; and to whom, for this consideration, they render a tribute of one-third of the produce of the land, and one-third of the horses, cattle, and fowl they may raise. Otherwise they are free to go and come at pleasure, and in some cases are elevated to the position of equality with their masters. I saw, while riding along the borders of the ponds, fine rice growing; and in the village large corn-cribs were filled, while the houses were larger and more comfortable than those of the Indians themselves.” **101**

Around the same time that the American slave-based colonies began to establish their “nationhood,” they formed a constitution that excluded natives, Africans, women, and propertyless whites. Yet, in the depths of Spanish-owned Florida, the antithesis to the US establishment was brewing. Right on the southernmost border of the Antebellum South, there began to form a large group of disaffected natives and fugitive slaves determined on maintaining their land and freedom against the pressures of slavers and land-grabbers. Some of the first acts of the United States were based on challenging this threat to white hegemony and black slavery. Southern slaveholders pushed the Federal government to retrieve their lost “property” that fled into the dark swamps of a largely uninhabited and unchartered Florida territory. In the 1790 treaty with the Creek Federation, the first national treaty in US history, a provision was included to address the concern of fugitive slaves in Florida:

“The Creek Nation shall deliver as soon as practicable to the commanding officer of the troops of the United States, stationed at the Rock-Landing on the Oconee river, all citizens of the United States, white inhabitants or negroes, who are now prisoners in any part of the said nation. And if any such prisoners or negroes should not be so delivered, on or before the first day of June ensuing, the governor of Georgia may empower three persons to repair to the said nation, in order to claim and receive such prisoners and negroes.” **102**

The prequel to the Fugitive Slave Policy was in Florida. The US pressured Creeks and the Spanish Florida government into retrieving fugitive slaves. That George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, two of the most prominent “Founding Fathers,” would place such emphasis on destroying the black Seminole refuge in Florida indicates the real terror that it posed to slavery – the essential American institution. These free black towns in Florida were not only intolerable to Southern slaveholders because of their attraction for other runaways, but they represented a beacon of freedom and autonomy that contradicted the foundations of the United States and compromised every single false notion that whites held about Africans in general. They stood as the most formidable obstacle to the plans of Southern expansionists and slavers. A nation founded upon native genocide and slavery shook in its boots as it faced the natural product of its own making – a black maroon and independent native nation - a threat that could potentially undermine it. The first signs of trouble arose with the Muskogee State, a paper regime comprised of militant Seminoles, native Florida tribes, Lower Creeks, and black maroons that revolted against the Spanish Florida government and its concessions to the encroaching US.

### **The Muskogee State**

If any individual represented the contradictions, confusions, and struggles of Spanish Florida at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was William Augustus Bowles. Florida was not only a center of international intrigue between the French, the Spanish, the British, and the United States, but also a considerable refuge and place of residence for maroons and refugee natives. With the two objectives of establishing Florida as a British protectorate in the Americas and forging an autonomous nation of Southern native tribes and free blacks, Bowles’ agenda represented the nature of the Florida frontier at this time period. With increasing pressure from flocks of white settlers, Southern natives began to understand that unity, sovereignty, and self-determination were essential for survival. While Bowles was an agent of the British Empire among the tribes of the Southeast, he had also established personal relations and ties with the natives for years, suggesting his efforts to create a sovereign nation among them were more than likely sincere. During the American Revolution, Bowles had served in a British loyalist regiment at Pensacola that included free blacks and natives. After his service, he spent several years among the Creeks. For a period he lived among the black maroon settlement at Miccosukee. He was eventually accepted as a member of the tribe and then

proceeded to climb the ranks of the hierarchy to become a newly ascribed chief. His attempt to form a Muskogee nation would appeal to many disaffected Seminoles, Creeks, and black maroons.

Over the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cordial relations between the Seminoles and Spaniards, which always stood on fragile ground, turned to outright hostility almost overnight. The 1795 treaty between Spain and the US yielded Spanish control of the Mississippi and its strategic outposts north of the thirty-first parallel and east of the Mississippi to the United States. This opened up a huge portion of native land for an influx of white Anglo settlers. Spanish Florida had become a conciliatory territory. It no longer had the power or backbone to determine its own policy. Spain stood in the middle of a struggle that was occurring between the United States and Southern natives and black maroons, forming its policies in an attempt to reconcile both sides and maintain its tenuous rule over the territory.

Blacks grew disillusioned with the Spanish promise of freedom. On May 17, 1790, a royal order was issued to arrest all runaway slaves escaping from the United States, returning them to their owners only after the validity of the claim was established and costs paid for capture and maintenance of the slave. Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, played an instrumental role in forcing Spain to repeal the edict of 1693. This just meant that runaway slaves continued to seek refuge in Florida despite Spanish rule, not because of it. The black involvement in the Muskogee State is a widely ignored feature of the quixotic venture. The Muskogee capital was situated in the Miccosukee region of North Florida which contained the largest concentration of black maroons in the Southeast. These blacks fought in the Muskogee army and navy. Slaves fled from their masters to join the raiding parties of Seminoles and black maroons ravaging East Florida. Bowles relied on free black interpreters Prince and Hector to communicate with his black and native allies. One historian claimed that they were “one of the mainstays of Muskogee.” **103**

The Muskogee State was formally established in 1799. In October 1799, a delegate of Seminole, Miccosukee, and Lower Creek chiefs appointed Bowles the “Director General” of the “Muskogee State.” While the Spanish attempted to downplay the support that Bowles received from the natives, it was early reported that most of the Seminoles and Lower Creeks had joined Bowles at its capital of Miccosukee. In his formal declaration of the Muskogee State, Bowles expressed his opposition to the rampant land theft that afflicted the Southeastern tribes, the 1790 Treaty of New York that usurped Creek lands for white settlers, and the 1795 treaty between Spain and the US that reestablished the borderline of Florida and Georgia. He then demanded that Spanish



Portrait of William Augustus Bowles. Source:  
 Source: *American Historical Images on File:  
 The Native American Experience.*

Florida and the US recognize Muskogee sovereignty. **104** The Seminoles were ripe for revolt around the time that Bowles came along. In 1799, a surveying party commissioned to draw the boundary line of the thirty-first parallel met Seminole opposition when it reached the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers of West Florida. Surveyor Stephen Minor reported:

“The Seminoles have appeared repeatedly in our camp and behaved with the greatest insolence and insult. The Chiefs of this neighborhood have advised us that other Seminoles are resolved to oppose the continuation of the line, and that it is indispensable to conduct a conference with them as much on this matter as for persuading them to return the horses which they have stolen from us, and accordingly we have invited all the chiefs to a conference on the 8th of this month, and all have answered us that they will meet in this camp on the set day. Nevertheless, it seems that they have agreed among themselves to ravage us completely and force us to retreat.” **105**

The journals, diaries, and reports of the boundary commissioners all convey the same picture of Seminole obstruction and harassment. Seminole resistance against the US boundary commission was just the beginning of a deep-rooted hostility towards US settlers that would continue for years to come. In June 1799, a Miccosukee chief Methlogey expressed his fears that

“all of the Indians that fell on the Spanish side of the line, the men would be made slaves of to work the ground for the Spaniards, and their women and children would be kept and taken care of; and that all their land would be taken from them...that Indians who fell into the American side would be served in the same way.” **106**

The chief communicated to Creek Agent James Seagrove that his people were preparing to go to war against the whites rather than let their towns be swept away by a wave of settlers:

“that they are determined sooner than submit to such treatment, to engage in a war against any nation or people, and sooner sacrifice their lives to a man, than be robbed of their lands, which is their only support...from all these alarms the Indians had become outrageous, and but for the advice of old and principle Chiefs, blood would have already been split, as the warriors were on the point of falling on the Spaniards; and also of going and driving off, of killing those people who running the line, but from persuasion they were restrained until I could come down and see you to make these things known, and to get some satisfactory explanation to carry home, for which purpose I am allowed only twenty days.” **107**

On April 5, 1800, Bowles formally declared war against Spanish Florida, with the majority of Seminoles and Miccosukees behind him, citing the 1795 Spanish treaty with the US as a specific pretense. He assembled an army consisting of Seminoles, Lower Creeks, his own white compatriots, a number of black maroons from among the Seminoles, free blacks, and runaway slaves from the Spanish garrisons at St. Augustine and Pensacola. Shortly after the war began, the interracial, multiethnic army made its opening strike at the Spanish fort at San Marcos de Apalache, easily seizing the heavily-garrisoned fort after a short siege. This was all that Bowles actually needed as St. Marks was the only Spanish outpost between Pensacola and St. Augustine. **108** The Spanish

Florida government was not so much concerned with Bowles as it was with the widespread support he received from the natives in its territory. That he could act with impunity also highly embarrassed the Spanish regime at St. Augustine and openly displayed its tenuous grasp over the province.

In June, Bowles commissioned numerous raids from his new headquarters at St. Marks. Small regiments of blacks, Miccosukees, Seminoles, and “vagabond” whites ravaged the East Florida settlements. The Florida governor ordered East Florida planters to garrison themselves and their property within the city walls at St. Augustine. One report described a party consisting of “Indians, Negroes and Whites, in all about twenty-five or thirty...direct from Bowles' head-quarters at St. Marks,” that was sent to “plunder and break up all the settlements in East Florida: that this party had actually crossed St John's river and had commenced the plunder of Negroes, Horses and Cattle, within twenty miles of Augustine.” **109** The presence of Seminoles and black maroons in these raiding parties suggests that the slaves were probably taken back to Muskogee, liberated, and then incorporated into the Miccosukee and Seminole settlements. As one division of the Muskogee army seized and defended St. Marks, the *Nassau Gazette* reported that the other division was sent

“to plunder, pillage & lay waste Augustine, from whence they have already brought a number of Prime Slaves & some considerable share of very valuable property, & will entirely lay waste & ravage that Country ere they withdraw from thence nor can Spain send any Troops to act them unless she wishes to sacrifice them which would be the case with any Troops who would enter their Country as they must bush fight it with them, which no Troops in the World are equal to the doing with success.” **110**

The Spanish Florida council of war ordered West Florida Governor Folch to form an expedition to retake St. Marks. On July 17<sup>th</sup>, his fleet of nine warships appeared off the mouth of the Appalachian River and bombarded the fort. Bowles, on sight of the Spanish fleet, determined to abandon St. Marks and opened up the fort's storehouse for his men to take the goods and ammunition before retreating back to the capital at Miccosukee. **111**

While many consider the Muskogee State little more than a paper regime, there are some signs that the Miccosukees, Seminoles, and Lower Creeks were actually interested and seriously considered the idea of an autonomous nation. The natives made demands for establishing schools, a constitution, and a frame of government but the war



with Spain delayed the establishment of a stabile regime. **112** As the Muskogee State continued its war with Spain, the plantations raids of East Florida grew more frequent. On August 31, 1801, the Miccosukee raiders seized 49 slaves from Fatio's plantation on the St. John's River. The same party seized ten slaves from Dupong's plantation thirty miles south of St. Augustine. They plundered and destroyed Judge Hall's settlement at New Smyrna, driving the indentured servants from his plantations. **113** The guerilla war raged on for three years between the Muskogee army and the Spanish Florida army. St. Augustine and Pensacola lacked the necessary soldiers and weapons to combat the numerically and tactically superior Muskogee Army, which was proving to be a growing nuisance and embarrassment.

Since Spanish Florida couldn't defeat the Muskogee military through force, it resorted to backroom dealings and negotiations instead. In March 1802, the treaty of Amiens was signed, ending hostilities between England, Spain, and France. This withdrew any hopes of support that Bowles could expect from Britain. **114** Spanish Florida extended considerable effort to negotiate with the Seminoles. Lieutenant Col. Jacobo Dubreuil, commander of St. Marks, called twenty-two Miccosukee and Seminole chiefs for a conference. On August 20, 1802, the Seminoles consented to twelve terms of peace, uncharacteristically agreeing to hand over the slaves that they had taken from the East Florida plantations. The chiefs promised that they would give no further aid or support to Bowles. Yet a good portion of Seminoles continued to lend their support to Bowles. One historian noted: "some accepted it in good faith, most were apathetic, while a sizable minority was not even represented at St. Marks." **115** This suggests that the slaves captured in the East Florida raids were more than likely never returned to the Spaniards and most probably remained and integrated into the maroons.

But St. Augustine couldn't take credit for disposing of Bowles. It was the savvy manipulation and maneuvering of pro-white Creek Agent Benjamin Hawkins that finally defeated the Muskogee effort. In May of 1803, a general assembly of chiefs from the Seminole, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee nations met at the Southeast Indian Agency. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, Bowles arrived to the Agency accompanied by a small group of Seminole and Miccosukee chiefs who continued to resist the Spaniards. Hawkins consulted with a friendly chief to carefully plan the arrest of Bowles. In turn, Hawkins promised the Creek Nation 4,500 *pesos* for complying with his orders. Bowles would have been spared if he could have proven to the chiefs that he had papers from the British King authorizing him to "preserve all the red people from having their lands taken from them as the Americans & Spaniards intended to do." But he failed to produce the papers. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, on Hawkins' orders, the Creek chiefs seized Bowles, securing him in chains

and delivering him over to Governor Folch at Pensacola. From there he was transferred to Morro Castle in Havana where he would die three years later. **116**

While many historians downplay the Muskogee State to a quixotic venture and categorize it with the various filibuster schemes occurring in Spanish Florida at the time, this is too simplistic. William Augustus Bowles was an idealistic adventurer and a British agent, but he was also a valuable, sincere ally to the Southern natives and black maroons. All three of these defining features of his played themselves out in the development of the Muskogee State and its war with Spain. The Muskogee State war with Spanish Florida was adventurist, yes, it was about international intrigue, yes, but it was also about white settler advancement and native resistance, slavery expansion and black liberty - all central aspects of US domestic and foreign policy at this time period. The native resentment sparked by the 1795 treaty between Spain and the US was channeled into the Muskogee State, which had managed to rally a considerable number of Miccosukees, Seminoles, and Creeks under its wing. Native resentment towards this treaty and the influx of white settlers that ensued would be the beginning of fifty years of native resistance and white encroachment in the Southeast. It also exposed important divides between pro-white and anti-white natives and the willingness of some to acculturate and others to resist. The black maroon resentment sparked by the 1790 agreement between Spain and the US was also channeled into the Muskogee State, which had managed to rally a considerable number of fugitive slaves and maroons from the black settlement at Miccosukee. So simply downgrading the Muskogee State to an individual venture taken by Bowles ignores the wider implications it had for Manifest Destiny, US expansionism, white hegemony, and slavery.

# **Chapter 3**

## **American Intrusion: Manifest Destiny, Land Theft, and Slavery Expansion (1803-1816)**

### **The West Florida Annexation Scheme**

“The persistent desire of the United States to possess the Floridas, between 1801 and 1819, amounted almost to a disease, corrupting the moral sense of each succeeding administration.” **1**

- Historian Kendrick C. Babcock summing up US attempts to annex East and West Florida in the first two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

While most of us learn about the Louisiana Purchase in grade school, very few Americans are even aware of the West Florida annexation scheme. This is because most traditional historians have accepted the argument put forth by powerful men - Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and Robert Livingston – that West Florida was included in the territory that France ceded to the US in the Louisiana Purchase. In fact, most maps of the Louisiana Purchase unquestionably include West Florida as if there was never even serious controversy over its ownership. By mere omission, historians and cartographers generally ignore the heated debate between the US and Spain regarding ownership of the territory following the Louisiana Purchase. They ignore that the debate began with an unsubstantiated interpretation of the Louisiana Purchase, proceeded along with bribery, coercion, and threat, and was concluded with aggressive force. They surely ignore the subsequent US covert operations to illegally seize West and East Florida from Spain. These filibustering operations were some of the first on the US expansionist record, setting forth arguments, ideas, and procedure for over two centuries of covert interventionist policy. Babcock further noted:

“These Florida incidents furnish the first instances of the enunciation of certain peculiar arguments to justify the United States in possessing itself of choice bits of territory here and there, arguments which have been used with great and continued effect in relation to Texas, Mexico, Hawaii, and Cuba.” **2**

The pretexts used to justify intervention that the US applied in its coercive measures to annex Florida became long-standing arguments for colonial expansion into other territories, including Texas and California. Historian Isaac Cox, in the *West Florida Controversy*, noted that operations in West Florida “established a precedent, and led the United States to pursue a similar course, deviously but without intent...into Texas and California.” **3** The US received its first lesson in international relations in the West Florida annexation scheme. It learned that exploiting the weaknesses of its rivals proved more effective in making gains than diplomacy, negotiations, and treaties. While international law and other “niceties” looked good on paper, they became regarded as obstacles to fulfill US foreign policy objectives which were underlined by Manifest Destiny. Treaties, diplomacy, compacts, etc. ensured that colonial rivals and native tribes would attempt to enforce their rights on an international platform that the US really had little consideration for. In real terms, the US adhered to its expansionist policy as its victims complained about law. American exceptionalism, first established in these Florida operations, was meant to ensure others that the US government had everybody’s best interests at heart. Altruism was the order of the day. So if the US illegally seized a piece of territory, its leaders concocted a list of pretexts - instability, threat, progress, etc. – but failed to mention the economic or strategic reasons that US officials quietly discussed among each other.

US colonial expansion was not to be driven by conquering armies but through the initiative of its own frontier population. Isaac Cox noted that dispute with Spain over treaty terms was decided more so by the “happenings on the frontier than by the skill of American diplomats.” **4** This frontier population of Anglo settlers migrated into every Spanish colonial possession desiring US expansion and implementing revolt to achieve it. In West Florida, the annexation movement, while quietly supported by US officials, was made possible by Anglo settlers who schemed to transfer control of the territory into US hands. A similar movement for Texas independence was formed around the same time. The political intrigue that revolved around West Florida’s annexation shared many parallels with that of Texas. Most important of all: the expansion of institutional slavery. In fact, the first “Lone Star State” was the “Republic of West Florida,” the short-lived

independent territory of West Florida established in 1810 by an uprising of white settlers.

5

The political intrigue revolving around West Florida had its origins in the time period immediately following the American Revolution. The Treaty of Paris in 1783, which gave official recognition of US independence, transferred British control of East and West Florida back to Spain, thus placing Spain to the south and the west of the newly formed United States. From 1784 to 1795, the newly formed United States disputed the northern border of West Florida, which had not been clearly established by the 1783 Treaty of Paris. In 1763, Britain had established the northern border of West Florida at the 31<sup>st</sup> parallel. But in 1764, the West Florida border was placed hundred miles north along the 32°28' due east of the mouth of the Yazoo River. When Spain received West Florida from Britain, it established the northern border of West Florida along the 32°28'. While Spain was in the right, no provision in the Treaty of '83 explicitly addressed West Florida's northern border, making conflict inevitable. Whoever possessed the one hundred mile strip of territory between the "Yazoo line" and the 31<sup>st</sup> parallel essentially commanded the navigation of the Mississippi River. After years of dispute, Spain conceded to US pressures and established the northern boundary of West Florida at the 31<sup>st</sup> parallel in the Treaty of 1795. 6

But the Spanish concession didn't satisfy US expansionists. It only proved that the Spanish Empire had weakened to the point that it would yield to the stronger power if pushed diligently and persistently enough. West Florida was desired by US policy-makers for a number of reasons: its strategic and commercial value; control of the eastern bank of the Mississippi and the shores of Mobile Bay; the strategic importance and necessity of possessing the mouths of rivers flowing into US territory with their origins in the Gulf of Mexico through West Florida.

In 1800, Napoleon compelled Spain to cede the Louisiana territory to France, but failed to clearly define its eastern boundary. The renewed conflict over West Florida began with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the dispute over the eastern boundary of territory that Spain had ceded over to France. In 1803, Secretary of State James Madison commissioned James Monroe and Robert Livingston as diplomats to induce France to hand over its Louisiana territory. His instructions were clear: "A cession of the Floridas is particularly to be desired, as obviating serious controversies." 7 But Madison admitted that gaining possession of Florida from France would be difficult because "it may happen that the Floridas are so far suspended, on unfinished negotiations between her and Spain, as to admit or require the concurrence of both in gratifying the wishes of the United States." 8



A map of North America showing the recognized boundaries of West Florida, engraved by John Cary, 1806. Source: *Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library – University of Georgia Libraries*.

Louisiana was loosely established as a French territory through negotiations with Spain, but the US government falsely claimed that Spain had also ceded over West Florida in a package with Louisiana. The gripe of the argument was whether or not the Louisiana territory extended beyond the Mississippi to the Perdido River, the long-established east boundary of West Florida. Even though Madison quietly acknowledged that the US claim had little ground to stand on, he still persisted on the claim that West Florida was included in the Louisiana Purchase. As early as August 1803, Thomas Jefferson was already espousing this interpretation:

“We have some claims, to extend on the sea coast Westwardly to the Rio Norte or Bravo, and better, to go Eastwardly to the Rio Perdido, between Mobile & Pensacola, the ancient boundary of Louisiana. These claims will be a subject of negotiation with Spain, and if, as soon as she is at war, we push them strongly with one hand, holding out a price in the other, we shall certainly obtain the Floridas, and all in good time.”

Jefferson also asserted that the US would have to wait for an opportune moment, such as war in Europe, to take West Florida from Spain. His interpretation of the Louisiana Purchase established the US position for the following seven years. Yet France, Spain, and Britain disagreed with the US interpretation. The US was laying claim to a territory that Spain claimed it never sold and that France claimed it never bought. In fact, France was unaware of having acquired any claim to West Florida until Robert Livingston began inquiring on whether it had been included in the Louisiana Purchase. **10**

As negotiations proceeded, US officials hoped to procure West Florida from Spain through propositions, threats, coercion, flattery, and bribes. But under considerable pressure, Spanish officials absolutely refused to hand over an inch of West Florida on any terms. On the other hand, US officials now hoped to delay conclusive negotiations with Spain. They considered the US acquisition of Florida so inevitable that it was only a matter of time. West and East Florida were necessary to complete the “rounding out of American dominions.” Yet it was the intervention of the US government, not time, that caused the annexation of West Florida. On February 24, 1804, Thomas Jefferson signed the “Mobile Act,” which enacted the claim that West Florida was included in the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson backtracked when the Spanish angrily protested, hoping to avoid a costly war, but affirmed that the “voluntary action of its inhabitants” would eventually scheme possession of West Florida anyways. Jefferson had insisted: “However much we may compromise on our western limits, we never shall on our eastern.” **11**

After Spain’s angry reaction to the Mobile Act, James Monroe was commissioned to conciliate the Spaniards into ceding West Florida. In 1804, Monroe set out to “negotiate” the cession of East and West Florida, the payment for individual claims to French damages, and the determination of boundary lines. By May 1805, Monroe had failed in his objectives. The Spanish Crown thoroughly rejected the US proposal for Spain to cede over all of its possessions east of the Mississippi, pay claims for French spoliations, and set the western boundary of the Louisiana territory on the Colorado River. **12** In response to US pressure, Spanish officials expressed outrage at the unjust, coercive measures that the US applied in its “diplomatic” efforts to grab West Florida:

“The interpretation given by the United States to the treaty of Cession, is therefore equally extravagant and untenable, and will never be sanctioned or submitted to by the Spanish court, although the annihilation of the monarchy should become a possible consequence of its rejecting so degrading a proposal...the unjust pretensions

of your government, an adherence to which, and that too for a barren and unimportant tract of country compare with Louisiana, would forever tarnish the honor of your nation, and stamp it with the character of that grasping ambition from which she alone of all powers of treaty, has been heretofore exempt.” **13**

Negotiations were “delayed” because the US had time on its side. Several factors now contributed to the US push for Florida’s annexation: 1) The minimal presence of Spanish authority in Florida 2) The unprecedented introduction of a white settler population desiring US annexation of Florida 3) The revolutionary spirit spreading throughout the Spanish American colonies 4) Napoleon’s invasion and occupation of Spain. US settlers contributed their fair share of destabilizing West Florida, making the territory favorable for a US grab. White settlers were the third branch of the US Empire. Over the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, West Florida was the Wild West of the Southeast, providing refuge for an assortment of “unsavory” characters – buccaneers, debtors, army deserters, land speculators, smugglers, outlaws, pirates, political refugees, and insurrectionary frontiersmen. Spain’s hold over the territory of West Florida was tenuous at best. Regardless of how negotiations occurred between the US and Spain, it was doubtful that Spanish rule over territory would last long under the pressure of a large, migratory population of Anglo frontiersmen. The Spanish force in West Florida only amounted to about nine hundred troops, mostly stationed in Pensacola, Baton Rouge, and Mobile. However, the West Florida militia, comprised mostly of Anglo settlers, carried a “general spirit of disaffection, and a great desire manifested to become Americans.” **14** Governor William Claiborne of the New Orleans territory reported that the “general wish and expectation here is—that our Governor will take immediate possession of that part of Florida which lies to the west of the Perdido.” This was possible because “from the Inhabitants no opposition would be received—and the regular troops of Spain, in that district, are too inconsiderable to make a serious resistance.” **15** Among them were the Kemper brothers.

Between 1804 and 1810, the Kemper brothers made numerous botched attempts to seize the territory. The Kempers were among the most prominent figures of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century international intrigue that characterized the U.S.-Spanish colonial borders. The Kemper trio – Samuel, Nathan, and Reuben - were partially interested in driving up the value of their West Florida lands through US annexation. In 1804, a rise in land taxes “excited great clamor” among the numerous land speculators in the territory. Governor Claiborne reported that West Florida landholders were “becoming restless under the



Spanish government” and “the wish is general, that the U. States may speedily take possession of the District.” **16** But the subsequent involvement of the “Colonel” Reuben Kemper in covert operations to seize Texas proves that the Kempers were unofficial agents of “empire-building,” not simply individual land-grabbers. After the failure of the native insurrection under William A. Bowles in East Florida, the Kemper brothers failed to rally up enough support for their Anglo “revolution” in West Florida in 1804. The Kempers failed to account for the loyalty of Spanish subjects in West Florida who felt threatened by the aggressiveness of recent Anglo arrivals. **17**

While Secretary of State James Madison denounced the “criminal attempt” made by the Kemper brothers to seize the fort at Baton Rouge, asserting that they would be “brought to justice,” he only intended to exonerate any sort of US complicity in the failed coup d’état. **18** US officials still hoped to diplomatically strong-arm Spain into handing over West Florida. It should be remembered that Jefferson was looking for the “voluntary action of its inhabitants,” a war in Europe, and other circumstances if the US was to make a move. If all the chips fell into the right place, the US would no longer care about the repercussions of taking extralegal measures simply because there would be none. In 1808, Napoleon invaded and began a long occupation of Spain. With Spain directing most of its resources and attention to resisting the French occupation at home, US expansionists saw the perfect opportunity to exploit Spanish weakness and seize its colonial possessions in the Americas. In 1810, independence revolutions exploded in the Spanish American colonies, convincing US officials that the Spanish Empire had reached its death throes.

Governor Claiborne of the New Orleans territory convinced President Madison to adopt his plan of intervention into West Florida he had suggested three years prior. He was empowered to enlist the aid of William Wykoff, a member of the executive council of the New Orleans territory, to stir up revolt in the territory. Wykoff was to emphasize the possibility of a French invasion in the break-down of Spanish colonial authority. On June 20, Secretary of State Robert Smith wrote to Wykoff, confirming the purpose of his mission:

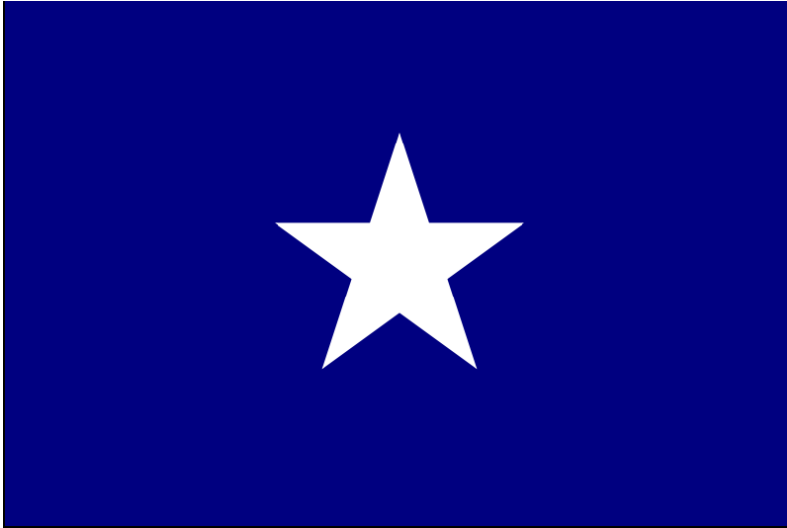
“It has been deemed proper to select you for the confidential purpose of proceeding without delay into East Florida, and also into West Florida, as far as Pensacola for the purpose of diffusing the impression that the United States cherish the sincerest good will towards the people of the Floridas as neighbours, and as having in so many respects a common interest, and that in the event of a political separation from the

parent Country, their incorporation into our Union would coincide with the sentiments and policy of the United States.” **19**

Wykoff was apparently successful in his operations. Between late June and August 1810, numerous conventions and clandestine meetings were frequently held in West Florida. Pro-American residents of West Florida, particularly in the district of Feliciana near Baton Rouge, were organizing in conventions and clandestine meetings to establish local rule. While giving the pretext that they were concerned about “foreign invasion and domestic disturbance,” David Holmes, the governor of the Mississippi Territory, confirmed that “the convention and a large Majority of the People were disposed to come under the protection of the United States.” **20** Nevertheless, a significant minority still existed in the territory that favored Spanish rule. **21** While the West Florida plotters associated their movement with the independence revolution in Venezuela, which was a genuine liberation movement against Spanish rule, in reality they merely wanted to change hands from one colonial ruler to another. An important aspect of the secret meetings and open conventions was land grants and taxes. Many settlers had not received titles for their lands despite settling there for some years, while the Spanish authorities had habitually issued out grants to some. The insurrectionists desired that the US recognize their claims to certain lands, which would essentially give them official title over their land grabs. To top it off, US annexation would result in a spike in land prices.

On October 10<sup>th</sup>, after the insurrection had already begun, John Rhea, president of the West Florida Convention, wrote to Secretary of State Robert Smith, declaring that the members of the convention were entitled to all the unoccupied lands of the territory because they had “wrested the Government and country from Spain at the risk of their lives and fortune.” **22** At this point, the revolt had revealed its true colors as an Anglo settler land grab. Slavery appeared to be a motive for the rebels as well. It wasn’t even two weeks into the revolt when the tax on slaves imported into the territory was repealed. Land taxes were reformed as well. Without Spanish law, the slave trade was quickly reinstated. Governor Claiborne discovered that slaves were being shipped into Mobile and sold into the United States during the short period of the Republic. **23**

The conflict finally broke out in September. After months of deliberating, news reached Pensacola of the rebel plans to overthrow Spanish rule. When the rebels learned that Governor Folch at Pensacola was planning to send a large force to restore order in the territory, they hastened their plans. On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, around seventy or eighty



The Bonnie Blue Flag, the first lone star flag, of the short-lived Republic of West Florida.

volunteers, commissioned by the rebel convention, seized Brookter's Landing, the principle fort of Baton Rouge. **24** On September 26<sup>th</sup>, the convention, numbering five hundred insurrectionists, assembled and declared that West Florida was a "free and independent state" to David Homes, governor of the Mississippi territory. The convention established the territory as the independent "Republic of West Florida." Its members requested US annexation and protection from Spanish reprisal. **25** In October, an expeditionary force under the command of Reuben Kemper was commissioned from Baton Rouge to seize the Spanish garrisons at Mobile and Pensacola. But the Spaniards managed to maintain hold of Mobile against Kemper's filibustering operations. **26** On October 10, the newly established regime requested the intervention of the US government and eagerly awaited President Madison's response:

"Should the United States be induced by these, or any other considerations, to acknowledge our claim to their protection as an integral part of their territory, or otherwise, we feel it is our duty to claim for our constituents an immediate admission into the Union as an independent State, or as a territory of the United States, with permission to establish our own form of Government, or to be united with one of the

neighboring territories, or a part of one of them, in such manner as to form a State.”

27

On October 27, James Madison issued a proclamation declaring that the US would endeavor to acquire the newly independent territory of West Florida. Without any deliberation, he exploited the opportunity to obtain his long-awaited “prize” of West Florida. He justified this illegal move on several false pretexts: 1) The territory that France ceded to Spain included the Perdido River – the eastern boundary of the West Florida province 2) The quarrel with Spain had continued for a decade over the rightful possessor of West Florida, and considering that a “satisfactory adjustment” with the US acquiring the territory had been “entirely suspended by events over which they had no control” than it was only right for the US to take this opportunity to claim it 3) A possible foreign invasion could result from the crisis in the province and this would leave the US vulnerable to its enemies. 28 Secretary of State Robert Smith instructed Governor Claiborne on the determination of President Madison to take possession of the West Florida territory. He was commissioned to the Mississippi Territory where he was to make the necessary arrangements with Governor Holmes to proceed into West Florida with an assortment of troops and take possession of it on behalf of the United States. 29 On December 10, Madison delivered his second State of the Union address announcing the annexation of West Florida:

“Among the events growing out of the state of the Spanish Monarchy, our attention was imperiously attracted to the change developing itself in that portion of West Florida which, though of right appertaining to the United States, had remained in the possession of Spain awaiting the result of negotiations for its actual delivery to them. The Spanish authority was subverted and a situation produced exposing the country to ulterior events which might essentially affect the rights and welfare of the Union. In such a conjuncture I did not delay the interposition required for the occupancy of the territory west of the river Perdido, to which the title of the United States extends, and to which the laws provided for the Territory of Orleans are applicable. With this view, the proclamation of which a copy is laid before you was confided to the governor of that Territory to be carried into effect. The legality and necessity of the course pursued assure me of the favorable light in which it will present itself to the Legislature, and of the promptitude with which they will supply whatever provisions may be due to the essential rights and equitable interests of the people thus brought into the bosom of the American family.” 30

Madison ridiculous claimed that “our attention was imperiously attracted to” the uprising in West Florida, as if the US was simply a casual observer rather than an active participant in the scheme. For almost a decade, the US had asserted a disproportionate amount of “diplomatic” energy in order to possess West Florida and was largely responsible for inciting the West Florida settlers to revolt, assuring them that annexation and protection would follow with the overthrow of Spanish rule. Madison himself was one of the top US officials who initially distorted the Louisiana Purchase to make it appear as if the US had a rightful claim to the territory. While the US contained actual control of the West Florida territory, Spain still wouldn’t formally relinquish possession until the Adams-Onis treaty of 1819. Now the US would use West Florida as its base for operations to take East Florida. But not before receiving harsh criticism at home and abroad for the unjust aggression, coercion, and illegality of its measures in seizing a foreign territory from Spain - a friendly nation. Most of the Federalist papers attacked Madison’s course as unconstitutional, unjust towards Spain, and likely to involve the US in an international war. **31** British diplomat James M. Morier expressed outrage at the United States, “a free nation like this,” for “wresting a province from a friendly power...in the time of her adversity”:

“The act, consequently, of sending a force to West Florida to secure by arms what was before a subject of friendly negotiation, cannot, I much fear, under any palliation, be considered as other than an open act of hostility against Spain.” **32**

An editorial from London echoed this sentiment and questioned the very noble pretense on which the US presented itself to the rest of the world:

“The conduct of America to Spain, affords a curious and not very favourable view of the morality of American policy. She contends that West Florida formed a part of Louisiana, which she bought of France, what France had no right to sell, and the negotiation carried on by the United States at Paris, for Florida was, throughout, a series of humiliation and disgrace. But what is the defence set up by America for seizing East Florida! That Spain owes her money for spoliations on her commerce. But has Spain refused all satisfaction? No, it is acknowledged that she admitted the injuries done, and was not indisposed to enter into a negotiation respecting them. But delay has taken place—Why? Because Spain, infamously invaded by Bonaparte, had her whole attention engrossed in finding the means of resisting the invader. And it is

in this state of affairs America, THE FRIEND OF FREEDOM, THE FOE OF TYRANNY, takes advantage, to wrest her territories from her! An eternal blot this, and indeed the whole conduct of the United States relative to Spain will be in the American annals. How will an American feel when investigating the history of the invasion of Spain, he shall inquire, what, on that occasion was the conduct of his ancestors, the only republican people then on earth, and who claim almost an exclusive privilege to hate and to denounce every act of ruffian violence, and every form arbitrary power? It certainly will not kindle a glow of emulation in his mind, when he shall be told that of this unparalleled crime, an oblique notice was once taken by the American Administration; that the people of that country seemed to rejoice at the conduct of the Invader, frowned on the efforts of his victims, and took advantage of their distress to despoil and rob them!" **33**

### **The Patriot War**

After 1790 negotiations with the United States, Spain no longer officially granted freedom to fugitive slaves absconding to its territory. Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, was instrumental in forcing Spain to give up its 1693 edict granting refuge for runaway slaves. The 1790 Treaty of New York with the Creek Federation, the first treaty in US history, was one of many successive measures that turned the Lower Creeks into slave-raiding allies of the United States. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, two "Founding Fathers" who we are told laid the foundations of the "free world," were engaged in destroying the only beacon of freedom that existed for African slaves in the South. Regardless, Spain's tenuous hold over Florida allowed slaves to escape from Georgian and Carolinian plantations and disappear as they crossed the Oconee River into Seminole territory. While Spain no longer officially abided by its promise of freedom, its possession of the territory prevented the establishment of an effective safeguard against the loss of slaves. The frontier planters of Georgia additionally claimed over five million dollars worth of their slave "property" had fled to Seminole territory over the years. This was the real background to the filibustering operation known as the "Patriot War."

The growing US tensions with Britain leading up to the War of 1812 raised fears in Georgia and Alabama that Britain would attempt to attack the Southern states through Florida, as its sparsely populated, lightly governed border provided little protection for the frontier. The US government, using rhetoric that it had effectively applied in West Florida, stroked fears of British intervention into East Florida with a crumbling Spanish Empire. Georgian settlers feared that British mechanisms in Florida would lay waste to

the frontier plantations on the Georgia-Florida border through an alliance with organized and armed bands of fugitive slaves and native tribes. As the Seminoles and blacks were opposed to white Anglo planters for obvious reasons, they were aware that the British would have no problem in recruiting them as allies.

However, the fear of a British invasion were mostly a pretext for the expansionist drive of US officials, who saw the acquisition of the Florida territory as inevitable and part of its manifest destiny. The covert invasion of East Florida was an outgrowth of the West Florida uprising and contemporaneous with numerous other illegal, covert operations sponsored by the US government in Texas and later California, as well as setting a precedent for several other invasions of Spanish Florida before the US finally acquired the territory in 1821. On January 15, 1811, before authorizing the President the power to seize East Florida, Congress declared a resolution which summarized the doctrine of Manifest Destiny:

“Taking into view the peculiar situation of Spain, and of her American provinces; and considering the influence which the destiny of the territory adjoining the southern border of the United States may have upon their security, tranquillity and commerce... that the United States, under the peculiar circumstances of the existing crisis, cannot, without serious inquietude, see any part of the said territory pass into the hands of any foreign power; and that a due regard to their own safety compels them to provide, under certain contingencies, for the temporary occupation of the said territory; they, at the same time, declare that the said territory shall, in their hands, remain subject to future negotiation.” **34**

Florida’s continental position only complimented the popular belief that the US had the natural right to possess it. Secretary of State James Monroe wrote:

“Situated as East Florida is, cut off from the other possessions of Spain, and surrounded in a great measure by the territory of the United States, and having also an important bearing on their commerce, no other Power could think of taking possession of it, with other than hostile views to them. Nor could any other Power take possession of it without endangering their prosperity and best interests.” **35**

Slavery was what mostly underlined the plans to acquire and annex Florida from Spain. The US government desired to transform Florida from a refuge and beacon of

liberty and autonomy to a profitable extension of the Cotton Kingdom with a rigid slave system and aristocratic government. To overthrow Spanish rule and annex the Florida territory, to dispossess the Seminoles of their lands and enslave their black allies, and to expand slavery to the Florida frontier were all intertwined goals. It was feared that the growing number of slaves moving to the southern Georgia boundary would be siphoned out by Florida's vast wilderness, Seminole refuge, and Spanish tolerance. Annexing Florida, along with other Spanish colonies, would also provide additional Slave States to the South in order to balance out the growing power of Free States in the North.

The drive to enslave the black Seminoles and expand slavery in Florida was also a consequence of the strengthening economic power of the slave system in the South. A rapidly growing international demand for cotton resulted in growing demand for fertile lands and slaves, both which could be procured for cheap in the "virgin" Florida territory. The rising price of slaves was complimentary to the spike in cotton prices. Georgian frontier planters were well-aware of the black Seminole towns in Florida and saw that the black maroons could be snatched up and seized at bargain prices. An English traveler who visited Florida in 1817 found that his black guide, who served as interpreter between the Seminoles and Spaniards, became "afraid to venture across the river St. John's, lest he might be carried off by the negro stealers, who are frequently found endeavouring to kidnap the slaves across the confines of Georgia." **36**

In addition to profit and stopping the drain of slaves into the territory, the presence of the black maroon towns and free blacks at St. Augustine added fear as an incentive to annex Florida. To US expansionists, this meant that not only was the possession of Florida desirable and inevitable, but any continued reluctance on taking hold of the territory was severely damaging to the South's stability. Georgia's settlers increasingly feared the possibility of slave insurrection perpetrated by free black militias and fugitive slaves under orders of the Spanish Crown. Armed free blacks in such close vicinity to plantations on the St. John's and St. Mary's rivers exacerbated Anglo planters in East Florida and Georgia. The armed and organized blacks could influence slaves in the vicinity to revolt by their mere example alone. Spanish Florida's model of freedom continued to be abhorred by whites in the South over a century after the King's 1693 edict.

Later insisting that the Federal government not withdraw its forces from Florida, John McIntosh, Patriot leader and wealthy Florida planter, wrote to James Monroe about the threat of slave insurrection:



“Latterly we have learned with inexpressible anguish, that the troops and gun boats of the United States, which constitute our only security, are to be removed, our slaves are excited to rebel, and we have an army of negroes raked up in this country, and brought from Cuba to contend with. Let us ask, if we are abandoned, what will be the situation of the Southern states, with this body of men in the neighborhood? St. Augustine, the whole province will be the refuge of fugitive slaves; and from thence emissaries can, and no doubt will be detached, to bring about a revolt of the black population in the United States.” **37**

On a similar note, David Mitchell, Patriot leader and Georgia governor, attempted to refurbish support for the Patriots with fears of slave insurrection in a letter to Monroe:

“And I feel that it is a duty I owe the United States, and Georgia in particular, to assure you, that the situation of the garrison of St. Augustine will not admit of the troops being withdrawn.—They have armed every able bodied negro within their power, and they have also received from the Havana a reinforcement of nearly two companies of black troops. An additional correspondence to that now enclosed, has taken place between the governor and myself, in which I have called his attention to the introduction of this description of troops, and it is my decided opinion that if they are suffered to remain in the province, our Southern country will soon be in a state of insurrection.” **38**

On January 15, 1811, Congress gave its approval for an act to “enable the president of the United States, under certain contingencies, to take possession of the country lying east of the river Perdido, and south of the State of Georgia and the Mississippi Territory, and for other purposes.” **39** Expansionist operations into Florida were now officially authorized. The statement, “and for other purposes,” gave unlimited power for the US government to violate constitutional and international law as it wished in taking possession of East Florida. It was a huge concession for the Executive powers to act on US territorial expansion. On the surface, it seemed as if the enactment only gave the President authority to acquire East Florida if an arrangement could be made with local authorities to handover possession of the province, the only exception being an invasion “by any other foreign power.” This implied that if Great Britain made a strategic move to strengthen its influence in Florida, then the US could take control of the territory to counter this potential threat. The President was given several powers in accordance with

the bill: 1) To employ the military for the purpose of controlling the province if it became necessary 2) To appropriate 100,000 dollars for the necessary expenses of coveting the territory 3) To establish a temporary government over the territory in the process. **40** A complimentary act on March 3<sup>rd</sup> forbade the publication of these pieces of legislation until the end of the following session of Congress, and they were not published until the sessions act of the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress on April 20, 1818. **41**

General George Matthews, the former governor of Georgia, and Creek Indian Agent John McKee were commissioned as secret agents and assigned to incite revolt in East Florida. As a pretext, President Madison could justify the acquisition of East Florida if a new regime demanded the intervention of the US government for its protection and stability. This opened up a loophole for US intervention as Matthews was commissioned to establish the “local authorities” if he perceived an imminent threat. The fermented chaos would provide the pretext for US acquisition as the threat of a foreign power could be conjured in the absence of a stabile regime. This circular logic shared uncanny similarities with the West Florida uprising. There the US established its own right to invade and occupy a foreign territory on its borders if any political crisis or unrest broke out, supposedly fearing an opening for imperial Britain to exploit. US intervention was believed to be necessary to counter the “foreign threat” and “restore order.”

On January 26, Secretary of State Robert Smith ordered the two agents to secretly travel to West Florida where they were to take control of the territory if Governor Folch agreed to cede it over to the United States, thus completing the informal US annexation of the territory. They were to return West Florida to Spain at a future date if such a stipulation was insisted by Folch. Smith wrote to the two agents about their mission:

“Should there be room to entertain a suspicion of an existing design in any foreign Power to occupy the country in question, you are to keep yourselves on the alert, and, on the first undoubted manifestation of the approach of a force for that purpose, you will exercise, with promptness and vigor, the powers with which you are invested by the President to pre-occupy by force the territory, to the entire exclusion of any armament that may be advancing to take possession of it.” **42**

Smith’s orders were purposely vague, leaving open plausible deniability for the US government if it became necessary to deny any involvement in the scheme. Smith

informed the agents that their subjective view of events in East Florida was sufficient to create the pretext for the US to intervene:

“The conduct you are to pursue in regard to East Florida, must be regulated by the dictates of your own judgments, on a close view and accurate knowledge of the precise state of things there, and of the real disposition of the Spanish government.”

**43**

On February 25, 1811, General Matthews, writing from West Florida, requested additional instructions from the President to confirm his exact wishes for East Florida:

“I hope to have it in my power to carry the President’s wishes into effect, our commission only goes to West Florida while our instructions embrace East Florida. Would it not be proper to forward a commission for East Florida by my return here? Should the President think this proper direct it to me here to the care of the Post Master-from the prospect of things here E. F. is growing of more importance to the U. S. every day. There is now in the Spanish waters here twenty large visits loading with lumber for the British government and eighty loaded the last year on the same account. You will be pleased to assure the President every exertion in my power will be made to carry his wishes in to effect.” **44**

Although no exact orders from the Madison Administration authorizing Matthews to invade East Florida are available on the public record, there is considerable evidence that the President held correspondence with him. A few weeks after his request for further instructions, his good friend Creek agent Benjamin Hawkins wrote to President Madison that Matthews “was sincerely impressed with the reception you gave him and the confidence you reposed in him as well as of all the heads of departments. He revealed to me the subject of his mission, and seemed pretty confident of success.” **45** While Madison’s exact orders to Matthews are not available in the public archives, it can only be inferred from proceeding events that Matthews was commissioned to take possession of East Florida. Furthermore, Matthews maintained constant communication with the Madison Administration, never disguising what his true intentions really were. On April 8, he wrote to Secretary Monroe about his plans for East Florida:

“I ascertained that the quiet possession of East Florida could not be obtained by an amicable negotiation with the powers that exist there; . . . that the inhabitants of the province are ripe for revolt. They are, however, incompetent to effect a thorough revolution without external aid. If two hundred stand of arms and fifty horsemen's swords were in their possession, I am confident they would commence the business, and with a fair prospect of success. These could be put into their hands by consigning them to the commanding officer at this post, subject to my order. I shall use the most discreet management to prevent the United States being committed; and although I cannot vouch for the event, I think there would be but little danger.” **46**

Matthews also freely communicated his plans to his close friend Georgia delegate William Crawford, whom he commissioned to further explain his designs to the government and keep the Madison administration informed of his efforts. There is no documented response to Matthews’ letters from the Madison administration but neither is there any sign of rebuke or protest from any administration official. Consensual silence was the only response. **47** Prior to the Patriots’ invasion, Matthews unsuccessfully attempted to garner support among the wealthy Anglo planters and traders of East Florida. While he claimed that the East Florida province was “ripe for revolt,” a letter from St. Mary’s provided a contrasting depiction:

“The Province of East Florida enjoyed, previous to the late rebellion, an extensive and lucrative lumber trade; which produced to some individuals upwards of a thousand dollars per month. It's cotton was equal to the best Georgia Sea Island; and the planters, if not rich, were tranquil and happy. In one moment the demon of revolution assisted by our intrigues, has spread ruin and desolation over the whole country; the lumber trade was destroyed, and the planters were obliged to fly from the open country, and take refuge in the Capital or in Amelia Island with their negroes, and leave their plantations to the devastation of the banditti from Georgia; for it is a well known fact, sir, and it will be some day, I hope, proved in a court of justice, that, had not the citizens from Georgia joined in the rebellion, there would have been no movement, as by far the greater number of the inhabitants were loyal.”

**48**

This provided a far more accurate picture. The vast majority of the Patriots’ force consisted of Georgia militiamen. Out of three hundred and fifty Patriots, three hundred were Georgians and only fifty were actual Floridians, “not one of them real Spaniards.”

That they planned to dispossess the Seminoles is evidenced in the bribe of five hundred acres of land for each participant. British Ambassador Augustus Foster informed James Monroe that Matthews was going about the East Florida frontier attempting to provoke a revolt:

“For the purpose of treating with the inhabitants of that province, for its being delivered up to the United States ' government; that he was with this view using every method of seduction to effect his purpose: offering to each white inhabitant who would side with him 50 acres of land, and the guarantee of his religion and property; stipulating also that the American government would pay the debts of the Spanish government whether due in pensions or otherwise: and that he would cause the officers and soldiers of the garrisons to be conveyed to such places as should be indicated, provided they did not rather choose to enter into the service of the United States.” **49**

By March of 1812, Matthews had considerable backing for his plans. He had recruited 350 land-hungry, slave-stealing Patriots, ensured the support of the US military, and believed that the Madison Administration fully approved of his designs. By March 5<sup>th</sup>, Patriot leader and wealthy Florida planter John McIntosh claimed that the Patriots had successfully subjugated the areas between the St. Mary’s and St. John’s rivers and were planning to seize Amelia Island from the Spanish authorities. McIntosh wrote to the Spanish commander at Fernandina, Don Justo Lopez, about the determination of the United States government “to take possession of our country by conquest, determined some of us, who are much interested in the advantages we now enjoy to do it ourselves.”

**50**

On March 16, Col. Lodowick Ashley wrote to Lopez ordering the residents of Fernandina to “place themselves under the protection of the government of the United States.” **51** From the start of the revolt, the Patriots made it clear that they feared and detested the presence of the armed free black militias in Spanish Florida. A Patriot leader wrote to Justo Lopez: “We are informed sir, that you have armed negroes on the Island against us.—We hope this is not true. If, however, we should find it a fact, remember that we solemnly declare that we will give you no quarters at the town of Fernandina.” The Patriots “threatened the inhabitants with a general massacre” if they refused to surrender, meaning that if they employed the free black militias against them. **52** The Royal Party was prepared to fight the Patriots and could have successfully resisted the invasion if it hadn’t been for the assistance of several US gunboats. Realizing that the gunboats were

backing the insurgents, they immediately surrendered. The Patriots held Fernandina for 24 hours before handing authority over to the US military. The US flag was hoisted above the city. On March 18, Col. Smith wrote:

“In obedience to my instructions of the 26th January, 1811, I have sent a detachment consisting of fifty men to receive and defend in the name of the United States, the Town of Sn. Ferdinandina & the Island of Amelia. I have been informed by General Mathews, that he has good reason to believe that a detachment of English troops (blacks) are on the eve of being sent to occupy the military posts within East Florida.” **53**

The Patriots scoured the countryside, intimidating loyal Florida citizens. Zephaniah Kingsley, a distinguished Florida planter, was brought to their headquarters and told to either join their cause or face imprisonment and confiscation of his property. **54** East Florida residents fled the plantations for the protection of the highly fortified St. Augustine. As the Patriots occupied East Florida, they “pursued a career of plunder,” driving the territory into chaos:

“Since the beginning of May, when the disavowal was said to have taken place, until the 18th inst. the United States' troops have continued encamped within a few miles of St. Augustine, and as the garrison was inadequate to the task of expelling them from the province, the whole country has been for five months the prey of the banditti calling themselves patriots. The trade has been totally suspended, the crops have been lost, the negroes scattered, and the stock amounting to some thousand head, destroyed or driven off to Georgia.” **55**

Their plunder included a large number of slaves from Spanish plantations. Up until 1848, residents of East Florida were claiming compensation for ninety slaves seized by the Patriot invaders. **56**

Following the successful takeover of Amelia Island, the Patriots next moved on St. Augustine. On April 8, Col. Smith stationed the US marines in Fort Mose about two miles from St. Augustine and the Patriots were located in a nearby camp. The US gunboats prevented supplies and provisions from entering the city from the coast, while the Patriots committed depredations on the local plantations, preventing any sustenance entering the city from the inland. Only 400 soldiers, made up mostly of the free black

militiamen, were available to defend St. Augustine. Furthermore, the majority of the Spanish military was spent resisting the French occupation at home, leading the Patriots to believe that St. Augustine could be easily seized. They found this to be completely incorrect. As a US soldier in the camp outside of St. Augustine put it: “Our aim is at Fort St. Augustine; five times the force we have will not be able to take it by storm, it’s the best and most Secure Fortified Fort I have ever Seen.” **57** What the Patriots also didn’t take into account was that Seminoles, black Seminoles, the free blacks of St. Augustine, and runaway slaves would assemble to defend Spanish rule. This was the most important factor to divert the siege of St. Augustine. A British voyager to Amelia Island in 1817, recalling the history of the Patriots War, wrote in his account:

“The garrison of St. A. were not inactive spectators of their enemies, several *sorties* were made particularly by a non-commissioned black officer called Prince, who in one of his *rencontres* carried off the whole of the enemy's forage, killed the commanding officer and three of his men, and wounded many of the remainder of the foraging party. These desultory attacks considerably weakened the confidence of the Americans, and induced them to think of retiring from the unavailing contest.”

**58**

Governor Mitchell wrote to James Monroe, frustrated that the unexpected strength of the free black militias prevented the Patriots from successfully taking St. Augustine:

“Indeed the principal strength of the garrison of St. Augustine consists of negroes, there being but a few militia of the province in the place who adhered to the royal government when the revolution broke out, and about one hundred effective men, the remains of an old battalion of regular troops, whom it is understood would surrender without firing a shot.” **59**

In the mean time, Secretary of State James Monroe decommissioned General Matthews from command of the Patriots, claiming that he had overstepped his boundaries and instructions in invading East Florida. Monroe claimed that Matthews only had the authority to take East Florida under consent of the local authorities, the only exception being the immediate threat of a foreign power attempting to take control of the territory. But it’s more likely that the Madison Administration was thinking strategically on the

matter, not wishing to extend hostilities to Spain as they were preparing for war with Britain. Plus public support for the war against Britain could have been compromised from embarrassing news of illegal operations in Spanish Florida. On April 10, Secretary Monroe appointed Georgia Governor David Mitchell at the command of forces in East Florida. He was ordered to restore the province back to its previous condition before the invasion. He was also ordered to withdraw the US troops and restore the Spanish authorities of Amelia Island. He was to receive assurance from the Spanish Florida governor that the Patriots would receive amnesty. **60** But on May 27, Monroe gave Mitchell a loophole to maintain the US presence in East Florida:

“It is not expected, if you should find it proper to withdraw the troops, that you should interfere to compel the patriots to surrender the country, or any part of it, to the Spanish authorities. The United States are responsible for their own conduct only, not for that of the inhabitants of East Florida. Indeed, in consequence of the commitment of the United States to the inhabitants, you have been already instructed not to withdraw the troops, unless you find that it can be done consistently with their safety, and to report to the Government the result of your conferences with the Spanish authorities, with your opinion of their views, holding in the mean time the ground occupied.” **61**

Before Matthews left Florida, he spoke with Seminole head chief Payne who led a delegate of chiefs to St. Augustine offering their services on behalf of the Patriots. Matthews told them, “I am the representative of the Americans here, sit you down at home and mind your business, and I will be your friend.” **62** This was a fatal mistake on Matthews’ part. The Seminoles were weary of his words. His band of marauders constituted the same white settlers who had been making land grabs in their territory for years. If they had control of Florida, what would stop the Georgian whites from continuing to encroach onto their lands without the Spanish Florida government to abate them? Antonio Proctor, a free black man from St. Augustine, made his way over to the Alachua towns and warned the Seminoles of the Patriots’ true motives:

“These fine talks are to amuse and deceive you, they are going to take your country beyond St. Johns, the old people will be put to sweep the yards of the white people, the young men to work for them, and the young females to spin and weave for them. This I have heard and this I tell you.” **63**



Then “after the Indians heard the talk of the Negro they believed it.” This single act set off a chain of events that proved disastrous for the Patriot invaders. Proctor’s talk struck a chord with the Seminoles, who were already weary of the recent invaders. They decided to firmly ally themselves with the Spanish. For his meritorious act, Antonio Proctor was given recognition by the St. Augustine government. Not being a member of the militia, Proctor’s services were probably more of an individual nature. He more than likely feared the ramifications of a Patriot victory on his own liberty. In 1816, he was rewarded with 185 acres of land. Proctor, fluent in Seminole language, was able to use his influence with the Seminoles to procure their alliance. **64**

On July 26, the Seminoles began to carry out raids the plantations around the St. Mary’s River on the Florida/Georgia border, running off with 35 slaves and deliberately targeting the landholdings of the Patriots. This initiated a series of raids and depredations committed by bands of Seminoles, maroons, free blacks, and runaway slaves unified in their common interest to protect Spanish rule in the province. During the first week of attacks, the Seminole bands murdered about nine white Georgians and liberated some eighty slaves. The Spanish gave incentive for the slaves to join the fight against the Patriots, promising freedom for all runaways who came to their side. Governor Mitchell complained: “The same governor has proclaimed freedom to every negro who will join his standard, and has sent a party of them to unite with, and who are actually at this time united with the Indians in their murderous excursions.” **65** Col. Smith knew that that hundreds of runaway slaves joining the Seminoles and free blacks would become even more difficult to stop if they weren’t immediately checked:

“The safety of our frontier I conceive requires this course. They have, I am informed, several hundred fugitive slaves from the Carolinas & Georgia at present in their Towns & unless they are checked soon they will be so strengthened by desertions from Georgia & Florida that it will be found troublesome to reduce them.” **66**

A letter on January 3, 1813 declared: “A number of slaves have lately deserted their Masters & gone to Augustine from the St. Johns.” **67** Ironically the Patriot insurrection exacerbated the influx of runaway slaves into Florida when annexation of Florida was primarily intended to eliminate it as a slave refuge. The free blacks, runaway slaves, and Seminoles all felt it in their best interest to protect Spanish rule of Florida from US encroachment. This mass defection of slaves from the Georgia and Florida

plantations may have been the predecessor to the St. John's River slave revolt at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War. Eighty slaves had defected in the first week and several hundred overall, plus a number of murders and skirmishes in which slaves were notable participants. The parties that had initially incited the slaves to revolt were comprised of allied natives, black maroons, and free blacks, much like the St. John's River slave revolt out the outbreak of the Second Seminole War years later.

The US force maintained its position at Fort Mose until May 16, when an armed Spanish schooner destroyed the fort with a shot from a 24-pound cannon. The Patriots had already started deserting their camps for the inability to successfully siege St. Augustine. But when the Seminole raids began, camp after camp was found deserted as the Patriots left to protect their homes. They completely forgot about their "grand mission." Since most of them were there to gain more slaves and landholdings, it's doubtful whether they had foreseen that they would lose their slave property and lands in the process. The Seminoles and free blacks successfully created a front in the rear of the attackers to divert their attention from the siege of St. Augustine. The Patriots' force was successfully split up. Col. Smith wrote: "Their only fears now seem to be about the Indians." Not only were over a third of the US soldiers sick, but they were literally trapped in the vicinity of St. Augustine as roaming bands of Seminoles and blacks awaited their exit. Retreating west to the St. John's River would have ensured their death. Col. Smith was apparently growing weary of the operation at this point: "In truth I am truly tired of the Damned Province and would not remain (if it rested with me) one month longer in my present situation for a fee simple to the whole of it." **68**

Smith ordered Major Newman to head an expedition of 200 to 250 volunteers to create a diversion by attacking the Seminole towns in the Alachua region, allowing his men to safely escape to the gunboats on the St. John's River. But Newman's operation couldn't be carried out in the meantime as there was much difficulty in obtaining horses and provisions for the expedition. Yet Col. Smith and his force were under the possible threat of about two to three hundred Seminoles and blacks coming from the west of the St. John's. Any detachment sent to gather information failed: "Blacks assisted by the Indians have become very daring & from the want of a proper knowledge of the country the parties which I have sent out have always been unsuccessful." The camps of US soldiers were terrified as entire parties of their men were frequently slaughtered and mutilated. The US soldiers in the vicinity of St. Augustine, no longer concerned with successfully taking Spanish Florida, now even looked grimly at their prospects for survival: "West India Blacks, strangers to fear, renders our situation extremely critical."

**69** The siege of St. Augustine seemed more hopeless by the day. A US marine at the St. Augustine encampment wrote:

“We have already experienced the loss of ten brave men murdered by the Indians and Negros, one of them a Mr. Maxwell charged with dispatches for Colonel Smith from the Blockhouse (where a number of our troops are stationed and where our provisions are stored) was way laid and dreadfully tortured and murdered having his nose ears and privities cut off scalped and otherwise barbarously used.” **70**

The turning point of the war was based on a single strike. The US soldiers near St. Augustine eagerly awaited supplies carried by string of provisions wagons on its way to their camp from the west. This supply line was escorted by Captain John Williams, Captain Fort, a non-commissioned officer, and nineteen regular troops. At St. Augustine, the Spanish caught wind of the supply escort and, determined to defeat the occupation, made plans to destroy it. About ninety free blacks from Havana were brought to the city and sent to destroy the escort under the command of a free black named Prince. They would be accompanied by a band of Seminoles. On September 12<sup>th</sup>, the Seminoles and blacks attacked the US convoy as soon as it entered the Twelve Mile Swamp around eight o'clock at night. They relentlessly assaulted the US forces for 25 minutes straight. The convoy charged back amidst the heavy fire, causing the Seminoles and blacks to give ground. After the second fire, they fled into the woods, “yelling like devils.” But the Seminole and black raid had successfully destroyed all of the provision wagons, killed the non-commissioned officer, and wounded eight others. Captain John Williams was fatally wounded as well. The supply wagons would have permitted the US encampment outside St. Augustine to continue the siege. Hence the attack of the free blacks on the US convoy was the most important event to protect Spanish rule in Florida. Nevertheless, Major Newman now began his expedition to Alachua, diverting the attention of the Seminoles and blacks back to their towns. Once the Seminoles and blacks left the vicinity of St. Augustine to protect their towns, Col. Smith immediately withdrew his troops from the camp to the safety of the US gunboats on the St. John's. **71**

Major Newman, adjutant general of Georgia and commander of the Georgian volunteers, led a force of 117 Patriots to the Alachua region where the main Seminole towns were concentrated. If the US forces and Patriots destroyed the Seminole towns, they could obtain personal land-holdings, steal blacks and cattle, cease the raids on their plantations, and destroy the main refuge where their fugitive slaves were harbored. It was

estimated that about two hundred Seminole gun-men and forty black gun-men were among the upper towns in Chief Payne's vicinity. 72 On September 24, the US expedition set out from St. John's under Newman's command. On the fourth day of the march, the volunteers encountered a Seminole force numbering 75 to 100 warriors commanded by chiefs Payne and Bowlegs, intending to strike the volunteers approaching their towns. Newman estimated his command to be about six to seven miles away from the main towns. The Seminole and black warriors gallantly formed in two columns in preparation, only slightly outnumbered by the US expedition. Major Newman found that the Seminoles remained close to the swamp as they fought, cleverly calling for a retreat once he realized this. The Seminoles, overjoyed and confused at the same time, overeagerly gave pursuit. Suddenly, the volunteers turned around and charged back, killing many of the warriors. This included Payne who was conspicuously mounted on a white horse, making him an easy target for the long-range frontier rifles. The warriors were furious at the death of their heard chief and retreated back into the swamps with shrieking yells.

The warriors remained near the battleground, painting themselves and consulting among each other with the apparent intention to renew warfare. As nightfall approached, the Georgian volunteers formed a breastwork of logs with portholes for protection. The Seminoles returned thirty minutes before sundown with large reinforcements from the black towns, numbering about 200, shouting the most horrible yells imaginable and making wild, frantic gestures. Newman noted that the party included blacks, "who were their best soldiers." The battle lasted until 8 o'clock when the Seminoles and blacks were finally repulsed. The next day, Newman sent out a dispatch to St. John's for provisions and reinforcements. For the time being, they encamped at the breastwork they had set up for defense. Three days later, the Seminoles started randomly sniping at the breastwork again, renewing their attack every day for five to six days straight. The US force grew hungry over this time period, now reduced to killing and consuming their horses. The number of the sick was increasing daily. An officer and some soldiers considered deserting the expedition in the middle of the night rather than starve or fall victim to the "merciless Seminoles and negroes." Only fifty of the men were still able to fight around this time.

On the eighth day, they left the breastwork for the Seminole towns. Two hours after they left, they received their provisions from 25 mounted volunteers detached from the St. John's who quickly turned around and went back after their job was done. Only five miles into the march, the regiment was attacked by a party of fifty Seminoles, equivalent in number to them. Within fifteen minutes the Seminoles were absolutely

defeated, many dropping their guns and retreating without even attempting to rally. It was estimated that the Seminole and black warriors endured about fifty deaths altogether from the numerous skirmishes. This is compared to the 22 casualties suffered by the US expedition. Having lost many good warriors, the Seminoles and blacks left the expedition to itself once Newman ordered the retreat east. They marched another five miles the next day, constructing a breastwork between two ponds. There they survived by “living upon gophers, alligators and Palmetto stocks.” Another relief party came to their aid. From their encampment they proceeded to the St. John’s River where Col. Smith awaited them with gunboats for protection. **73**

By December, volunteers from East Tennessee were offering their assistance to the US forces entrenched in East Florida. The East Tennesseans were concerned with the Seminole raids but there is evidence that they were aware of the problem of rebel blacks and fugitive slaves. Governor William Blount wrote from Nashville to Secretary of War William Eustis:

“The hostile conduct of the Creek Indians, with the spirit of disaffection among the blacks, as manifested in the attack of captain Williams of the marine corps of the United States, on the frontier of Georgia, founded as it is believed, from the instructions which they have from time to time received, from the Spanish local authorities, at St. Augustine and St. Marks, tending to excite the Indians and blacks in that quarter, to commit murders and depredations on the frontier citizens of the state of Georgia.” **74**

In December, Tennessee militia leader Col. John Williams marched about two hundred volunteers down from Knoxville to the St. Mary’s River on the Georgia-Florida border. The Tennessean volunteers desired personal land holdings of the fertile Alachua territory and to capture runaway slaves for a bargain price. The large herds of cattle on the Seminole lands could also prove to be a very profitable prize from the endeavor. The volunteers increased their forces once they reached the St. Mary’s River. They consisted of hunters, trappers, vagabonds, and men of desperate fortunes, each looking to profit from the destruction of the Seminoles and blacks in the Florida territory. **75**

By February 7<sup>th</sup>, a detachment of 220 soldiers under Col. Smith met about 350 volunteers under the command of Col. Williams near the Alachua towns. It was estimated they were only thirteen miles from Payne’s town. But the Seminoles and blacks were well aware of the US plans weeks before they arrived. They made no time to flee in

refuge from the large force. Col. Smith occupied Payne's town unabated as Williams led his volunteers to Bowleg's town. On the route over, they killed several Seminoles and captured seven prisoners. They interrogated the captives and learned that there was a black town about two miles from their position. Williams visited the town and found it empty. Its black inhabitants had fled just in time, warned of the encroaching US expedition by a wounded Seminole and the sound of gunfire off in the distance. This prevented many from being taken prisoner and undoubtedly sold into bondage afterwards. Williams returned to the US camp at Payne's town. They learned from the prisoners that the Seminoles had discovered the US invasion plans about three months in advance and most had fled for safety.

On the 10<sup>th</sup>, Williams set out with his volunteers and confronted about two hundred Seminoles and blacks in a spirited skirmish. The Seminoles were repelled and suffered about fifteen deaths, but the volunteers were successfully delayed for two days by the attack. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, the US troops under Col. Smith destroyed the empty black town that was shown to them by the prisoners. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, the volunteers and troops rendezvoused at Bowlegs Town. Finding the houses empty, they proceeded to plunder and destroy the town. They burned down 386 homes; consumed and burned about 2,000 bushels of corn; gathered 300 horses and 400 cattle; and appropriated 2,000 deer skins. The Seminoles and blacks viewed from the swamp as the plundering invaders ransacked their homes and provisions. As the soldiers were preoccupied, the warriors made a brief strike before they were repelled once again. Yet the Seminoles and blacks had fought them tooth and nail the entire way through, convincing Williams' expedition not to proceed any further. **76**

The principle towns of the Seminole territory were ruined and plundered, sending them into a state of migration, destitution and starvation. The Seminoles and blacks of the Alachua region spread out to the Suwannee and down south into a flourishing community of blacks south of Tampa Bay. While the piratical army successfully broke up the Seminole and black towns, they failed in their main objective to seize the blacks as slaves. They broke up the centralized Alachua settlements that the Seminoles and blacks had peacefully inhabited for generations. But for all the damages and losses suffered by the Seminoles and blacks, they had managed to delay the takeover and acquisition of Spanish Florida until negotiations began for US withdrawal of troops at the beginning of 1813. Black and native militancy diverted US acquisition of Florida temporarily. Don Luis De Onis, the Spanish minister at Washington, communicated to Secretary Monroe an act for the amnesty of the Patriots "who have been induced to revolt by an agent of the United States, whose proceedings in this respect, were unauthorized." **77** By March,

General Pinckney started negotiations with the Spanish government of Florida. Governor Kindelan wrote to General Pinckney that he would declare amnesty for the insurgents if the US government, in turn, withdrew its troops from Florida. He published his proclamation of amnesty for the Patriots:

“DECREE-Don Fernando VII, by the grace of God, and by the constitution of the Spanish monarchy, king of Spain, and during his absence and captivity the regency of the kingdom specially authorized by the general and extraordinary cortes, to grant an amnesty to the insurgents, who have co-operated in the invasion of the Spanish territory in East and West Florida, acting in conformity with the beneficent and conciliatory principles of the said cortes, and wishing to give a new proof of their clemency in favor of the Spanish subjects, who, unfortunately forgetful of their duties, have added to the distress of the mother country, during a most critical epoch, has determined to grant them a general pardon with oblivion of the past, on condition that, in future and after the proclamation of this amnesty, they shall demean themselves as good and faithful Spaniards, yielding due obedience to the legitimately constituted authorities of the national government of Spain, established in the peninsula.” **78**

The US began making preparations for the withdrawal of its forces. On the morning of April 27<sup>th</sup>, the soldiers withdrew from their station on the St. John’s River, leaving their encampment in flames behind them. On May 6<sup>th</sup>, the army lowered the flag at Fort San Carlos, Fernandina and crossed the St. Mary’s River over to Georgia with the remaining troops. **79** But the Patriots were not done. Following the US withdrawal, John McIntosh appealed to his Patriot comrades, reminding them of the free black militias at St. Augustine:

“Patriots of East Florida! At last the corrupt Government of St. Augustine has come forward with a proclamation offering "amnesty to the Insurgents who have co-operated in the invasion, (falsely so-called), of East Florida." Weak must be the mind that can have the least dependence upon a promise so hollow & deceitful. Can anyone believe that such a corrupt, jealous, & arbitrary Government will adhere to promises however sacredly made?

Can you? Will you, in poverty become the sport of Slaves & the abhorred Army in St. Augustine?” **80**

The Patriots couldn't permit the peaceful existence of free black militias and black Seminole maroon communities in Spanish Florida to continue unabated. Col. Hawkins wrote that the Patriots refused to surrender because "they could not submit to the present order of things at St. Augustine. The military force there being of that description of people, mostly blacks and mulattoes, abhorrent to them." **81** A pro-Patriot letter declared:

"I have just received information from a respectable character immediately from St. Augustine, that the runaway negroes from the U. States and Florida, that had been received and protected St. Augustine, are now getting out of the lines, and embodying themselves to make head against the revolutionists, and in favor, as to say, of the Indians. This measure has taken place upon the full expectation that the U. States troops are to be withdrawn from Florida—What is to become of us, God knows." **82**

In January of 1814, a body of Patriots moved into the Alachua lands that they cleared of their Seminole and black residents just a year beforehand. This alternative strategy aimed at establishing a self-governing state. On January 25, the Patriots declared the occupied territory the "Republic of East Florida," intending to supplant the Spanish "Territory of East Florida." They assembled at the location of the former Seminole towns, declaring it the "Elotchaway District" with its capital only a few miles east of Ocala at Fort Mitchell. At the first assembly of the "Council of the Republic of East Florida," its President General B. Harris recognized that the Patriots appropriated "a quarter of the Continent heretofore the lurking places of the most inveterate and troublesome savages, who have been instigated by British Influence, aided by many of the Slaves of the unfortunate Patriots." **83** They petitioned Congress and requested annexation of the "Republic" to the United States. In April 1814, Secretary Monroe rejected their request: "The United States being at peace with Spain, no countenance can be given by their government to the proceedings of the revolutionary party in East Florida, if it is composed of Spanish subjects-and still less can it be given them if it consists of American citizens." In 1816, the Spanish government in East Florida offered peace terms to the Patriots, proposing that they abandon the "Republic" and accept Spanish rule under a system that divided the territory between the St. Mary's and St.

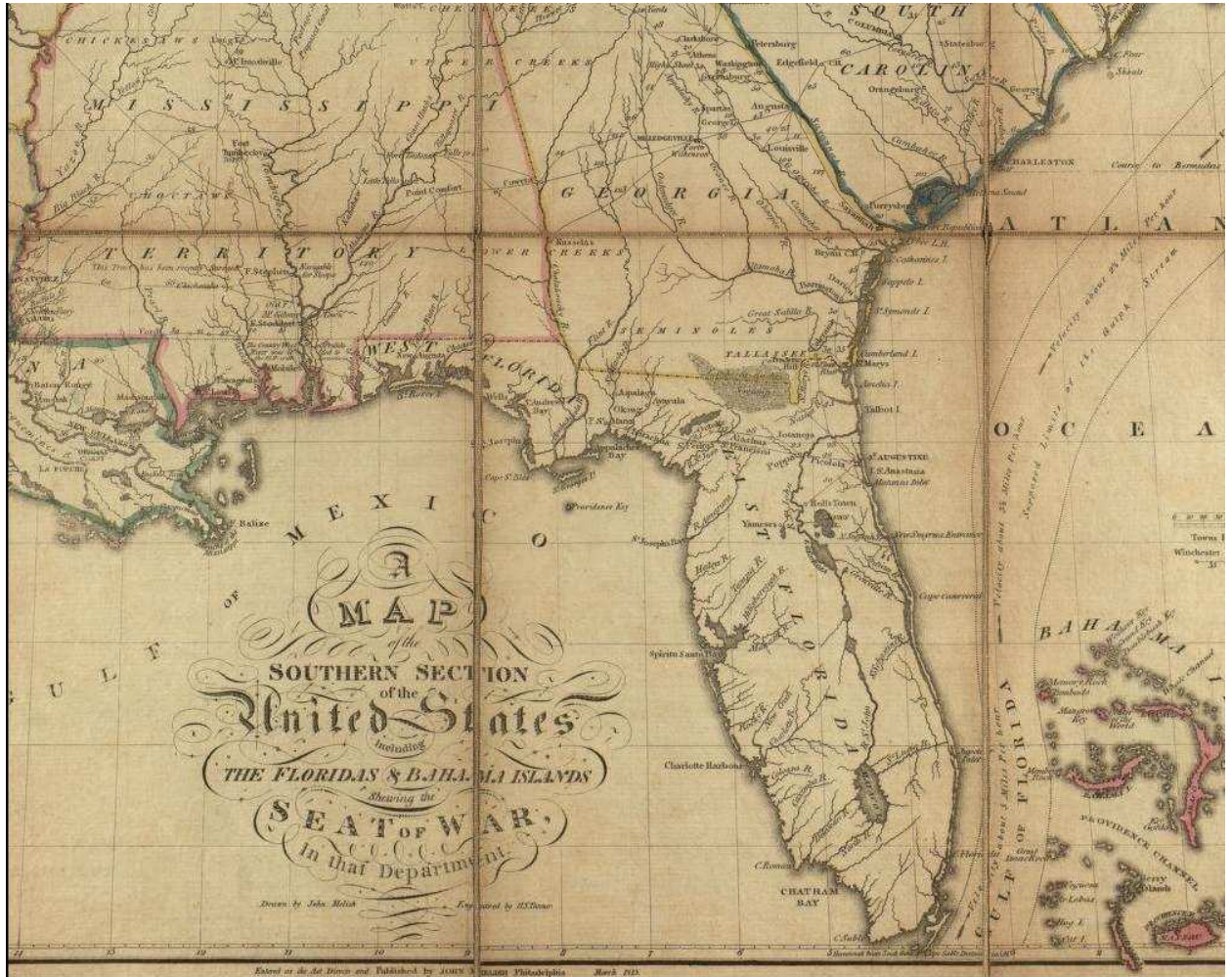


John's into three self-governing districts. The Patriots accepted these terms, finally ended their "revolution" after four years of attempted conquest. **84**

In 1815, former Patriots were still entering Florida, committing murders, depredations, and raids on the Seminole towns. An English observer in 1817 noted that "the frequent incursions of Georgia backwoodsmen" into Florida were "to steal cattle, and negroes, from the Indians." **85** Seminole chief Bowlegs complained to British official Edward Nichols about outrages from "the people of Georgia, who had gone into East Florida, driven off his cattle, and destroyed his property...and murdered two of his people." **86** Nichols addressed Bowlegs' multiple complaints to Col. Benjamin Hawkins, a Patriot sympathizer from the start. Nichols' defense of the Seminoles was one of the rare instances when white men in Florida actually identified with the cause of people of color. Others were either outright hostile to the Seminoles and blacks or patronized them as "poor savage victims." But the Seminoles warmed to Nichols, realizing that they had a true ally in the British official. Hawkins replied that the renewed assaults of the Patriots were justified: "The Indians of Aulotchwan, who, without provocation, murdered and plundered a number of subjects of Spain on the St. John's, have engendered such a deadly feud between the parties, that it will be long before the descendents of the injured can forget and forgive." **87** This is evidence that the continuous crimes inflicted on the Seminoles were perpetrated by the Patriots. The Seminoles had only targeted the plantations of the Patriots to divert their attention from the illegal siege of St. Augustine. Hawkins never mentioned that the Seminoles had been the victims of white land grabs long before the Patriots invasion. The Seminoles raids were sparked once the chiefs discovered that the Patriots intended to steal their land and divvy it among themselves as soon as they conquered East Florida.

### **The "Negro Fort" Massacre**

That the War of 1812 was truly characterized by US expansionism, slavery, and Indian Removal is hidden by traditional history books. As with the Revolutionary War, the war against Britain in 1812 was not simply about defense against an invading aggressor, but also about the expansion of US territory. The War of 1812, the Patriot War in East Florida, the Creek War (1813-1814), the "Negro Fort" incursion, and the First Seminole War were all closely related conflicts. These conflicts were about numerous intertwined goals: expanding US territorial domain, exterminating indigenous tribes, expanding institutional slavery, and destroying the slave refuge in Florida. The conflicts



A map of the southern section of the United States, including the Floridas & Bahama Islands, showing the seat of war in that department, engraving by H.S. Tanner, 1813. Source: *Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library – University of Georgia Libraries.*

in the Southeast during the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also clarified the concept of Manifest Destiny as the official policy of the US government. Manifest Destiny was the perceived right of the United States to violate national sovereignty to eliminate any perceived threat of an encroaching foreign colonial power in its vicinity. In the War of 1812, British officials in Florida utilized disaffected native tribes and fugitive slaves to form a southern front against the United States as a diversion from the more important theater of war in the north. This British policy originated out of Admiral Alexander Cochrane's plan to commission Major Edward Nichols and Creek Indian Agent George Woodbine to form and train a large force of natives and fugitive slaves in Florida to harass the plantations along the Georgia and Alabama border. The war with Britain in the South further clarified the "need" of the US to establish control over its borderlands and remove the native tribes who were supposedly "easily enticed" by enemies of the United States.

Florida's sparse settlement, weak governance, and large population of natives and black maroons made it an easy station for Britain and Spain to engage in low-intensity warfare against the United States. However, the reason why British agents were able to utilize native tribes and black maroons so easily was because the constant aggressions they suffered from white settlers and slave raiders. That the Seminoles and black maroons, recently dispossessed from their lands in Alachua by the Patriot invaders, were willing to oppose the US and support the British in the War of 1812 is unsurprising. British support undoubtedly relieved the starving conditions they had endured following the destruction of their towns and plunder of their crops by the Patriots. The arms the British provided also gave them means for revenge against the white settlers of Georgia. When the British began the southern front of the war, they found a receptive audience and eager alliance in the Seminoles and black maroons of Florida.

The reigning US doctrines of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – Manifest Destiny, slavery expansionism, and "Indian Removal" – were largely derived in reaction to the threat that Florida, a native and fugitive slave sanctuary, posed to the Southern states. But these wars in the Southeast were not simply to ward off the British Empire and its influence over the various native federations. The idea that foreign enemies would use Florida and native tribes in the Southeast against the United States merely provided a pretext for the US to illegally seize Florida and carry on wars of extermination against the Seminoles, Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, etc. Prior to these wars, white settlers had been encroaching on native lands and seizing black maroons as slaves for years. Furthermore, white hegemony over the profitable cotton lands of Georgia, Alabama, and Florida and the expansion of institutional slavery were the twin-goals behind the acquisition of



Engraving of Red Stick chief William Weatherford meeting Andrew Jackson in his tent for negotiations following the Red Stick defeat at Horseshoe Bend, 1814. Source: *American Historical Images on File: The Native American Experience*.

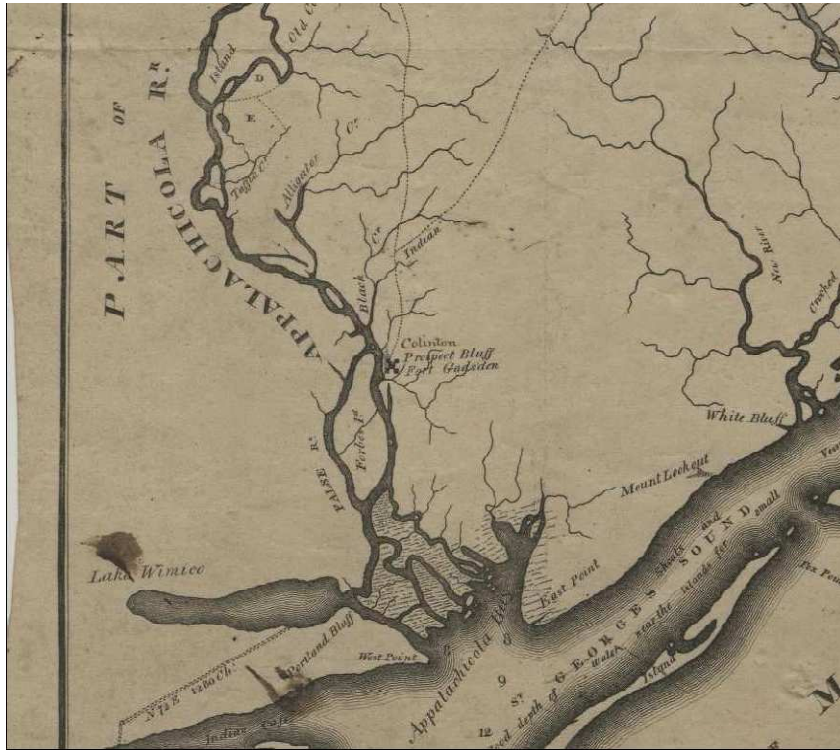
Florida and the removal or extermination of all native federations in the Southeast. Florida was desired not only for profitable cotton land to expand slavery, but for white settlement to stop the continuous outflow of fugitive slaves into the territory. As the policies of Indian Removal and Manifest Destiny became further clarified in the Southern theater of war against Britain, the black maroons and anti-white natives found themselves in a continuous conflict with the slave-raiding, land-grabbing white settlers of Georgia.

As the Seminoles and blacks were battling the white settlers of Georgia in the Patriot War (1812-1814), Red Stick Creeks were also fighting the US military and its pro-white Lower Creek allies. The pan-native traditionalist movement was spreading across the native tribes and federations of America as a reaction to white encroachment on native lands. The native traditional movement asserted native autonomy, an independent cultural identity, and the communal ownership of land. In 1811, Shawnee leader Tecumseh carried the message of unity to the southeastern tribes in the interest of establishing a common front against the American advance on their lands. His

admonitions of Pan-American native unity against white Americans found a receptive audience in a significant core of the Upper Creeks in central Alabama. What developed was an influential and powerful group of anti-American Creek warriors determined to resist the onset of land-grabbing white settlers. The Creek Federation became deeply divided between traditionalist Red Stick Creeks and pro-white Lower Creeks who had acclimated to the white institution of private property. By 1813, a civil war broke out between the Red Sticks and the pro-white Creeks. The US military under General Andrew Jackson quickly came to the support of their Lower Creek allies and defeated the Red Sticks by March 1814 at the battle of Horseshoe Bend. In August that year, a host of Creek leaders ceded over 23 million acres in the treaty of Fort Jackson, intolerable terms for the majority of the Creek Federation. Soon after, eight towns of Red Stick Creeks, numbering up to a thousand inhabitants, fled down to Florida and were harbored in Pensacola by British officials. The Red Sticks, won over by British promises of land and tribal independence, now fought with the British to harass the American South from their base in Florida.

Jackson's military interventions in Florida were now centered on the twin-goals of eliminating the anti-white Seminoles and Red Sticks Creeks and returning fugitive slaves to their owners. British officials in Florida had promised thousands of natives and fugitive blacks land, freedom, and protection as long as they fought on the British side in the southern theater of war. They now began to arm and organize them for war against the southern plantations bordering on Alabama and Georgia. When Jackson invaded Pensacola in November 1814, the British, Red Stick Creeks, and runaway slaves flocked down to Prospect Bluff on the Appalachicola River to establish a new base of operations. Prospect Bluff, fifteen miles up from the mouth of the Appalachicola River in north Florida, became the center of British, native, and black opposition to the United States for two years. Thus Manifest Destiny, forming white America's domain, became associated with black slavery, native extermination, and white hegemony as much it was ridding of threatening European colonial powers in Florida. The Seminole, Red Stick Creek, and black allies in Florida established closer ties in these frontier operations, with the clear and generally understood notion that they all shared a mutual interest in unifying to fend off the encroaching United States. **88**

After retreating from their base at Pensacola, British military official Col. Nichols made plans to construct a fort at Prospect Bluff on the east bank of the Appalachicola River. The British were joined by about a thousand of their Red Stick Creek allies and four hundred fugitive slaves belonging to the residents of Pensacola. **89**



Plan of lands in East Florida purchased by John Forbes & Co. from the Indians, showing the location of the “Negro Fort,” ca. 1815-1825. Source: *Harrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library – University of Georgia Libraries.*

Nichols furnished the fort with artillery and munitions. The fort was located fifteen miles above the mouth of the river, manned with three hundred British soldiers and an incoming flow of refugee Seminoles, Miccosukees, Red Sticks, and runaway slaves. **90** The purpose of operations on the Appalachicola was to assemble an army of disaffected indigenous people and runaway slaves to attack the plantations along the Georgia and Alabama borders. Almost immediately Jackson took action. In September, Creek official William McIntosh was commissioned to retrieve the fugitive slaves at Appalachicola. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, McIntosh marched there with 196 warriors, twenty rounds of ammunition, and twenty days’ provisions. It was expected that he was to be reinforced along the way by several hundred more warriors, enough for the object of the mission. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, Jackson wrote to Creek agent Benjamin Hawkins: “I hope to hear in a few days Major McIntosh having captured all the stores and negroes on the Apalachicola.” **91** Apparently the mission was unsuccessful. By December 1814, anywhere from two thousand to 3,500

warriors were training for war at Prospect Bluff – a coalition of refugee Red Stick Creeks, Seminoles, blacks, and numerous tribes indigenous to Florida. **92** General Gaines estimated 900 warriors and 450 armed blacks inhabited the fort. **93**

In the early summer of 1815, Nichols left the Appalachicola Fort and embarked for Britain accompanied by a delegate of Red Stick Creek chiefs. He intended on making their plight known to the British Crown in hopes for protection against the Americans and reprieve from their starving conditions. Most of the Red Stick Creeks and Seminole warriors who remained behind abandoned the fort soon afterwards. **94** Before Nichols had even left, the blacks had already begun taking possession of the fort. An additional 300 to 400 runaways were estimated to have fled to the fort for protection by this time. **95** A letter from General Gaines on May 14<sup>th</sup> declared: “Certain Negroes and outlaws have taken possession of a Fort on the Appalachicola River in the territory of Florida.” **96** The Seminoles “were kept in awe” at the hundreds of armed blacks in the vicinity. “For a period,” William H. Simmons claimed, the Seminoles “were placed in the worst of all political conditions, being under a dulocracy or government of slaves.” **97** Nichols left behind a large supply of arms, artillery, and ammunition to protect the inhabitants from slave raiders and to commission raids on Southern plantations. They were supplied with 2,500 stands of musketry, 500 carbines, 500 steel scabbard swords, four cases containing 200 pistols, 300 quarter casks of rifle powder, 162 barrels of cannon powder, and a large count of military stores. On the walls of the fort were mounted four long twenty-four pounder cannon, four long six-pounder cannon, a four-pound field pierce, and a five and a half inch howitzer. **98** James Innerarity, junior partner of the John Forbes & Company located at Prospect Bluff on the Appalachicola River, complained in a letter about the British officials and the well-armed, trained free blacks they left behind:

“Our Store is broken up with considerable loss, over & above that of our Cattle eaten by the plunderers, & negroes robbed by them-our influence over those Indians dead, or expiring, & Prospect Bluff & the Lands in possession of the Negroes... They would not deliver up the Negroes; no, that could not be done without a violation of British faith!!! Which had been pledged for their freedom, but they left them at Prospect Bluff (after having trained them to Military discipline) in possession of a well constructed fort, with plenty of provisions, & with Cannon Arms & Ammunition of every description, not only in abundance but in Profusion for their defence-report says, they have even since sent them an accession of Strength, and they are now organized as Pirates, have several small Vessels well armed, & some

Piracies that lately occurred in the Lakes are supposed to have been committed by them.” **99**

The fort grew from a strategically defensive base to a flourishing free black community around the banks of the Appalachicola. The blacks cultivated fields and plantations extending fifty miles up the river. The blacks successfully applied their inherited knowledge of rice-cultivation techniques from West Africa to Florida’s tropical climate. The community surrounding the fort was attractive for its defensible position and fertile lands. Runaway slaves began pouring in on a daily basis. The community grew to about 1,000 blacks in the fields surrounding the fort. **100** A total of 300 black men, women, and children were in possession of the fort, accompanied by about twenty Choctaws and a number of Seminoles. **101** Joshua Giddings vividly depicted the “Negro Fort”:

“Their plantations extended along the river several miles, above and below the fort. Many of them possessed large herds of cattle and horses, which roamed in the forests, gathering their food, both in summer and winter, without expense or trouble to their owners. The Pioneer Exiles from South Carolina had settled here long before the Colony of Georgia existed. Several generations had lived to manhood and died in those forest-homes. To their descendants it had become consecrated by “many an oft told tale” of early adventure, of hardship and suffering; the recollection of which had been retained in tradition, told in story, and sung in their rude lays. Here were graves of their ancestors, around whose memories were clustered the fondest recollections of the human mind. The climate was genial. They were surrounded by extensive forests, and far removed from the habitations of those enemies of freedom who sought to enslave them; and they regarded themselves as secure in the enjoyment of liberty. Shutout from the cares and strifes of civilized men, they were happy in their own social solitude. So far from seeking to injure the people of the United States, they were only anxious to be exempt, and entirely free from all contact with our population or government; while they faithfully maintained their allegiance to the Spanish crown.” **102**

Colonel Patterson wrote about the Appalachicola Fort:

“The force of the negroes was daily increasing; and they felt themselves so strong and secure that they had commenced several plantations on the fertile banks of the



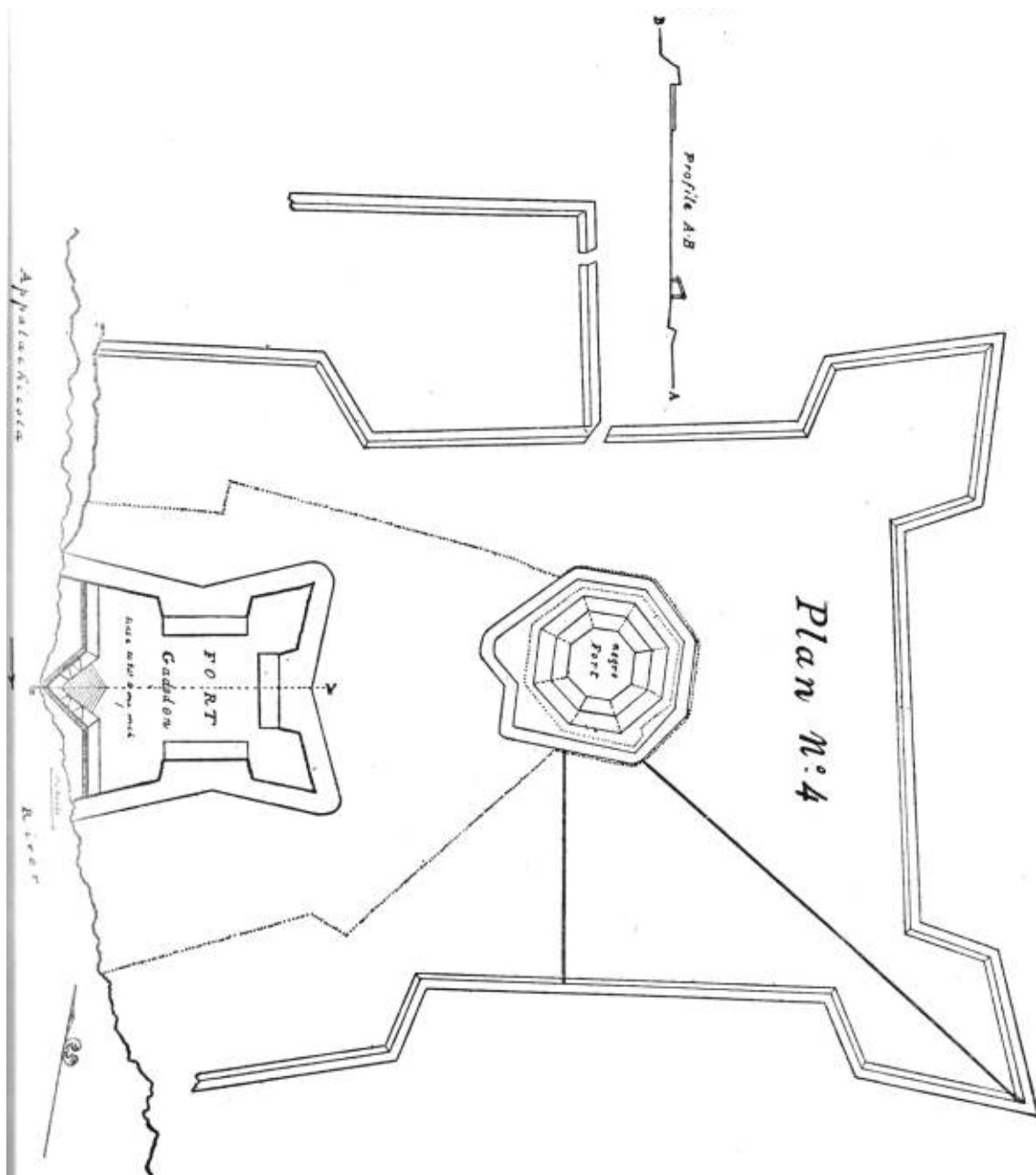
Appalachicola, which would have yielded them every article of sustenance, and which would, consequently, in a short time have rendered their establishment quite formidable and highly injurious to the neighboring States.” **103**

The fort was becoming a growing threat to slavery itself. The existence of an armed, liberated black maroon community was intolerable alone, but it became a rallying point for runaway slaves fleeing from other Southern states. The blacks were less concerned about “committing depredations” as was depicted by US military officials than they were about protecting their freedom. The true crime they were guilty for was to “inveigle negroes from the citizens of Georgia, as well as from the Creek and Cherokee nations of Indians.” **104** Col. Patterson commended its elimination:

“The service rendered by the destruction of the fort, and the band of negroes who held it, and the country in its vicinity, is of great and manifest importance to the United States, and particularly those States bordering on the Creek nation, as it had become the general rendezvous for runaway slaves and disaffected Indians; and asylum where they were assured of being received; a stronghold where they found arms and ammunition to protect themselves against their owners and the Government.” **105**

As the blacks peacefully flourished in their isolated community on the Appalachicola, military officials and slaveholders planned its destruction. On May 21, a British “gentleman of respectability” from Bermuda wrote a memorandum disapproving Col Nichols for having “espoused the cause of the slaves.” He wrote of the “Negro Fort”: “No time ought to be lost in recommending the adoption of speedy, energetic measures for the destruction of a thing held so likely to become dangerous to the state of Georgia.” **106**

On March 15, 1816 the Secretary of War ordered General Andrew Jackson to call attention to the governor of Pensacola to the fort. If the Spanish governor refused or was unable to “put an end to an evil of so serious nature,” the US government would promptly take the “necessary measures” to reduce it. On April 23, Jackson transmitted the demands of Secretary of War William H. Crawford, ordering the Spanish governor to “destroy or remove from out frontier this banditti, put an end to an evil of so serious a nature, and return to our citizens and friendly Indians inhabiting our territory those negroes now in said fort, and which have been stolen and enticed from them.” The blacks at the



Plan of Fort Gadsden, built on the site of the “Negro Fort” in 1818. The location of the “Negro Fort” is noted in the middle of this sketch. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

Appalachicola Fort were supposedly “enticed from the service of their masters.” **107** The *Savannah Journal* concurred with this sentiment:

“It was not to be expected, that an establishment so pernicious to the Southern States, holding out to a part of their population temptations to insubordination, would have been suffered to exist after the close of the war. In the course of last winter, several slaves from this neighborhood fled to that fort; others have lately gone from Tennessee and the Mississippi Territory. How long shall this evil, requiring immediate remedy, be permitted to exist?” **108**

The well-positioned, well-armed fort and the fertile soil of the Appalachian River banks were the “temptations to insubordination.” Believing that emissaries and agitators were necessary to incite slaves to leave their masters, whites underestimated the vast informal communication networks of slaves across the South and their ability to receive information on possible outlets of freedom. The very example of an armed, liberated community of blacks on the border of the United States offering refuge for incoming fugitives was what generally frightened planters and officials. The destruction of such a threat to institutional slavery would not be bound by laws or diplomacy. Jackson’s request to the Spanish governor only gave a façade of legitimacy to the inevitable designs of the US government. On April 8, two weeks before Jackson wrote the Spanish governor, he ordered General Gaines to destroy the “Negro Fort” regardless of its location on Spanish territory:

“I have little doubt of the fact, that this fort has been established by some villains for rapine and plunder, and that it ought to be blown up, regardless of the land on which it stands; and if your mind shall have formed the same conclusion, destroy it and return the stolen Negroes and property to their rightful owners.” **109**

General Gaines carefully prepared for the operation. He himself believed that the fort would “produce much evil among the blacks of Georgia, and the eastern part of the Mississippi territory.” **110** Lt. Col. Duncan Lamont Clinch was assigned to destroy the fort. Gaines ordered him to speedily establish a fort near the junction of the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers, where they joined to form the Appalachian, to intimidate the “Negro Fort.” Clinch was to meet the convoy of supplies from New Orleans with fifty soldiers once he was informed that they had arrived at the river. The convoy was



Portrait of Col. Duncan Lamont Clinch, who led the assault on the “Negro Fort” and would later go on to become a U.S. General during the Second Seminole War. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

detached with two gunboats. From that point, Gaines ordered him to proceed to the “Negro Fort” where if he was to “meet with opposition” then “arrangements will immediately be made for its destruction.” Gaines wished to provoke an attack to justify the destruction of the fort. For this purpose, Clinch was supplied with two eighteen-pound cannons and one howitzer. **111**

On July 10, the supply convoy reached the mouth of the Appalachicola where they received a dispatch from Col. Clinch ordering them to hold their position until he could arrive with troops to escort them up the river. On July 17, a party of five men from the supply vessels was sent to gather fresh water. Once the party entered the river, they discovered a black man on the shore, near one of the plantations along the Appalachicola. As soon as they touched down on the shore to question the lone black man, about forty blacks and Seminoles fired a volley of shots from their hidden position in the bushes. The

black man on the beach served as a decoy to lure the small party into the ambush. Three of the men were immediately killed, one dove into the water and made it back to the convoy, and the other was captured. **112**

On that same day, Col. Clinch commenced to the “Negro Fort” with 116 soldiers and incidentally met a party of 150 slave-hunting Coweta Creeks under William McIntosh. On top of Clinch’s excursion, Jackson had commissioned McIntosh with his Coweta Creeks to capture the blacks at the Appalachicola River - offered fifty dollars for every fugitive slave they seized and returned to their owner. After holding a council, McIntosh’s Creeks agreed to keep parties in advance and capture every black that they encountered. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, they caught a black Seminole in the vicinity heading to the Seminole chiefs with the scalp of one of the members of the party they ambushed. The blacks were attempting to garner the assistance of their Seminole allies.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, Clinch’s troops left with the Creek mercenaries over to the fort and came within gunshot range, but it was impossible to destroy the fort without artillery. They were forced to wait until the gunboats from the supply vessel arrived. McIntosh was ordered to surround the fort with a third of his force and maintain an irregular fire as a diversion. The blacks fired artillery back, but to no avail. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Creeks demanded that the blacks surrender but they responded defiantly. The black commander Garcon told the deputation of Creeks “he would sink any American vessels that should attempt to pass it; and he would blow up the fort if he could not defend it.” **113** The blacks then hoisted the English Union Jack accompanied with the red flag over the fort. They knew that surrender would only mean slavery so there would be no compromise. For the next several days the blacks opened fire whenever any troops appeared in their view. On July 27, the gunboats approached the fort. The blacks opened fire when they entered into gunshot range. The gunboats fired back with some cold shots to get an idea of their real distance. The gunboats then fired “the first hot one,” made red-hot in the cook’s galley, which went screaming over the wall and into the fort’s magazine full of gunpowder. The fort completely exploded. Col. Clinch reported the horrific destruction:

“The explosion was awful, and the scene horrible beyond description. Our first care, on arriving at the scene of the destruction, was to rescue and relieve the unfortunate beings who survived the explosion. The war yells of the Indians, the cries and lamentations of the wounded, compelled the soldier to pause in the midst of victory, to drop a tear for the sufferings of his fellow beings, and to acknowledge that the great Ruler of the Universe must have used us as his instruments in chastising the blood-thirsty and murderous wretches that defended the fort.” **114**

The terrible explosion instantly killed 270 black men, women, and children within the fort, the rest being mortally wounded out of the total 330 residents. Only a few survived. The black commander Garcon and the Choctaw chief somehow managed to survive the explosion. From the first black captive, they had learned that the blacks had tarred and feathered the captured soldier. The Creeks immediately executed all of the survivors afterwards. Some of the blacks were captured and immediately returned to their speculated masters. The large number of runaway slaves on the fields that surrounded the river fled to safety. Some escaped to the protection of the blacks and Seminoles at the Suwannee and others left to the growing black maroon community just south of Tampa Bay. The elimination of the fort was not the end of the black Seminole social structure in Florida. Several other black communities remained largely intact. But it was far from the end of the terror inflicted on the black Seminoles by the Federal government. It was far from the end of their resistance either. They would next strive to avenge the loss of their family members and loved ones. **115** In the official report, Clinch provided a divine justification for the massacre. But he also wrote a far more descriptive alternative account of the event without involving God:

"The explosion was awful, and the scene horrible beyond description. You cannot conceive, nor I describe the horrors of the scene. In an instant lifeless bodies were stretched upon the plain, buried in sand and rubbish, or suspended from the tops of the surrounding pines. Here lay an innocent babe, there a helpless mother; on the one side a sturdy warrior, on the other a bleeding squaw. Piles of bodies, large heaps of sand, broken guns, accoutrements, etc, covered the site of the fort. The brave soldier was disarmed of his resentment and checked his victorious career, to drop a tear on the distressing scene." **116**

## Chapter 4

### The First Seminole War: The Real 300 was at the Suwannee River (1817-1821)

After over half a decade of covert operations, state terrorism, and illegal cross-border excursions into Florida territory, Jackson and his military cronies were planning to defeat the Seminoles and blacks once and for all. Many of the black Seminoles who survived the “Negro Fort” massacre left for the small flourishing community on the Manatee River. Others left for the Suwannee River where indigenous and black warriors were stockpiling weapons and supplies. It was then reported they had begun to undergo military training and preparation to retaliate for the massacre:

“They speak in the most contemptuous manner of the Americans, and threaten to have satisfaction for what has been done – meaning the destruction of the negro fort. There is another of my acquaintances returned immediately from the Seminole towns, and saw the negroes on parade there. He counted about six hundred that bore arms. They have chosen officers of every description, and endeavor to keep up a regular discipline, and very strict in punishing violators of their military rules. There is said to be the same number of Indians belonging to their party, and there are both negroes and Indians daily going to their standard. They say they are in complete fix for fighting, and wish an engagement with the Americans, or McIntosh’s troops; they would let them know they had something more to do than they had at Appalachicola.” **1**

It was also reported that their British ally George Woodbine was among them, training and supplying them with weapons as he had at the Appalachicola Fort. **2** The “Negro Fort” massacre had essentially thrown a rock at a hornet’s nest. The surviving blacks and Seminoles became even more determined in their hatred and spite for the Americans and began preparing to avenge their fallen comrades and family members. The black settlement at the Suwannee River would now become the primary target of Andrew Jackson’s military operations in Florida. As slave raids into their territory grew more frequent, black and native mobilization was largely directed for self-defense.

Prepared they were. When a party of Creek raiders under Thomas Woodward reached Bowlegs' Town in January 1817 in search of runaway slaves, British official Alexander Arbuthnot warned them that they were best to stay away from the black section of Suwannee. Woodward recalled: "Arbuthnot had a store close by, and he informed me that he believed the negroes, or a part of them, were in the neighborhood, but that I would hazard too much in attempting to arrest them. I quit the place, and saw nothing more of it for over a year, at which time I helped to burn up the place." <sup>3</sup> US army officer Hugh Young wrote a topographical memoir of Florida which described a vastly different picture of a peaceful, autonomous, and isolated community located on the Suwannee:

"The negroes at Sahwanne were fugitives from Georgia and St. Augustine and were living in quiet and plenty without a single temptation to depredate in our territory. Their distance screened them from the single efforts of their masters to recover them and the abundance of cattle and corn obviated every plea on the score of subsistence. They were situated handsomely on the west bank of Sahwanne, thirty-six miles from its mouth-in a hammock of thin but productive soil where they raised corn, potatoes, peas, beans and rice. Their cabins were large and better constructed than those of the Indians and many of them had neat gardens enclosed by paling and affording good fruit and vegetables. Their form of government was similar to that of the Indians. The chief was a Mulatto whose talents formed his only tie of authority and who knew that the respect and affections of the negroes were the only security to the continuance of his magistracy. In numbers they were about two hundred men with the usual proportion of women and children." <sup>4</sup>

The US now awaited any pretext to spark a war. In November 1817, the US military made what is normally considered the opening strike of the war at the Miccosukee settlement of Fowltown, only fifteen miles north of Fort Gaines. Tensions rose when General Gaines demanded that the Miccosukee chief hand over some of the warriors who allegedly murdered white settlers. Yet Gaines made it apparent that his main concern lied with retrieving the fugitive slaves that were then harbored at the Suwannee River. In August 1817, General Gaines wrote to Miccosukee chief King Hatchy:

"If you do give me up the murderers who murdered me people, I say I have got good strong warriors, with scalping knives and tomahawks. You harbor a great many of



my black people among you at Sahwahnee. If you give me leave to go by you against them, I shall not hurt anything belonging to you.” **5**

King Hatchy replied to Gaines, claiming that white settlers had actually murdered more of his people and the Miccosukees were not responsible for harboring their fugitive slaves:

“You charge me with killing your people, stealing your cattle, and burning your houses; it is I that have cause to complain of the Americans. While one American has been justly killed, while in the act of stealing cattle, more than four Indians while hunting have been murdered by these lawless freebooters. I harbor no negroes. When the Englishmen were at war with America, some took shelter among them; and it is for you white people to settle those things among yourselves, and not trouble us with what we know nothing about. I shall use force to stop any armed Americans from passing my towns or my lands. **6**

Refusing Gaines’ request to commence slave-raids into Miccosukee territory was enough to make King Hatchy an enemy of the United States. The handful of white deaths served merely as a pretext for Gaines to demand that the Miccosukees and Seminoles turn over their black allies. A state of constant warfare had characterized the Florida-Georgia frontier for years now. Deaths of innocent natives and whites were both common place on the frontier and an environment of mutual retaliation and hostility had existed for years by this time. The chiefs of ten Miccosukee towns petitioned Major Twiggs to address the numerous injustices perpetuated against them by white settlers:

“Since the last war, after you sent word we must quit the war, we, the red people, have come over on this side. The white people have carried all the red people’s cattle off. After the war, I sent to all my people to let white people alone, but the white people still continue to carry off their cattle...The whites first begun, and there is nothing said about that, but great complaint made about what the Indians do. This is now three years, since the white people killed three Indians. Since that they have killed three other Indians, and taken their horses, and what they had; and this summer they killed three more; and very lately they killed one more...The white people killed our people first; the Indians then took satisfaction...All the mischief that the white people have done ought to be told to their head man. When there is anything done you write to us; but never write to your head man what the white people do.” **7**

Behind the false pretexts of “protecting citizens” from the “savage depredations,” military officials were overwhelmingly concerned with retrieving runaway slaves harbored by the Miccosukee and Seminole settlements. The chiefs desperately attempted to convince US government officials not to aggress onto their lands:

“You have sent to us respecting the black people on the Suwany River; we have nothing to do with them. They were put there by the English, and to them you ought to apply for anything about them. We do wish our country to be desolated by an army passing through it, for the concern of other people.” **8**

Neamathla, the chief of Fowltown, warned Major David E. Twiggs: “not to cross or cut a stick of wood east side of the Flint river, alleging that the land was his; that he was directed, by the Powers above and below, to protect and defend it, and he should do so.” **9** Gaines was indignant from the “insolent” response he received, ordering the chief to come visit the US camp. Neamathla didn’t respond. President Monroe approved the movement of troops from Fort Montgomery to Fort Scott in order to “restrain the Seminoles from committing further depredations.” **10** In November 1817, General Gaines detached two regiments from the Flint River to invade the Miccosukee territory, retrieve Neamathla, and destroy Fowltown. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, 250 men under Major Twiggs entered Fowltown and began burning some homes. The troops killed two warriors and a fleeing woman as the town’s inhabitants fled to the adjacent swamp. The town managed to rally their warriors and force the Americans to temporarily fall back. The soldiers set up a blockhouse some distance from Fowltown and called for reinforcements from Fort Gaines, “stating the Indians were the aggressors.” **11**

A couple days later, three hundred soldiers under the command of Colonel Arbuckle were detached to retrieve Neamathla. Once they entered the vicinity of Fowltown they found the inhabitants had taken refuge in the swamp once again. Sixty warriors came out of the swamp to the sound of a shrilling war-whoop and commenced a brisk fire onto the troops. After fifteen to twenty minutes, the Miccosukees were thoroughly defeated. They killed one soldier and wounded two, but suffered eight deaths with many more wounded. The inhabitants fled Fowltown as the soldiers proceeded to pillage and burn down the settlement. **12**

David Mitchell, ex-governor of Georgia, gave a statement to a Senate hearing noting the role that Fowltown played in sparking the war:

“Of the three towns referred to, the Fowltown was one; but, before I had an opportunity of sending for those chiefs, or of taking any measures of meeting their proposition, General Gaines arrived with a detachment of troops from the west, sent for the chief of Fowltown, and for his contumacy for not immediately appearing before him, the town was attacked and destroyed by troops of the United States, by order of General Gaines. The fact was, I conceive, the immediate cause of the Seminole war. The reasons assigned for the destruction of Fowltown, in addition to the contumacy of the chief, were, the refusal of the chiefs of the Seminoles to give up some murderers, and the hostile aspect which they had assumed. Of this demand and refusal I know nothing more than what has been published; but truth compels me to say, that, before the attack on Fowltown, aggressions of this kind were as frequent on the part of the whites as on the part of the Indians, the evidence of which can be furnished from the files of the Executive of Georgia, to which I have before referred.” **13**

Several years before, James Monroe had commissioned David Mitchell to lead the Patriots in their invasion of Spanish Florida in place of George Matthews. The Patriots comprised of white Georgian settlers who burned and pillaged the main black and Seminole settlements in the Alachua region. Mitchell was well-aware that the current fighting that was taking place was part of an ongoing frontier war initiated by land-thieving white settlers and slave-raiders. What were typically called “savage depredations” and “barbaric savage acts” by US officials emanated from the Seminole and black retaliatory principle. Every act of murder or theft committed by the Seminoles, Red Stick Creeks, and blacks was retaliation for murders or thefts that the whites had perpetrated against them. Yet, in the minds of many US officials, natives had no right to kill whites or retaliate no matter what crimes they suffered. Taking this into consideration, it’s apparent that the Seminole War truly began with the “Negro Fort” massacre or even further back to when the marauding Patriots invaded Spanish Florida. That US aggression and atrocities began the conflict compromises the entire notion of American exceptionalism. That is why the official timeline of events for the Seminole War that many historians have constructed and accepted has only pointed to Seminole retaliatory acts as the cause of the war, ignoring US injustices and aggressions. Further testimony by Mitchell clarified the principle of Seminole retaliation:

“The peace of the Georgia frontier has always been exposed and disturbed, more or less, by acts of violence, committed as well by the whites as the Indians; and a spirit of retaliation has mutually prevailed. These petty acts of aggression were increased and multiplied by a set of lawless and abandoned characters, who had taken refuge on both sides of the St. Mary’s River, living principally by plunder. I believe the first outrage committed on the frontier of Georgia, after the treaty of Fort Jackson, was by these banditti, who plundered a party of the Seminole Indians, on their way to Georgia for the purpose of trade, and killed one of them. This produced retaliation on the part of the Indians, and hence the killing of Mrs. Garret and her child. The evidence of these plunderings and murders is on the files of the Executive of Georgia” **14**

As the military began mobilizing troops, supplies, and weapons on the north Florida border, the Seminoles and blacks initiated a series of raids to avenge their plight and prevent the US from strengthening its presence. The US presence at Fort Gaines had become increasingly ominous for the Seminoles and blacks. On November 30, a large party of Seminoles and blacks ambushed the expedition of Lieutenant Scott. Five hundred Seminoles and other “hostile” tribes had assembled one hundred and fifty yards along the shore of the Appalachicola River bank in preparation to attack the military boat under Scott’s command. They slaughtered 34 out of forty soldiers, along with several women and children on board. Gaines had sent the boat to transport military supplies to Fort Gaines to start preparations for the Florida offensive. **15** The intention of these weapons was to murder and enslave black and indigenous women and children for slaveholder profits. We can only imagine what the US military would have done if the blacks, Seminoles, and Red Sticks were amassing large quantities of weapons through shipping routes in US territory. Gaines broke out into a bitter, nonsensical rant after the report of the slaughter:

“I am now quite convinced that the hostility of these Indians is, and has long been, of so deep a character, as to leave no ground to calculate upon tranquility, or the future security of our frontier settlements, until the towns south and east of this place shall receive a signal of our ability and willingness to retaliate for every revenge... which leaves no doubt of the necessity of an immediate application of force.” **16**



Engraving of the rescue of captive Georgian militiaman Duncan McKrimmon during the First Seminole War, 1817-1818. Malee, daughter of Red Stick chief Francis Hillishago, pleads with her father for his life. A black Seminole is shown to the left. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

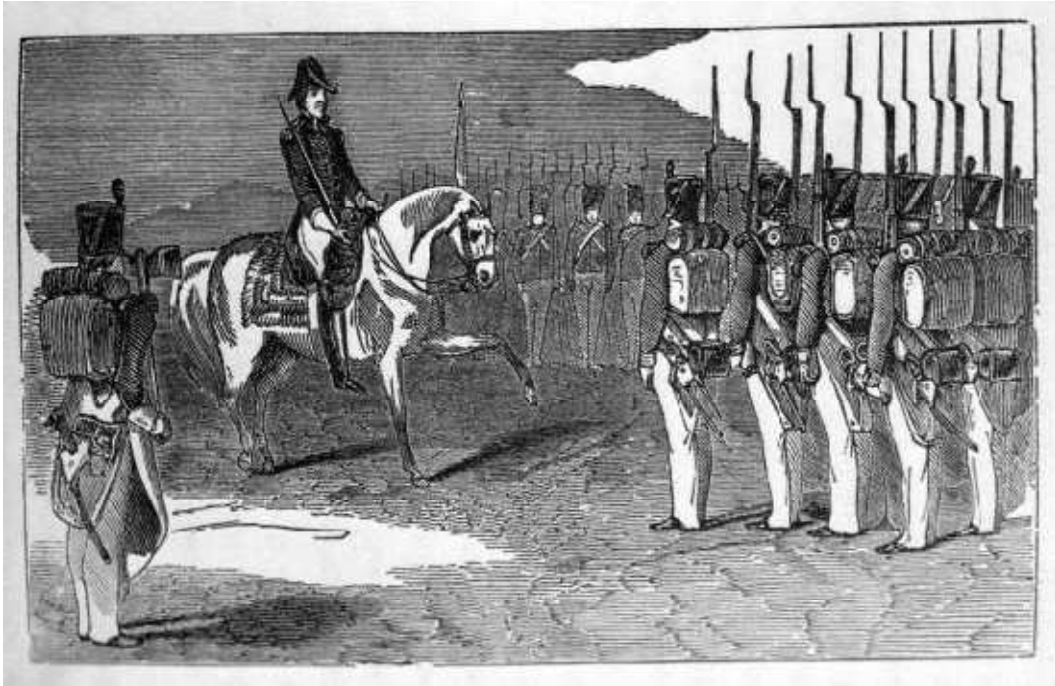
Media outlets and politicians all expressed their outrage and horror at the Lieutenant Scott massacre, calling for vengeance against the “atrocities” perpetrated by barbaric “savages.” But mention of the “Negro Fort” massacre was excluded by the media, politicians, and all who were interested in stirring up public support for war. The military mobilization for war on the Florida frontier, the white settler encroachment on lands, the burning of Fowltown, the “Negro Fort” massacre – none of these were included as background information on the Lieutenant Scott massacre. The official policy-makers kept the general population and most Congressional delegates unaware of the preceding events, leading many to safely assume that the Seminoles had suffered no prior wrongs. Speeches and discussions in public discourse would focus on the “savage barbarity” and “moral deprivation” of the Seminoles from this point. There was no mention of the “retaliation principle” or prior American aggression, only that of “unprovoked hostilities” perpetrated by “savage Indians and negroes.”

The blacks and Seminoles continued to resist US encroachment over the time period. On December 13, a party of twelve hundred blacks and Seminoles seized William

Hambly and Edmond Doyle, agents of Forbes and Company, on the Appalachicola River. The two men were responsible for providing intelligence to the US government that led to the “Negro Fort” massacre. They had also seized some of the runaway slaves who survived the explosion. At first they were transported to the Miccosukee towns, and then to the Suwannee settlements where most of surviving black inhabitants from the “Negro Fort” resided. British agent Alexander Arbuthnot advised that the two captives be handed over to the five or six Choctaws who survived the “Negro Fort” massacre to take their vengeance. But black chief Nero intervened to spare the two prisoners. Instead they were transported to St. Marks where the Seminoles and blacks kept them confined. The Spanish authorities had no power to override their imprisonment. **17**

On December 15, a transport under the command of Major P. Muhlenburg was attacked on the Appalachicola River by blacks and Seminoles who lined up both sides of the river. They maintained a constant fire with small arms and inflicted two deaths and thirteen injuries on the excursion. **18** In January 1818, Secretary of War John Calhoun wrote to General Gaines: “The honor of the United States requires that the war with the Seminoles should be terminated speedily, and with exemplary punishment, for hostilities so unprovoked.” **19** As politicians and newspapers condemned the “brutal savages” who failed to “abide by the laws of civilization,” a large gap existed in the official chain of events. Public consciousness was carefully synchronized to beat the drums of war. Calhoun gave instructions for an invasion of Florida if the Seminoles should fail to “make reparations” for “depredations” committed against the “citizens of the United States.” Calhoun ordered Andrew Jackson to take command of Fort Scott and concentrate his forces in preparation for war. **20** On March 25, President Monroe, acting on the “sacred right of self-defense,” effectively declared war on the Seminoles for their “unprovoked hostilities.” **21**

Andrew Jackson commanded a military force numbering eighteen hundred regulars and Georgian militiamen from Fort Scott across the Florida line. Fifteen hundred more were Lower Creek mercenaries under General McIntosh. Jackson called the conflict “a savage and negro war.” On April 1, the force moved upon the Miccosukee towns just thirty miles south of the Georgian border. A considerable number of black maroons inhabited some small villages around Miccosukee Lake. A mile and a half before the Miccosukee settlements, a small party of Seminoles and blacks confronted the US invaders, fighting together in their own separate regiments with their own officers. The battle was short but they put up enough resistance for Jackson to call in reinforcements before falling back. Fourteen of the warriors were left dead on the battlefield and four women were captured. The military arrived at the main town to find it completely



General Andrew Jackson reviewing troops during the First Seminole War, engraving from *Pictorial Life of Andrew Jackson*, John Frost, 1847.

abandoned. A collection of scalps found in the town were supposedly those of the soldiers killed at the Lieutenant Scott raid. **22** As they destroyed the Miccosukee settlements, thirty warriors were killed, including a great Miccosukee war chief. A total of sixty men, women, and children were seized. Jackson accounted for the pillage: “Three succeeding days we employed in scouring their country, burning their towns, and securing their corn and cattle, of which we found great abundance; upwards of three hundred houses have been consumed.” **23**

After the raids on the Miccosukee towns, General Jackson proceeded to the Spanish fort at St. Marks, some fifty miles southwest of Miccosukee Lake, where the black maroons and Seminoles had used for safe refuge and headquarters. He once again attempted to justify the invasion in a letter to the Spanish governor there, claiming that the purpose of the excursion was

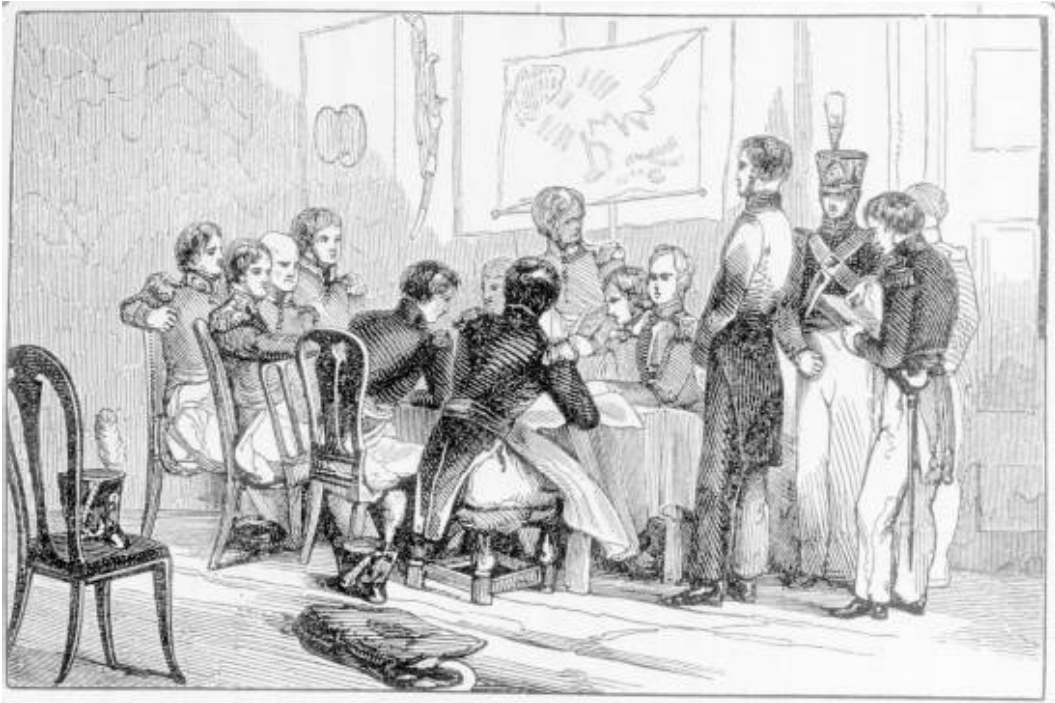
“to chastise a savage foe, who, combined with a lawless band of Negro brigands, have for some time past been carrying on a cruel and unprovoked war against the

citizens of the United States, has compelled the President to direct me to march my army into Florida.” **24**

Once Jackson reached St. Marks, he seized the city without resistance. He immediately began imprisoning anybody suspected of supporting the Seminoles, Red Sticks, and blacks. Jackson ordered Captain McEver’s naval forces to cruise the Florida coast and capture anybody found along the way. McEver’s ship, adorning a British flag as a decoy, successfully lured two influential Red Stick Creek chiefs on board. One was Francis Hillishago, a Creek prophet thought to be inspired by Tecumseh, and the other was Himollemico, an old, influential Creek chief. The two important Red Stick Creek leaders had fled to Florida after their defeat against Andrew Jackson only several years prior. After taking them prisoner aboard the ship, Jackson took them ashore and had them hung as examples for others who would resist the United States. Jackson referred to them as the “prime instigators” of the war and claimed that they were responsible for the massacre of Lieutenant Scott’s command. **25** There was no trial or hearings for the two chiefs, only cold-blooded execution.

Jackson also arrested British official Alexander Arbuthnot, a “foreign agent” who had “instigated” the Seminoles to “hostile relations” with the United States. Arbuthnot was imprisoned at St. Marks for providing the Seminoles and blacks with military provisions and information. Arbuthnot had forewarned the settlement on the Suwannee of the encroaching military force and its intention to destroy them. His compatriot, Robert Ambrister, was a British marine veteran notorious for arming the black warriors at the Suwannee. Shortly after, Ambrister was imprisoned when he was found commanding an armed schooner on the Suwannee River. Both men were initially commissioned by General Woodbine to attend to the black community established at Tampa Bay. Of course, Jackson couldn’t consider the idea that white settlers who consistently raided the Seminole lands could have possibly been responsible for provoking the “hostilities.” It must have been “outside agitators” who “provoked the savages and negroes.” It was a common belief among US officials that native and slave revolts were facilitated by instigation from hostile whites because the feeble-minded people of color could not possibly form their own opinions and ideas. Shortly after the war, a trial was held in a kangaroo court set up by General Jackson. Both were initially found guilty and sentenced to execution. But members of the court reconsidered Ambrister’s execution and sentenced him to fifty lashes and a year’s term of imprisonment. This was until Jackson intervened to oppose the alteration of his sentence.





Trial of Ambrister during the Seminole War, engraving from *Pictorial Life of Andrew Jackson*, John Frost, 1847.

On April 26<sup>th</sup>, the two “foreign agents” were both sentenced to death. Several days later they were both summarily executed. **26**

Before his arrest, Arburthnot had advocated the Seminole cause and spoke up for native rights, testifying to the horrors of US aggression that had been perpetrated against the Seminoles and blacks:

“I am in hopes that those aggressions of the Americans on the Indians are not countenanced by the American government, but originate with men devoid of principle, who set laws and destructions at defiance, and stick at no cruelty and oppression to obtain their ends. Against such oppressions the American Government must not use only their influence, but, if necessary, force, or their names will be handed down to posterity as a nation more cruel and savage to the unfortunate aborigines of this country, than ever were the Spaniards in more dark ages to the nations of South America.” **27**

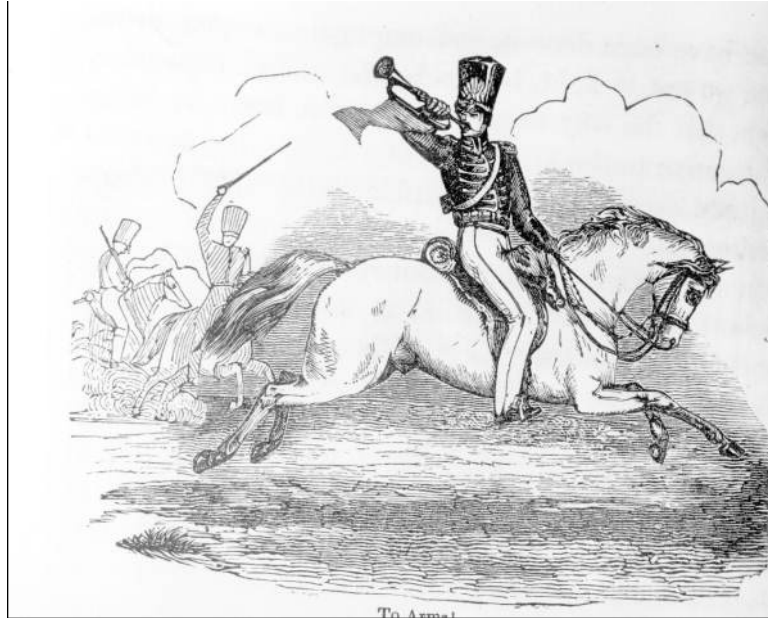
Brigadier General William McIntosh and his regiment of two thousand Lower Creek mercenaries embarked on a different route from Jackson to raid Seminole, Red Stick, and black towns in Florida. First they commenced from Fort Mitchell to the Chattahoochee River and arrived at a town called Red Ground, capturing 53 warriors and 180 women and children. Red Ground and thirty of his warriors escaped on horseback. After taken into captivity, ten of the Red Stick warriors were killed attempting to escape. On the march to the Suwannee, the pro-white Creeks encountered a force of two hundred Red Stick Creek, Seminole, and black warriors under Red Stick leader Peter McQueen, killing 37 warriors and capturing six along with 106 women and children. **28** The Coweta Creeks were once again promised reward for retrieving fugitive slaves. General Richard K. Call gave profitable incentives for these pro-white Creek slave raiders:

“That the property taken at Suwannee consisted principally of horses and cattle; that the army subsisted on the cattle; and that the property was given to the friendly Indians; and that the negroes taken were given to the Indians; that, as he understood, Colonel Arbuckle gave 50 dollars a head to the Indians for every negro delivered to him at Fort Gadsden, intending to deliver them to the owners when called for.” **29**

In this account it becomes obvious that the main intention of the war was to “return the stolen property and negroes to their former owners.”

As the Creek volunteers and Tennessee militiamen made their way to the Suwannee, they committed atrocities on random groups of Seminole women and children. Thomas Woodward recalled one instance:

“On our march from St. Marks to Sawany, the old half-breed, Blount, and I were ahead, and discovered some Indians that were cutting a bee tree. We halted for the purpose of getting some friendly Indians to surround them, but some of the Tennessee mounted men came up, and we pointed them out and requested the mounted men to wait until the friendly Indians could come up — that it was possible the bee-hunters might be friendly Indians; but they made a rush upon the Indians, who proved to be three men, a woman and two children; they made no resistance, but the mounted men killed one of the men, broke another's thigh, shot the woman through the body, shot off the under jaw of one of the children, and broke an arm of the other — the third man made his escape. On my return by the place, the woman



An army bugler blowing the cavalry charge in the Seminole War, engraving from *Pictorial Life of Andrew Jackson*, John Frost, 1847.

and one child were lying dead — the child with the broken arm, and the one with his thigh broke, had left.” **30**

On April 16, Jackson’s forces and McIntosh’s Creeks rapidly approached forward to the black and Seminole settlements at the Suwannee River. When the US forces entered Florida, Alexander Arbuthnot noted: “the main drift of the Americans is to destroy the black population of Suwannee.” In Arbuthnot’s message to his friend head chief Bowlegs, he forewarned him that “it is throwing away his people to attempt to resist such a powerful force” and insisted that he “get all the goods over the river in a place of security.” **31** Once they received the warning from Arbuthnot, the blacks “began to prepare for the enemy, and the removal of their families and effects across the river.” **32** The Seminole and black regiments elected their own separate leaders and officers to command them. **33** The commander of the black regiment was a black Seminole named Nero, a highly regarded “slave” owned by Bowlegs. According to one testimony, “Nero commanded the blacks, and was owned and commanded by Bowlegs; but there were some negro captains who obeyed none but Nero.” **34**

The blacks now made their defensive stand at the Suwannee River. The Seminole and black forces openly faced the advancing army on separate wings, the Seminole warriors on the right and the black warriors on the left. Many of the women and children had prepared for evacuation in anticipation of the US attack, gathering their goods and necessities for escape to the east bank of the river. Fearing the enslavement of their women and children, the blacks had no option but to fight to the death. They clashed with the Creek mercenaries and Jackson's forces at Bowlegs Town. Although vastly outnumbered, the black regiment fought so hard that they initially repelled Jackson's right flank, composed of Tennessee militia and McIntosh's Creeks. But the Seminoles gave way to Jackson's left flank, allowing for a general charge to route the black regiment and forcing the blacks to fall back. In the clash, eighty warriors were left dead on the field. Although highly outnumbered, the resolute stance of the black warriors allowed their families to successfully cross the river and escape to safety, before they themselves retreated and swam across the river. Thomas Woodward, a veteran of Jackson's campaign in Florida, recalled that the "severest brush that I was engaged in during the campaign, was at the Negro Village, near Bowlegs' Town, on the Sawanee." **35** Jackson now ordered the army to burn the abandoned town and the Seminole villages in the vicinity, some three hundred homes. Jackson's forces captured three hundred Seminole women and children, but none of the black civilians. The Creeks gave pursuit of the blacks without success, their provisions and munitions having been exhausted by this time. **36** McIntosh was disappointed that so many potential slaves escaped and Jackson realized that he failed to achieve the major objective of the war.

Jackson returned to St. Marks following the battle. On May 24, Jackson marched to Pensacola with the pretext of "finally closing" the Seminole war. There had been reports of "hostile Indians" in Pensacola but the actual black and Seminole resistance to the US military had already been repressed after the battle of Suwannee. Jackson intended to completely seize Florida for its acquisition into the United States. The Spanish governor Jose Masot threatened to "repel force by force" but Jackson entered and took Pensacola with little resistance. **37** His response to Governor Masot was typical Jackson rhetoric:

"The Southern frontier of the United States has, for more than twelve months, been exposed to all the horrors of a cruel and savage war. A party of outlaws and refugees from the Creek nation; negroes who have fled from their masters, citizens of the United States, and sought an asylum in Florida; and the Seminole Indians inhabiting the territory of Spain, all uniting, have raised the tomahawk, and, in the character of



001\_002\_2.21 Engraving. Reproduced from *History of the United States*, by Benson S. Lossing.  
 Jackson and his troops triumphant at Pensacola. Source: *American Historical Images on File: The Native American Experience*.

savage warfare, have neither regarded sex nor age. Helpless women have been massacred, and the cradle crimsoned with the blood of innocence.” **38**

After seizing Pensacola, Jackson planned to take drastically escalate his Florida campaign. He asked President Monroe permission to completely end Spanish rule in Florida through reinforcements and provisions. He told Monroe he could easily take St. Augustine and promised: “I will insure you Cuba in a few days.” **39** US expansionists desired to acquire Cuba for the United States perhaps even more so than Florida. Not only would it guarantee privileged strategic access to the Caribbean and control over its vast sugar plantations, but expand slavery outside of main land America. However, the controversy stirred from Jackson’s violation of international law had alarmed the expansionists of the Monroe Administration. Monroe turned down Jackson’s request with the explanation that it would upset prospects for peaceful negotiations with Spain to acquire the Florida territory. The US returned St. Marks and Pensacola to Spain afterwards, but this was only a momentary measure until Florida would be acquired diplomatically.

## Aftermath of the Seminole War

Jackson's Florida campaign received mixed reviews. To the land speculators, slaveholders, and expansionists he made way for the United States to acquire the long-awaited Florida province, opening up a vast strip of cheap, profitable cotton land in Florida for exploitation and vanquishing the threat to their slave property. The planters along the borders of Alabama and Georgia now felt safer to expand operations into Florida. Nevertheless, there was concern over the war in Washington. Congressional hearings were called to investigate Jackson's unauthorized invasion, violation of Constitutional law, intrusion on Spanish soil, and illegal execution of British prisoners. There were concerns that Jackson's actions would provoke international conflict with Spain and Britain. However, most criticism was kept within acceptable bounds, ignoring the larger and more pertinent questions of slavery, Manifest Destiny, and native extermination. The hearings, while critical of Jackson, rarely questioned the true causes of the war. Some felt that Jackson simply had too much power for a military general. His unauthorized, unilateral invasion and disregard for judicial process appeared parallel to the military dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte. Henry Clay believed that Jackson's unilateral measures were "pure intentioned" and "patriotic" but also set the precedent for military rule:

"Beware how you give a fatal sanction, in this infant period of our Republic, to military insubordination. Remember that Greece had her Alexander, Rome her Caesar, England her Cromwell, France her Bonaparte, and that it we would escape the rock on which they split we must avoid their errors." **40**

Others expressed their outrage at his violation of international law, unilateral action, and immoral, unjust execution of war captives through extrajudicial proceedings. Pennsylvanian delegate Abner Lacock told the Congressional hearings:

"Humanity shudders at the idea of a cold-blooded execution of prisoners disarmed, and in the power of the conqueror... The weakness of the Spanish authorities is urged in justification of this outrage upon our constitution. And is the weaknesses of an independent power to disparage their neutral rights, or furnish pretences for a powerful neighbor to weaken them further by hostile aggressions? And is it thus we are to be furnished, by an American officer, with a justification for the

dismemberment of Poland, the capture of the Danish fleet by Great Britain , and the subjugation of Europe by Bonaparte?" **41**

But the two executed Red Stick chiefs were rarely discussed. As long as Congressional discussion strayed from mention of slavery, the crux of Jackson's campaign, the debates had no long-term effect on US policy. The "Negro Fort" massacre and Fowltown were rarely mentioned at all. There was one exception. The only speaker in the Congressional debate who had the tenacity to denounce the slaughter at the "Negro Fort" was Virginia delegate Charles F. Mercer:

"It has not, and I presume will not be pretended, that the destruction of the negro and Indian fort near the mouth of the Appalachicola, was required by any absolute necessity...If the alleged reason for this wanton injustice were deemed sufficient to warrant it, "that the fort had become a refuge for runaway negroes and disaffected Indians," where would it carry us? With what neighboring nation, civilized or savage, could we preserve relations of amity? Will it be pretended that we have a right to punish disaffection in those who owe us no allegiance; or to recover by violence the persons of our fugitives, whether bond or free? The attempt to gloss over this cruelty by the suggestion that the force of the miserable negroes was "daily increasing, and that the fertile banks of the Appalachicola were about to yield them every article of subsistence," is calculated to shed additional horror over a transaction wanton in its motive, and savage in its execution. A war upon the peaceful negro settlements on the Wabash would be equally politic, and, in principle, alike justifiable. I have thus traced the Seminole war, Mr. Chairman, to the unauthorized invasion of East Florida in 1816." **42**

But Jackson escaped any true repercussions for his actions. At first, the Monroe Administration was reluctant to openly voice its support for Jackson's invasion. Only Secretary of State John Quincy Adams gave a principled defense of his campaign. Luis De Onis, Minister of Spain, angrily wrote to Adams about Jackson's campaign of "excessive aggression, unexampled in the history of nations." Secretary of State Adams wrote Minister Onis back to call his attention "to a series of events which necessitated and justified the entrance of the troops of the United States upon the Spanish border of Florida...the aggravations and horrors of savage cruelty, by Seminole Indians, and by a banditti of negroes sallying from within the Spanish border." **43** Jackson's invasion had produced results favorable for the expansionist goals of the Monroe Administration, who

proceeded to quietly endorse his invasion. Jackson had finally convinced Spain of its inability to manage its colonial hold over the Florida territory, something that was long desired by the expansionists in the administration.

Jackson's expansionist moves did not cease for the time being. Jackson's policy was to act first and let everybody complain about it afterwards. In August 1818, months after the war had ended, Jackson ordered Gaines to "proceed to, take, and garrison, Fort St. Augustine with American troops, and hold the garrison prisoners until you hear from the President of the United States." **44** Jackson sought expansion and direct US control over Florida through forceful takeover. He gave this command without authorization, strikingly similar to his earlier invasion of Florida. Red Stick Creek chief Peter McQueen and his followers had formed a settlement on the Suwannee River after US military operations formally came to a halt. Jackson also ordered Gaines to destroy this settlement: "I trust before this reaches you, you will destroy the settlement collected at Suwany; this can easily be done by a coup de main, provided secrecy of your movements be observed, and great expedition of march used." **45** Secretary of War John C. Calhoun blocked Jackson from commissioning any further military operations that could result in international conflict. He wrote to Gaines: "orders in relation to St. Augustine were given... You will accordingly, not carry that part of Jackson's order into execution." **46** Yet Calhoun did not repudiate the part of Jackson's command that ordered Gaines to strike the Red Stick Creek settlement assembled along the Suwannee River. Jackson's determination to obliterate remaining pockets of black and native resistance would culminate into a devastating raid on the black Angola settlement in South Florida.

The Monroe Administration believed in US expansion into Florida, obliterating the Seminoles, and enslaving the blacks among them. However, they approached international matters with caution, opposed to the "guns blazing" foreign policy of Andrew Jackson. In turn, Jackson was avidly opposed to the "third, temporizing means" of the Monroe Administration. **47** The more sophisticated men of the ruling class understood that diplomatic means were often more efficient. But US expansionism, Indian Removal, and slavery never came into question in orthodox political discourse. Calhoun and other top officials in the Administration were aggressive imperialists like Jackson; they just approached matters more cautiously. Calhoun wrote to Jackson:

"I concur in the view which you have taken...and such, I believe, is the opinion of every member of the administration...it appears to me that a certain degree of caution ought, at this time, to mark our policy. A war with Spain...such a war would not continue long without involving other parties...if it can be prudently and



honorably avoided for the present, it ought to be. We want time-time to grow, to perfect our fortifications, to enlarge our navy, to replenish our depots, and to pay our debts.” **48**

In 1819, Spain ceded Florida over to the United States. History textbooks recount the event as if the US had purchased Spain for five million dollars. A brief analysis of the treaty between the US and Spain easily debunks this myth. Article eleven of the Adams-Onís Treaty absolved Spain for any damage claims made by their citizens, giving a five million dollar maximum limitation on the amount that the US government could be held responsible to pay the claimants. But there was no proposition to purchase Florida for five million dollars. Textbook historians and propagandists still attempt to give a strand of legitimacy to the US acquisition of Florida by calling it a “purchase.” The pact with Spain did include a provision that guaranteed protection and rights for the territory’s inhabitants:

“The inhabitants of the Territories which His Catholic Majesty cedes to the United States by this Treaty, shall be incorporated in the Union of the United States, as soon as may be consistent with the principles of the Federal Constitution, and admitted to the enjoyment of all privileges, rights and immunities of the Citizens of the United States.” **49**

While this would later allow the free blacks of St. Augustine and Pensacola to retain their freedom under the slave regime, little regard was given to the black maroons and Seminoles. This treaty provision had obvious loopholes. Georgian white settlers did not consider the Seminoles as legitimately independent from the Creek Federation. Therefore, they were not the “rightful inhabitants” of Florida. This official doctrine, to be used or discarded selectively over time, ignored the fact that the Seminoles had declared independence from the Creeks over seventy years before. They also ignored that Seminole independence had been a slow process of establishing autonomy on the periphery of the Creek Federation. The policy makers insisted that the Seminoles were outlaws who “fled” from the Creek Federation. Thus the US government held the Creeks accountable for the Seminoles, attempting to enforce dubious reparations through treaty. White planters could also work their way around the treaty provision by ignoring the fact that the black Seminoles were not recent runaways, but residents who had established themselves in Florida for over a century.

In 1821, the US acquired five million acres of the best Creek land through the Treaty of Indian Springs. The Creek nation would receive 450,000 dollars in payments over a period of 14 years. But they were forced to pay 250,000 dollars out of their annuity to the state of Georgia as reparations for the claims of “lost property” of runaway slaves in the Seminole territory. The Georgia commissioners wrote to the Creeks: “As the negroes now remaining among the Seminoles, now belonging to the white people, we consider those people (the Seminoles) a part of the Creek nation; and we look for the chiefs of the Creek nation to cause the people there, as well as the people of the Upper Towns, to do justice.” **50** The wealthy Creek chiefs, already participants in the “Negro Fort” massacre, various slave raids, and the Seminole War, had transformed into an army of determined slave catchers. They now legally claimed the blacks in Seminole territory as their own property and would become the primary antagonists towards their freedom. Despite receiving compensation for their fugitives, Georgian white settlers would continue to claim ownership of blacks in Seminole territory as well.

Official authority over Florida was not granted to the US until 1821. Worst of all, Andrew Jackson was granted the seat of Provisional Governor over Florida, only dampening the outlook for the scattered black maroons and Seminoles of Florida. The acquisition of Florida was important first and foremost for the expansion of slavery. As Joshua R. Giddings put it, “The final ratification of the treaty by which Spain ceded the Floridas to the United States constituted one of the important incidents in the regime of slavery during the year 1821.” **51** With the growing presence of Anglo slaveholders in the new territory, the US government could no longer tolerate the continued existence of independent Seminole, Red Stick Creek, or black maroon communities. The most difficult obstacle in the way of subjugating the Seminoles was their black maroon allies. Jean A. Penieres, Sub-agent for Indian affairs in Florida, gave the first official account of the problem that the free black maroons could pose in controlling the Seminoles:

“We must add to this enumeration.... fifty or sixty Negroes, or mulattos, who are maroons, or half slaves to the Indians. These Negroes appeared to me far more intelligent than those who are in absolute slavery; and they have great influence over the minds of the Indians. It will be difficult to form a prudent determination with respect to the maroon Negroes who live among the Indians on the other side of the little mountains of Latchiove. Their number is said to be upward of three hundred. They fear again being made slaves under the American government and will omit nothing to increase or keep alive mistrust among the Indians, whom they in fact govern. If it should become necessary to use force with them, it is to be feared that

the Indians will take their part. It will, however, be necessary to remove from Florida this lawless group of free booters, among whom runaway Negroes will always find refuge. It would perhaps be possible to have them received at St. Domingo, or furnish them the means of withdrawing themselves from the United States.” 52

Jackson concurred with Penieres’ proposal to remove the black Seminoles from Florida and proposed the establishment of a military base at Picolata to prevent fugitive slaves from escaping into Seminole territory:

“This must be done, or the frontier will be much weakened by the Indian settlements, and be a perpetual harbor for our slaves. These runaway slaves, spoken of by Mr. Penieres, must be removed from the Floridas, or scenes of murder and confusion will exist and lead to unhappy consequences that can’t be controlled.” 53

Jackson’s determination to destroy the black Seminole maroons culminated into the covert assault on the Angola settlement in Sarasota. As Seminoles were constrained in a reservation for the next fifteen years, Florida’s Indian Agents consistently demanded Seminole chiefs to hand over runaway slaves. This policy was first instituted by the War Department in 1821. In a letter to Florida Indian Agent Captain John Bell, Secretary of War John Calhoun noted: “The government expects that the Slaves who have run away or been plundered from our Citizens or from Indian tribes within our limits will be given up peaceably by the Seminole Indians when demanded.” 54

### **The Onslaught of Angola**

As white settlers flocked into the Florida territory and the US military uprooted them from their communities and native lands, the dispossessed Seminoles and blacks relocated across the Florida territory in hopes of finding a safe area of refuge from the whites. But while attempting to return to the peace and stability of their daily lives, the chaos failed to end with the US acquisition of Florida in 1821. Many blacks escaped from the Suwannee settlement to the Tampa Bay region and joined the sizable maroon community that existed on the Manatee River. Throughout the recent chapters, the Tampa Bay area has constantly been alluded to as a safe-haven for black fugitives. Most historians of the time typically account for the black communities around the “Negro Fort” and the Suwannee River, but lesser-known is the massive black settlement of

Angola. Some of the first black refugees had arrived to the Tampa Bay region after the Revolutionary War. But the first large influx of black and Seminole refugees into South Florida occurred amidst the Patriot invasion of their towns in the Alachua region. In January 1813, shortly before the Patriots made the final assault on the Alachua settlements, Benjamin Hawkins reported that the Seminoles and blacks were fleeing to southwest Florida in anticipation of the attack:

“I received from an Indian of note...the following information...Paine is dead of his wounds...the warring Indians have quit this settlement, and gone down to Tellaugue Chapcopo, a creek which enters the ocean south of Moscheto river, at a place called the Fishery. Such of their stock as they could command have been driven in that direction, and the negroes were going the same way. The lands beyond the creek towards Florida point, were, for a considerable distance, open savannas, with ponds; and, still beyond the land, stony, to the point.” **55**

Hawkins later reported: “The negroes now separated and at a distance from the Indians on the Hammocks or the Hammoc not far from Tampa bay,” after they fled the Patriots invasion. **56** Hawkins was alluding to the Peace River where it flows into Charlotte Harbor near present-day Punta Gorda. The “Fishery” he mentioned was the Cuban fishery located on Charlotte Harbor. For years, many natives from all across the Southeast would travel down to South Florida during the winter to plentiful hunting grounds and exchange deerskins and various others crafted items for trade goods with the Cuban fishing ranchos established all along the Gulf Coast of Florida. The Seminole town of Talakchopco was located on the main crossing point of the Peace River and served as a way station for natives passing into and out of the hunting grounds. After the destruction of their towns in Alachua during the Patriot War, it also served as the main area of refuge and relief for the starving and destitute Seminoles, while their black allies established themselves in a separate location to the north. **57**

In 1815, after Nichols left the “Negro Fort,” some of the blacks no longer felt secure with the absence of a British military force. Woodbine left the “Negro Fort” with about two hundred blacks to relocate them to some plantations south of Tampa Bay. Still more had fled down south to the area after the “Negro Fort” massacre. Some of these slaves belonged to John Forbes & Company and the company papers complain of their fugitive slaves having left the area to both Tampa Bay and Suwannee after the fort’s destruction. According to historians William S. Coker and Thomas D. Watson, “other

slaves joined the blacks on the Suwannee and some fled as far south as Tampa,” after the fort’s obliteration. **58** There fugitive slaves and black maroons from Alachua, Miccosukee, and Suwannee established a flourishing, autonomous community and cultivated the fields along the Manatee River, present day Sarasota-Bradenton area. This community was called “Angola” by Cuban fisherman and was the last remaining stronghold for the black maroons in Florida. The name “Angola” was probably ascribed because many of the blacks were West Africans who had been shipped into the Carolinian plantations. They applied an assortment of West African agricultural techniques to cultivate vast acres of plantation land, learned from centuries of inherited traditions. In 1821, a South Florida Expeditionary mapped out the region. The map chart was entitled: “A draft of Sarrazota, or Runaway Negro Plantations.” **59**

With the loss of black and native power in north and central Florida, various black, Seminole, Red Stick, and Spanish settlements became well-established on the southwest Florida Gulf Coast, stretching from Tampa Bay down to present-day Ft. Myers. The Angola community, approximately located in present-day Sarasota-Bradenton area, became the main refuge for blacks escaping the onslaught of white slave raiders. Its population varied between 750 and 900 residents. The accounts of the Creek raid on Angola, which recorded the combined number of refugees with enslaved captives, suggest that its population numbered at least around six or seven hundred at the time of its destruction. The Red Stick Creek followers of Peter McQueen also found refuge forty miles to the south at the Seminole village of Talakchopco on the Peace River. British official George Woodbine chose to relocate the blacks from the “Negro Fort” to Tampa Bay because of its extremely fertile lands, optimal trading location, and safe distance from slave raiders. Angola’s location also gave the blacks easy access to the Caribbean trade. According to one report of Tampa Bay: “This is an extensive bay, and capable of admitting ships of any size, contiguous to which are the finest lands in East Florida, which Woodbine pretends belong to him by virtue of a grant from the Indians.” **60**

In 1817, there were intelligence reports that Woodbine was amassing a large band of Seminole and black allies in Tampa Bay for the purpose of invading and seizing St. Augustine. This was reportedly intended to prevent the United States from taking acquisition of the territory rather than out of any direct animosity against Spanish rule. The rumors never materialized though. **61** Arbuthnot and Ambrister, the two British officials executed under Jackson’s orders, had supported the blacks at Angola with weapons and trade under the orders of Woodbine. Robert Ambrister was commissioned to ensure that the blacks that Woodbine left at Angola were secure. A witness at his trial reported: “I frequently heard him say he came to attend to Mr. Woodbine’s business at

the bay of Tamper.” The same with Arbuthnot: “The prisoner was sent by Woodbine to Tampa, to see about those negroes he had left there.” **62** In 1837, John Lee Williams made observations of ruins left behind from the Angola community as he extensively explored the Manatee River: “The point between these two rivers is called Negro Point. The famous Arbuthnot and Ambrister had at one time a plantation here cultivated by two hundred negroes. The ruins of their cabins, and domestic utensils are still seen on the old fields.” **63**

The Manatee River was not only an extremely fertile, easily defensible location but an optimal site for communication and trade with the British Empire and Spanish Empire in Cuba. Its proximity to the Spanish fisheries ensured that the blacks would have access to foreign markets for their agricultural goods, fish, and timber. This also gave the blacks and Seminoles access to updated arms and ammunition from Cuba. Still fearful of a renewed US attack, the defensible, fortified, and armed Angola settlement proved the most logical site of relocation for blacks from the Suwannee River. Captain James Gadsden, aide to Jackson in his Florida campaign, reported back to Jackson about the importance of establishing Tampa Bay as a maritime depot:

“It is the last rallying spot of the disaffected negroes and Indians and the only favorable point from whence a communication can be had with Spanish and European emissaries. Nichols it is reported has an establishment in that neighborhood and the negroes and Indians driven from Micosukey and Suwaney towns have directed their march to that quarter.” **64**

The natives and blacks were establishing themselves at Angola as if they were anticipating some sort of last stand against the US military. They began arming themselves through their Spanish and British trading partners. With reports of Spanish provision of armaments, General Gaines offered to “do what can be done with the limited means under my control, and strike at any force that may present itself.” **65** It was reported that the Seminoles had also procured “some provisions and ammunition” from “an English trading vessel” at Tampa Bay. According to Gaines, the Spanish “furnished hostile Indians, at the bay of Tampa, with ten horseloads of ammunition, recommending to them united and vigorous operations against us.” **66**

Jackson focused on establishing and increasing the military force in Tampa with five hundred regulars. This would be to “insure tranquility in the south.” The detachment was intended to destroy “Woodbine’s negro establishment.” **67** Col. Robert Butler

reported that the blacks were fortifying themselves at Tampa Bay in anticipation of a US attack. **68** Jackson had remained adamant in his goal to obliterate independent black, Seminole, and Red Stick settlements throughout the peninsula. Calhoun failed to authorize Jackson the use of direct military force in Florida. He knew that any further incursions into the Florida peninsula would possibly put a damper on negotiations with Spain for its acquisition. Angola had secured itself for the time-being. This was until Jackson was granted governorship of the Florida territory early in 1821. On April 2, 1821, Andrew Jackson requested instruction from Secretary of State John Quincy Adams on the removal of the Red Stick and black settlements in the Tampa Bay region. **69** Before he received an answer, Jackson would take action into his own hands.

Geopolitical intrigue in Florida intended to kill two birds with one stone: defeating insubordinate natives and preventing fugitive slaves from finding safe-haven. In late April 1821, William McIntosh, Jackson-appointed brigadier general, ordered a war party of Coweta Creeks into Florida to eliminate the Red Stick Creek settlements and enslave the blacks at Angola. A force of two hundred Coweta Creeks was commissioned under the command of William Weatherford and Charles Miller, pro-white Creek chiefs who were closely associated with McIntosh. An “eye-witness,” possibly a participant in the incursion, described the purpose of the raid in the editorial columns of the *Charleston Gazette*:

“Towards the end of the month of April last, some men of influence and fortune, residing somewhere in the western country, thought of making a speculation in order to obtain Slaves for a trifle. They hired Charles Miller, William Weatherford [and others], and under these chiefs, were engaged about two hundred Cowetas Indians. They were ordered to proceed along the western coast of East Florida, southerly, and there take, in the name of the United States, and make prisoners of all the men of colour, including women and children, they would be able to find, and bring them all, well secured, to a certain place, which has been kept a secret.” **70**

Describing the raid and its purpose, Creek Agent John Crowell wrote in a letter to John Calhoun:

“Some short time previous to my coming into this agency, the chiefs, had organized a Regt. of Indian Warriors, and sent them into Florida in pursuit of negroes that had escaped from their owners, in the Creek nation as well as such as had run off from



Portrait of William McIntosh. Source: *American Historical Images on File: The Native American Experience*.

their owners in the States; this detachment has recently returned, bringing with them, to this place fifty nine negroes, besides about twenty delivered to their respective owners on their march up.” **71**

The raiders wrecked havoc throughout Florida until they launched a surprise attack on Angola and devastated the settlement. The Creek raiders captured over three hundred of the black inhabitants, plundered their plantations, and set fire to all of their homes. Afterwards, the war party made its way south and plundered the Spanish fishery ranchos at the Caloosahatchee River. Most of the three hundred prisoners taken in the raid disappeared as the Creek party made their way back to the United States. The “eyewitness” in the *Charleston Gazette* detailed the raid of Angola and other southwest Florida settlements:



“They arrived at Sazazota, surprised and captured about 300 of them, plundered their plantations, set on fire all their houses, and then proceeding southerly captured several others; and on the 17th day of June, arrived at the Spanish Ranches, in Pointerrass Key, in Carlos Bay, where not finding as many Negroes as they expected, they plundered the Spanish fishermen of more than 2000 dollars worth of property, besides committing the greatest excess. With their plunder and prisoners, they returned to the place appointed for the deposit of both.” **72**

The aftermath of the Coweta Creek raid was chaotic for the black maroons, Seminoles, and Red Stick Creeks in the Florida territory. Settlements were scattered, refugees fled into different areas, and others, having grown tired of the constant terror of US aggression, escaped the country. While some remained behind under the protection of Spanish gunboats, about three hundred refugees left on canoes to the Florida Keys and escaped to the Bahamas on British wrecking vessels. The “eye-witness” detailed the aftermath of the assault:

“The terror thus spread along the Western Coast of East Florida, broke all the establishments of both blacks and Indians, who fled in great consternation. The blacks principally, thought they could not save their lives but by abandoning the country; therefore, they, by small parties and in their Indian canoes, doubled Cape Sable and arrived at Key Taviniere, which is the general place of rendezvous for all the English wreckers [those who profited from recovery of shipwreck property], from Nassau, Providence; an agreement was soon entered into between them, and about 250 of these negroes were by the wreckers carried to Nassau and clandestinely landed.” **73**

A Florida observer wrote that some the blacks from the “Negro Fort”, along with runaway slaves from Florida and other Southern states,

“formed considerable settlements on the waters of Tampa Bay. When the Indians went in pursuit of these negroes, such as escaped made their way down to cape Florida and the reef, about which they collected within a year and a half upwards of three hundred; vast numbers of them have been at different times since carried off by the Bahama wreckers to Nassau.” **74**

After the assault, some blacks armed themselves and remained isolated in the southwest region of the state under the protection of Spanish traders. Some Florida residents petitioned the President to “retain their property” that escaped to an island or cluster of islands off the Florida west coast and were “protected by an armed banditti.” **75** In July, a small party of destitute Seminoles made their way to St. Augustine, informing Capt. John R. Bell that “very recently a party of Indians (Cawetus) said to be headed by McIntosh came into their neighborhood and had taken off a considerable number of negroes and some Indians, that the commander of party had sent them information that in a short time he should return and drive all the Indians off.” **76** Bell denied that the party was authorized by Jackson or any higher authorities, but failed to make a note that McIntosh was Jackson’s close ally who had even served under Jackson in his Florida campaign.

A mass exodus of blacks took place from the Keys to the Bahamas. James Forbes reported that runaway blacks were amassed at Cape Florida: “At this key, which presents a mass of mangroves, there were lately about sixty Indians, and as many runaway negroes, in search of sustenance, and twenty-seven sail of Bahaman wreckers.” **77** Florida officials were not merely satisfied with the blacks taken during the Coweta raid. In 1823, Governor Duval wrote to Calhoun in apprehension of fugitive blacks escaping to the Bahamas from Angola:

“I have been informed by Gentlemen upon whom I can rely, that there are about ninety negros, fugitives from this Province and the neighboring States, on St. Andrews Island one of the Bahamas, & about thirty more on the Great Bahamas & the neighboring Islands, those Negros went from Tampa Bay, & Charlotte Harbour, in boats to the Florida Keys from whence they were taken to the Bahamas by the Providence Wreckers. The slaves might be obtained, if Com. Porter be ordered to demand them from the authorities at those Islands.” **78**

James Forbes also wrote a letter to Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, reporting that the Seminoles “apprehend some disturbance from the Cowetas. These last are said to have been at Tampa about 200 strong and taken from thence about 120 Negroes after destroying four Spanish settlements there.” **79**

Calhoun shouldered the blame of the illegal incursion onto “rogue” Creek chiefs, although these pro-white Lower Creek chiefs had been allies of the US government for

some years now. He purposely avoided mentioning Jackson as the possible culprit for organizing it, his resolution to destroy “Woodbine’s negro establishment” and other Florida settlements, or his close association with the Creek leaders who led the incursion. Jackson’s involvement was behind the scenes and there was nothing to directly implicate him. Calhoun reprimanded the Creek chiefs in a letter to Indian Agent John Crowell:

“The expedition to Florida was entirely unknown to this Department. I have to express my concern at, and most decided approbation of, the conduct of the chiefs; that they should seize upon the very moment when that country was about to pass from the possession of Spain to that of the United States, and when everything was in confusion, to use the superior force of the Creek nation over the weakness of the Seminoles, to impose on and plunder them.” **80**

But Calhoun, while pretending to care about the weakness and destitution of the Seminoles, was far more concerned about the fate of the captured fugitive slaves taken in the raid. He was far angrier at the Lower Creek chiefs for stealing these fugitive slaves, the “property” of Southern slaveholders, and allowing many more to escape to the Bahamas. Crowell wrote a response to Calhoun defending the chiefs:

“Special orders were given to Col. Miller not to interrupt the person or the property of any Indian or white man & he declares that he did not take from the possession of either red or white person a single negro except one from a vessel belonging to the celebrated Nichols, lying at anchor in Tampa Bay. The negroes he took, were found and acknowledged by the inhabitants of the country to be runaways.” **81**

It was presumed that most of the blacks seized in the raid were sold by the Creek mercenaries to Florida planters as they made their way back to the United States. Crowell gave a list of 59 slaves that had made it to the United States, titled a “Description of the Negroes brought into the Creek nation by a detachment of Indian Warriors under the command of Col. Wm. Miller a half breed Indian.” In turn, Calhoun gave the list to Capt. John R. Bell of St. Augustine in hopes that some Florida slaveholders could retrieve their property: “I furnished you with a list of negroes taken from the Seminole Indians by a party of Creeks; by which it would seem that many of them belong to the Inhabitants of Florida.” **82** Slaveholders attempted to retrieve the blacks taken in the raid

and the black refugees who escaped to the Bahamas. The “eye-witness” in the *Charleston Gazette* rhetorically concluded his editorial column on the Creek incursion:

“Now all these Negroes, as well as those captured by the Indians, and those gone to Nassau, are runaway Slaves, from the Planters on St. John’s River, in Florida, Georgia, Carolina, and a few from Alabama. Cannot those Planters who have had their Negroes missing recover them by means of these chiefs I have named, and who are so well known by the parts they have been playing for some time past in the late Indian wars, and discover who are those speculative gentlemen who now hold their Negroes, and if they were lawfully their slaves? Could not all those Negroes unlawfully introduced into Nassau be also recovered by an application to the English governor, backed by a formal demand from the Government of the United States?”

**83**

When it came to catching the refugee blacks, Governor Duval’s hands were tied. Duval instructed Horatio S. Dexter to bring in the runaway slaves he found in the vicinity of Tampa Bay. Duval could not pursue the black refugees from Angola until he received permission from Bahaman authorities nor call out a militia against the blacks in Florida territory until given Presidential authority. Duval received information that a “considerable number of slaves” had established themselves at Pine Island on the mouth of the Charlotte River after fleeing from Tampa. They were “well armed with Spanish Muskets” and “refuse to permit any American to visit the Island.” They maintained their allegiance to the Spanish traders, cutting timber and fishing for the Havana market. In turn, the Spaniards gave them protection with several small gunboats armed with one to three guns each. Duval could not comply with the wishes of slaveholders until he received Presidential authority to which he would commission sixty mounted militiamen under the command of Col. Gad Humphreys to apprehend the blacks. **84**

The blacks and Seminoles of Middle Florida also felt the effects of the Creek incursion. The black and Red Stick Creek settlements in Middle Florida were broken up and scattered into even more remote locations. In 1822, Dr. William Simmons travelled to a black settlement in the Big Swamp “accompanied by an Indian Negro, as a guide.” In his route, he witnessed the effects of the Coweta incursion: “the sites of Indian towns, which had been recently broken up, and the crops left standing on the ground.” These were “chiefly the settlements of Lower Creeks” which had recently “dispersed themselves, or retired to remote situations.” **85** Simmons also found that his black

Seminole hosts had recently fled from their settlements in apprehension of Coweta slave raiders, impoverished and unable to provide him with any form of hospitality:

“These people were in the greatest poverty, and had nothing to offer me; having, not long before, fled from a settlement farther west, and left their crop ungathered, from an apprehension of being seized on by the Cowetas, who had recently carried off a body of Negroes, residing near the Suwaney.” **86**

US imperialism in Florida meant the increased decentralization of black and native settlements. This would, paradoxically, make US efforts to concentrate them within the reservation even more difficult several years later. Native and black people who had once flourished on the Alachua savannah for almost a century were broken up by the Patriots invaders. Native and black people who had once cultivated the fertile banks of the Appalachicola River were broken up by a US incursion that slaughtered hundreds at the “Negro Fort.” Native and black people who cultivated fields along the Suwannee River were broken up by Andrew Jackson’s incursion two years later. Native and black people who lived off of the fertile lands and abundant hunting grounds in the vicinity of Tampa Bay were broken up by a pro-white Creek incursion detached by Jackson. In four separate incursions over the span of a decade, the US made it clear that its Florida policy was to subjugate its free black residents in order to make it safe for slavery to flourish. Florida was no longer the safeguard of freedom it once was. Following closely behind the Angolan refugees, Simmons found that many black maroons and free blacks in St. Augustine were now fleeing out of Florida to Havana:

“The indulgent treatment of their slaves, by which the Spaniards are so honourably distinguished: and the ample and humane code of laws which they have enacted, and also enforce, for the protection of the blacks, both bond and free, occasioned many of the Indian slaves, who were apprehensive of falling into the power of the Americans, and also most of the free people of colour who resided in St. Augustine, to transport themselves to Havana, as soon as they heard of the approach of the American authorities.” **87**

## **Chapter 5**

### **Containment and Enslavement: Whites Expand Their Hold of the Florida Territory (1821-1835)**

#### **The Camp Multrie Compact, Desolate Reservation, General Discontent, Slave raids, Frontier Tensions**

Throughout the 1820's, Florida's whites took numerous measures to marginalize the Seminole Nation, working to break its back for eventual removal from the territory. The government took numerous measures to stop the Seminole practice of harboring runaway slaves: 1) Attempting to instill friendly chiefs at the top who would turn them over 2) Containing them in a desolate region where they would be dependent on the US government 3) Making slave raids into Seminole territory 4) Divide-and-conquer. If none of these strategies worked even the Florida governor would threaten military action on the Seminoles to forcefully strip them of every fugitive slave and black ally. In the mean time, white settlers grabbed up Seminole lands in a free-for-all into Middle Florida. Woodbine Potter recalled:

“The whites have not been backward in applying Indian property to their own uses, whenever it may have suited their convenience; and as the law were alone favourable to the whites in consequence of the exclusion of Indian evidence in courts of justice, they thought they had the doubtless right to do with the Indian, or his property, as they might think proper.” **1**

At the time of Florida's acquisition, it was a vastly unpopulated territory. Natives and blacks largely outnumbered whites and occupied a far more extensive quantity of land. The Florida territory was a new frontier land to the whites – one where the possibilities were endless. White slaveholders imagined a Florida where they would one day monopolize the land, institutionalize slavery, and produce cotton for its prime cash crop. Free blacks and independent Seminoles could not exist in this idea of Florida. Their very presence was a direct contradiction to what whites wanted Florida to be. Whites assumed that the inevitable conflict between proximal populations of white settlers and

natives could only be reconciled if the native peoples were either removed or exterminated.

William H. Simmons was one of the few white Floridians at the time who adopted a viewpoint that was genuinely sympathetic to the Seminoles: “Whenever our population presses upon their’s, it would be more just that we should give way and emigrate, than that they should be ultimately annihilated – as if our existence and their’s were incompatible.” But he didn’t extend the same luxury to the black Seminoles. At the time, Simmons presumed that the four hundred blacks who resided among the Seminoles “will be broken up by the American Government – as their existence, in their present state, is incompatible with the safety and interests of the planters of Florida.” **2**

As individual settlers migrating into Florida made land grabs and encroached on native territory, the Federal government was also doing its part to enact white hegemony over native lands. The discovery doctrine, adopted by the Supreme Court in the *Johnson v. McIntosh* case in 1823, established as fixed law what had already been tolerated, approved, and even encouraged in practice – the white settler land grabs of native territory. Made law the same year that the Seminoles were concentrated in their reservation, the discovery doctrine was the white rationale behind expansion and native dispossession. Since the Seminoles, as well other native federations, chieftains, and tribes, lacked an established state government, whites claimed that they didn’t have “legal possession” to the lands that they occupied. In the 1823 *Johnson v. McIntosh* case, Chief Justice John Marshall argued that the European powers had assumed “rightful” title and possession of native lands based on discovery while the natives only had the “right of occupancy.” The assumption behind this was that natives had prior ownership claim to their lands since they lacked an established state and failed to cultivate the soil or make improvements on their lands. Since these “savages” were merely hunter-gatherers who made no mark on the land, it was falsely believed, they had no rightful claim of possession. And since whites cultivated the soil and subjugated the land, which was God’s order to humanity according to the Bible, their claims took divine precedent over that of natives. “Legal possession” additionally implied that native claims to their territory must be backed by the “proper authorities,” meaning legal authorization of the US government. Supplementing Manifest Destiny, the discovery doctrine simply clarified that natives were to reside where and when the U.S. government granted them the “right of occupancy.” **3**

Florida officials argued the “discovery doctrine” to displace Seminoles from their lands. Indian Agent Joseph White wrote:

“Their fondness for idle habits present an insuperable obstacle to cultivation of the soil...The Indians were, therefore, placed on the same ground occupied by other inhabitants of the country, having no other titles to real property save that conferred by actual occupation of the land; which constituted no right, without a grant from the proper authorities.” **4**

Florida’s acquisition was intended to expand slavery and the Cotton Kingdom of the South that made way for unprecedented economic growth. Large manors with hundreds of slaves were settling into what soon become known as Middle Florida where the new aristocracy replicated the social hierarchy of the Old South. In 1821, there were only 4,700 whites, most concentrated in East Florida and the rest around Pensacola in West Florida. Middle Florida, the region between the Appalachicola and Suwannee rivers, was primarily occupied by an estimated 5,000 natives and blacks. Its fertile soil, suitable for planting cotton, provoked a number of white planters and speculators to flock into the region. The immediate removal of Seminoles and blacks from Florida proved impractical as the hostile terrain and size of the indigenous population remained unknown to the US government. To make way for the incoming white population, concentrating the Seminoles south in the desolate area of Central Florida was becoming a widely supported policy. To do this would require the removal of thousands of natives and blacks from the territory between the Appalachicola and the Suwannee rivers.

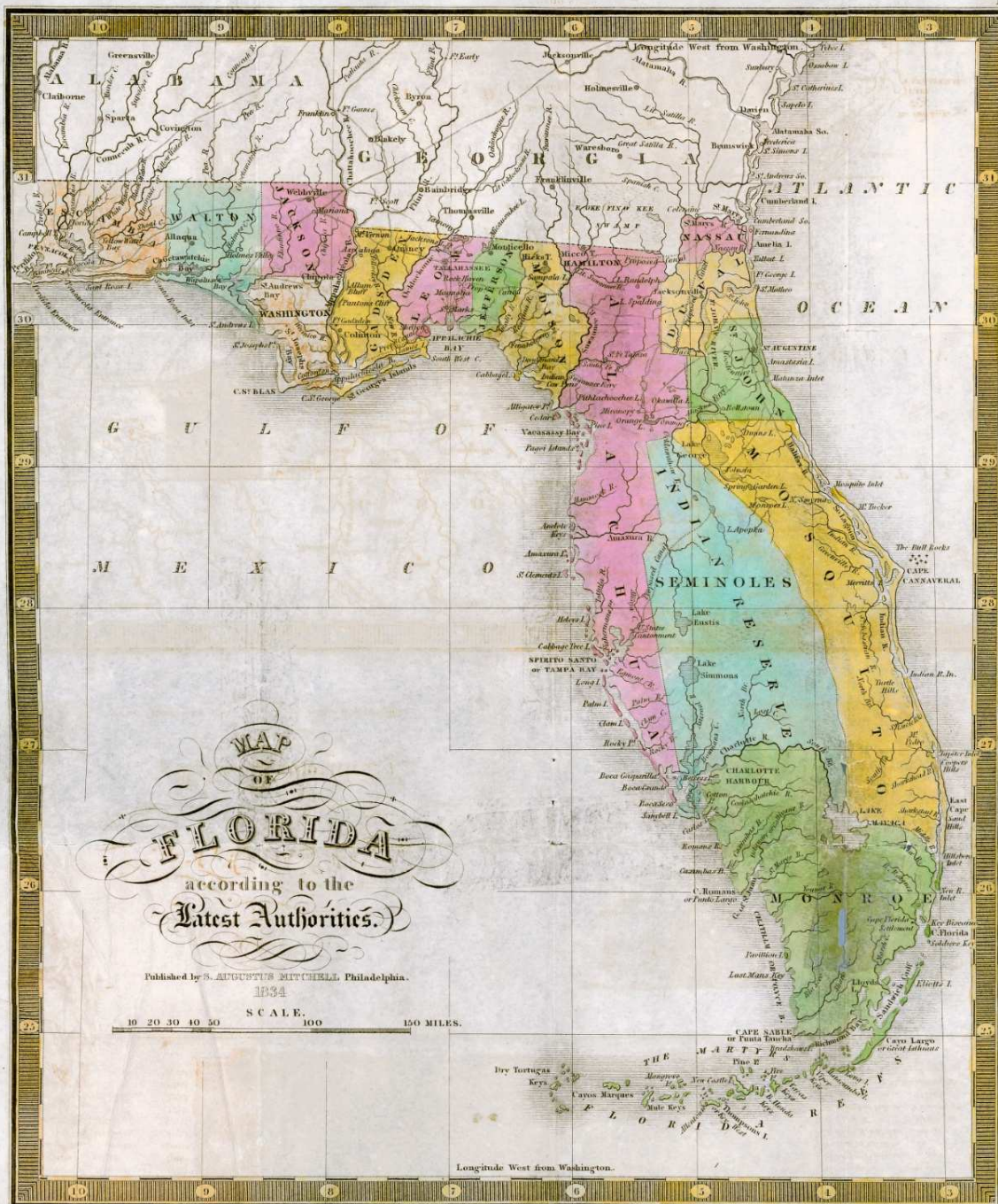
Whites were already showing sentiments for Seminole removal. To the US government it was a “misfortune to Florida...with her maritime exposures, to have any tribes of Indians within her boundaries.” **5** US acquisition of Florida or any territory was unquestionably accompanied by white hegemony over desired lands, which required coercive relocation of its native occupants. Col. James Gadsden wrote about the frontiersmen as “another class of population, which will inevitably predominate in Florida.” It was hoped that containing the Seminoles in a reservation would establish white authority over the nation, prep them for eventual removal, and strip them of their black population. Gadsden believed that setting up military posts around the reservation would be important to “make them perfectly subservient to the views of the Government.” **6** Commissioners were appointed to convince Seminole chiefs to move into the territory adjacent to and south of Tampa Bay. Gadsden noted the strong Seminole opposition to moving from their fertile lands into this desolate region:



“Those west of the Suwannee...are most attached to their own country...and would prefer...even an emigration west of the Mississippi to a concentration south of Tampa Bay...At the head of the discontented is Encomatta, an enterprising, daring savage...among the principle instigators of the Seminole war...These conflicting interests and opinions will be the chief difficulty the commissioners will have to encounter in effecting a treaty.” <sup>7</sup>

Several other factors came into play. Jean A. Penieres, Sub-Agent for Indian Affairs in Florida, told the Secretary of War that establishing consent for the treaty was difficult because the “numerous maroon negroes who live among them, the speculators, and other ill-disposed persons,” were instilling “mistrust” in the Seminoles. <sup>8</sup> Because of extreme Seminole opposition to being forced south of Tampa Bay, the northern line of the reservation was to be a strip of territory extending thirty miles north of Tampa. The reservation was to be constricted at least fifteen to twenty miles within the east and west coasts. It was hoped this would limit coastal access for the Seminoles and blacks and cut off their communication with Spanish Cuba, depriving them of arms and provisions they received from Havana traders. Gadsden reported: “intercourse and active trade with the Cuban fishermen...have been ascribed the encouragement hitherto given to absconding negroes, and the savage depredations committed on cattle, estates, etc.” <sup>9</sup> While the blacks turned to the Cuban traders for arms when they needed to protect themselves from Jackson’s raids, their influence was highly exaggerated. This was mostly because whites wished to believe that blacks and indigenous people lacked the intelligence to form their own positions and determinately defend themselves without support from abroad – thought to be enemy whites from the Spanish and British empires.

While the Indian Springs Treaty and official policy had held that the Seminoles were merely a Creek offshoot, the US government now acknowledged the Seminoles as an independent tribe – so they could be legally dispossessed of their lands through treaty. The Treaty of Camp Multrie would dispossess the Seminoles and blacks of their most fertile lands on the Alachua Savannah, the Suwannee region, the Appalachian River, and the Miccosukee Lake. Article seven of the treaty intended to turn the Seminoles into mercenary slave-catchers. The treaty issued that the Seminole chiefs would “stipulate to be active and vigilant in the preventing the retreating to, or passing through, of the district of country assigned to them, of any absconding slaves or fugitives from justice.” <sup>10</sup> The government had the option to withdraw the annuity to the Seminoles if they failed to abide by these terms. In August 1823, Colonel Gadsden met an assembly of Seminole



Map of Florida showing the Seminole reservation, 1834. Source: *Florida Map Collections – George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.*

chiefs at the Multrie Creek encampment to begin territorial negotiations. These chiefs were hardly a complete representative of every native band or tribe in the Florida territory. On August 6, Gadsden paternalistically pronounced the benefits of “white civilization” to the skeptical chief council:

“Many years ago, false prophets and evil-disposed men from across the water deluded the Creek nation. The young warriors became mad, and the old men forgetful. They raised the Red Sticks in war, and inhumanely massacred women and children. General Jackson with his warriors marched into the nation, subdued the deluded, and made friends with those who buried the tomahawk and sued for peace. Your father the President of the United States, like a kind parent, forgot their disobedience, and, placing his Creek brothers by themselves, they are now a rich, happy, and friendly people.” **11**

Micosukee head chief Neamathla refused to hand over the Red Stick Creek fugitives who had integrated into the Seminole Nation, declaring that the “Florida Indians had incorporated with their tribes the fugitive Creeks and Red Sticks who were among them.” Neamathla estimated the general Seminole population to be 4,883 and the chiefs gave the names and locations of 37 Seminole towns, but not Peliklakaha - the main black Seminole community. Neamathla also “objected to stating the number of negroes in the nation.” **12** This was probably because, as William Simmons observed a year earlier, “There was...a general impression among them, that the Americans would seize all the Negro property of the Indians.” **13** Concerned primarily with retrieving fugitive slaves, Gadsden now angrily threatened further war at Neamthla’s defiance:

“Are you not tired of wars? Have you not suffered enough innocent victims at the folly of others? Brave warriors, though they despise death, do not madly contend with the strong. Your nation stands alone; if the peace and friendship now offered is refused, the poison of bad men will ruin you.” **14**

Neamathla plead with Gadsden not to remove them from their territory to the south where the land was notoriously infertile. The maroons and Seminoles were firmly rooted in the area of Middle Florida where they had cultivated lands and lived in freedom and autonomy for many years. Neamathla argued to maintain hold of “my fields, cultivated by only myself. I am attached to the spot improved by my own labor.” **15** Six

of the most prominent chiefs, including Neamathla, would refuse to sign until they were bribed with an additional article allotting fertile lands to each. “Homespun, calicoes, lead, power” and an assortment of goods were given to the rest of the Seminole sub-chiefs and leaders. **16**

The bribe partitioned the fertile lands in the Appalachicola region to six of the chiefs, while most of the Seminole Nation would be forced south to the Tampa Bay region. The commissioners later acknowledged that the treaty would not have been possible without this bribe: “The reservations made on the Appalachicola district were in favor of six influential chiefs, whose assent to the treaty would not have been obtained without the equitable provision for them and their connexions.” **17** They also admitted that the bribe of fertile lands on the Appalachicola River was a privilege promised for the chiefs who supported Andrew Jackson during his Florida campaign: “Blount and Tuski-Hajo have long been friendly to the Americans, and rendered essential services to Jackson during the operations in Florida...with the promise that, when the Indians in Florida were disposed of, the provisions now made for them should be taken into consideration.” **18** The commissioners hoped that the division of the Seminole Nation into different regions would allow for easier management and control of the reservations: “The lands allotted...are so limited as to force the habitants into civil habits and pursuits...While so large a subtraction is made from the Indian population...as to render that population more easily manageable.” **19** Gadsden later acknowledged the Camp Multrie compact to be “a treaty of imposition”:

“It is not necessary to disguise the fact to you that the treaty affected was in a degree a treaty of imposition. The Indians would never have voluntarily assented to the terms had they not believed that we had both the power and disposition to compel obedience.” **20**

Governor William Duval and Indian Agent Gad Humphreys both believed that head chief Neamathla could prove to be a valuable asset for whites in administering the Seminole Nation. With the “general discontent” among the Seminole reservation, whites hoped to set up a compliant, influential chief as head of the tribe. Duval wrote in admiration of Neamathla’s character: “a man of uncommon capacity: bold, violent, and restless...the greatest man ever seen among the Indians.” **21** Neamathla could “control his warriors with as much ease as a colonel could a regiment of regular soldiers,” Duval gushed, “if this man can be made the firm friend of our Government, no means should be

spared to induce him...to continue as head chief of his nation.” **22** The 1823 Camp Multrie treaty had allotted the fertile lands of the Appalachicola for Neamathla’s Miccosukees, but Florida officials soon regretted this provision. **23**

Duval now urged Neamathla to sell his properties on the Appalachicola and join the Seminoles in the southern reservation limits. The chiefs who had signed the Camp Multrie Treaty in return for good lands were being taught a valuable lesson in negotiating with whites. With Middle Florida now the major prospect for white settlement in the Florida territory, the US government began going back on its promises. Commissioner John Lee Williams wrote: “Neamathla said he was much annoyed by people from Georgia, who endeavored to get his land from him.” **24** Although the treaty effectively divided the Seminole Nation, the Miccosukee settlements in close proximity to Tallahassee proved to be ominous for white land-grabbers. The Miccosukees under Neamathla raided cattle and threatened the white settlers in the vicinity seeking to dispossess them. Duval wrote that Neamathla’s warriors were “the most lawless and vile of Indians in Florida...they will not remove into the boundary given to them...unless there is a military force in the vicinity to overawe them.” **25.**

Neamathla had always been a “hard-line” opponent to white encroachment. He had defiantly told Major Twigg to keep US troops off of his lands, provoking Gaines to burn down the Miccosukee settlement at Fowl Town prior to Jackson’s Florida campaign. He had turned down Col. Gadsden’s demand for the estimated census of blacks in Seminole territory. Now he had threatened to violently resist white encroachment that was driving his people off of their lands. After this, Duval disappointedly wrote that Neamathla was the “only turbulent man in the nation.” **26** But this was not true. Only several months later, Duval acknowledged the widespread Seminole discontent with conditions on the reservation: “The Indians are restless, and much dissatisfied with the treaty.” **27**

Duval entered into Neamathla’s town and ordered some three hundred armed warriors to meet him at St. Marks on July 26. He guaranteed them that “their ruin and destruction are certain” if they failed to obey the order. **28** On July 26, over six hundred Miccosukees arrived at St. Marks compliantly. Duval selected pro-white chief John Hicks as the Miccosukee head chief in place of Neamathla and the eldest son of Chief Hijah as his chief counselor. Duval noted: “these chiefs are men of sense, and will execute my orders.” **29** He then ordered the Miccosukees to move south to the reservation for easier containment. But keeping the Miccosukees constrained in the reservation would prove to be a reoccurring problem throughout the 1820’s. **30** Neamathla abandoned his Appalachicola lands, exiling himself out west to Creek territory in Alabama. Governor

Duval later bragged that he “broke the head chief” who could have possibly caused “serious difficulties to the white people” if he had persisted. **31**

The inclination of whites to create a set of head chiefs in the Seminole nation that would comply with their demands meant that the real authority in the tribe would begin to develop from below. As Neamathla and other defiant chiefs were marginalized or destroyed through the manipulation of US officials, the Seminole tribe gravitated towards a young class of Red Stick Creek and black warriors to lead them. The US was unintentionally throwing more difficult obstacles in its pathway. Most Seminoles were predictably opposed to the forced relocation due to the unsustainable land of the southern reservation. Not only would it rob the fertile lands cultivated by the Seminoles and blacks for generations, but also make them dependent on the US government for rations. If the Seminoles were completely dependent on rations, they may be more willing to hand over the blacks among them. The Camp Multrie Treaty gave the government the option to withdraw annuity payments if the Seminoles failed to abide by its provisions, which included the return of runaway slaves.

The impoverished conditions of the Seminole reservation produced the breeding grounds for eventual rebellion and further ingrained resentment towards the US government. The Seminoles were forced to rely on the barest minimum to survive. It’s quite possible that the Seminoles were only able to subsist through the superior agricultural capabilities of their black allies. McCall’s observations of the principle black town depict a prosperous community with more than sufficient sustenance. **32** Perhaps their ties with Spanish traders in Charlotte Harbor permitted them to make a living. But most of the reservation was in an extreme state of suffering due to its uncultivable soil.

In 1824, the rations authorized to be provided under the fifth article of the Camp Multrie treaty were significantly reduced in order to “stimulate the Indians to agricultural pursuits.” They were far from adequate to supplement the small crop that could be produced in the extremely poor lands of the reservation. In 1825, drought throughout the reservation resulted in Seminole raids on plantations in nearby white settlements. Famished Seminoles left the impoverished reservation and slaughtered the cattle of white settlers for food. In 1825, there were reportedly three hundred Seminoles who ventured out beyond the reservation boundaries to the Suwannee and Aucilla areas due to the starving conditions. **33**

The conditions in the Seminole reservation were so miserable that President John Quincy Adams even relayed several reports to Congress for consideration. Lt. Col. George Brooke reported to Col. Gibson about the desperate scenario on the reservation:

“The major part of the nation are, and have been, suffering for some time in extreme want. Some have died from starvation, and others have lived on the roots of sweet-briar, as a substitute for bread...unless the Government assists them, many of them must starve, and many of them will deplete on the property of whites in the St. John’s and Alachua settlements.” **34**

The government initially supplied a scarce amount of rations, reduced them, and eventually withdrew them altogether before the drought ravaged the reservation. George Walton, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, listed the common complaints he received from the Seminoles:

“They have always been furnished by a scanty supply of provisions only, and which some time since has ceased altogether; that they have no means of subsistence within themselves; that there is no game in the country; that it is, moreover, exceedingly unhealthy, exposing them to sickness and inevitable death; and, in fine, that no part of the country allotted to them for a residence is of such a description as to afford them comfortable settlements, or of such a quality that will enable them to have stocks or raise corn.” **35**

Benjamin Chaires noted that the lands allotted to the Seminoles in the Camp Multrie treaty were in the “poorest part of Florida” and that the Seminoles “cannot possibly subsist in their present location.” Governor William Duval gave a revealing conclusion in his first-hand account of the reservation region set aside for the Seminoles: “I had not seen three hundred acres of good land in my whole route...it is by the far the poorest and most miserable region I ever beheld.” **36** From his observations, Duval proposed that the northern line of the Seminole reservation be moved five miles north of the Big Swamp in order to appropriate fertile lands for the Seminoles. Extending the reservation boundary five miles north of the Big Swamp into the pine barren would also prevent Alachua’s white settlers from intruding into Seminole territory. **37** The Office of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Florida issued an 1825 report to describe the conditions of the reservation and the cause of the “universal discontent that seems to prevail amongst the Indians”:

1. That the land allotted to them by the treaty is too poor to make their bread on.

2. That there is no running water in the country; and, from their knowledge of pond water, in hunting excursions, disease and sickness must ensue.
3. That a sufficient maintenance has not been issued at the agency for those Indians that did not present themselves there, many of whom have returned from thence.
4. That a fair distribution of funds allowed them by Government has not been attended to by either their own chiefs or the white men.
5. The many, who have for several years resided in the vicinity of the reserve, have not as yet moved into it, and still object to do so.
6. That the land allowed them by the treaty was partly forced on the chiefs, and that the Indians never agreed to give up the land. **38**

Slave raiders and speculators made concerted efforts to acquire the large number of blacks, potentially prime slaves, from the Seminoles. Government pressures on Seminole chiefs to hand over runaway slaves further raised tensions between the famished reservation and the white frontier, increasing the possibility of erupted conflict. Claims for slaves failed to distinguish the black Seminoles, long-term descendents of runaway slaves, from the runaways that were constantly flowing into the territory. In 1823, a host of slaveholders from St. Augustine petitioned the US President to help them retrieve their runaway slaves in the Seminole reservation:

“We are constrained to look on with patience, whilst they possess and enjoy the property, justly and rightfully Ours;-And still it is held obnoxious to law, and improper, to take from their Territory, even those negroes, that are unclaimed and unpossessed by the Indians; and this too at a time, when there is much reason for believing that they are gradually escaping from the Continent; or, alarmed at the Change of Government, are putting themselves under the protection of individual Indians, who claim them as their private property merely to protect them from their rightful owners.” **39**

Neil Coker, an ex-slave from East Florida, noted that slaves at the time had perceived that their freedom could simply be achieved by escaping to Seminole territory: “Negro slaves from the region around St. Augustine and what is now Hastings used to escape and use Bellamy's Road on their way to the area about Micanopy. It was considered equivalent to freedom to reach that section, with its friendly Indians and impenetrable forests and swamps.” **40** These slave raids were a clear violation of the Camp Multrie treaty. **41** Some raiders would go into the reservation to sell whiskey to Seminoles and illegally induce them to sell their blacks once they were too intoxicated to



think properly. **42** Indian Agent Wiley Thompson reported the illegal Seminole sale of their blacks and how “whiskey has been made a prime agent in the accomplishment of such violations.” **43** Illegal raids and liquor were not the only tactics that whites used. Speaking to a council of chiefs, Governor Duval applied a divide-and-conquer strategy to split the black-Seminole alliance:

“You hold negroes in your nation that belong to the white people. By the treaty, you are bound to deliver all the negroes that do not belong to the Indians to the agent; this you have not done; although you have promised in your talk to do so; you are now called upon to fulfill the treaty. You are not to mind what the negroes say; they will lie, and lead you astray, in the hope to escape from their rightful owners, and that you will give them refuge and hide them; do your duty and given them up. They care nothing for you, further than to make use of you to keep out of the hands of their masters. Thus far the negroes have made you their tools, and gained a protection, contrary to both justice and treaty, and, at the same time, laugh at you for being deceived by them. Your conduct in this matter is cause of loud, constant, and just complaint on the part of the white people, who are thus deprived of their slaves. Deliver them up, rid your nation of a serious pest...Should you, however, refuse to do this act of justice. I shall order my soldiers to go over your whole country, to search every part of it, from time to time, and to seize all runaway slaves by force...I will order my soldiers from Tampa Bay to scour the country, and drag the runaways from their hiding-places, and make your nation suffer for its neglects and violations of the treaty.” **44**

John Hicks replied to Duval that the chiefs would hand over some runaway slaves to the whites if the whites would return some of the blacks seized from the reservation: “The white people have got some of our negroes, which I suspect they will be made to give up.” **45** While the two groups had a long-established economic and defensive alliance, a mutual affinity had long developed that was underlying the Seminole refusal to turn over. After over half a century of integration and cooperation, the blacks and Seminoles shared kinship, social, and cultural bonds that determined their brotherhood. Frank Berry, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, recalled that interracial mixing occurred frequently between Seminoles and slaves: “Indians often captured slaves, particularly the women, or aided in their escape and almost always intermarried with them.” **46** Because of the Seminole matrilineal system, many of their decedents would be born within Seminole society.

The blacks and Seminoles allying with one another for self-interested motives was certainly an aspect of their relations, but not the full picture. The Seminoles refused to turn over their allies even when they faced starvation in the desolate reservation, although the government often threatened to cut their annuity payments. John Lee Williams observed that “There exists a law among the Seminoles, forbidding individuals from selling their negroes; and any attempt to evade that law, has always raised great commotions among them.” Woodburne Potter reported that it was not just black influence over the Seminoles that prevented voluntary emigration, but the fact that “these Indians have always evinced great reluctance to parting with slaves: indeed the Indian loves his negro as much as one of his own children, and the sternest necessity alone would drive him to the parting.” **47**

Duval seemed more interested in securing fugitive slaves from the Seminoles than relieving their starving condition. Abolitionist Ohio delegate Joshua R. Giddings noted on Governor Duval:

“He, and many other officers, appear to have supposed the first important duty imposed on them, consisted in lending an efficient support to those claims for slaves which were constantly pressed upon them by unprincipled white men.” **48**

Governor Duval gave orders to Indian Agent Col. Humphreys “on the subject of the runaway slaves among the Indians, within the control of your agency”:

“It will be proper in all cases, where you believe the owners can identify the slaves, to have them taken and delivered over to the marshal of East Florida, at St. Augustine, so that the federal judge may inquire into the claim of the party and determine the right of property.” **49**

As planters gathered and petitioned the Federal government to assist in retrieving their slaves, the Florida government in effect became a bureaucracy solely focused on substantiating claims for blacks in the Seminole territory. Capt. John T. Sprague noted: “The demands for negroes said to be among the Indians, continued to agitate the country, threatening the most serious results.” Col. George Brooke lamented the false slave claimants attempting to wrest away the Seminoles’ black allies:

“I really pity those Indians, and although negroes are of little value to the Indians, being rather masters than slaves, still they view them as their property. So many claims are now made on them, that they begin to believe that it is the determination of the United States to take them all. This idea is strengthened by the conversations of many of the whites, and which they have heard.” **50**

These demands reached the US President who, through the Secretary of War and Commissioner of Indian Affairs, ordered Indian Agent Gad Humphreys to seize the claimed blacks. The claims for slaves in Seminole territory were pushed on the War Department through the territorial delegate, Joseph M. White, who demanded redress for the grievances of his constituents. Whenever the chiefs arrived at the Indian Agency, they were persistently harassed with a laundry-list of demands for their blacks. Commissioner Thomas McKenney ordered Humphreys to seize the black runaways of a slaveholder claimant named Margaret Cooke. Humphreys commissioned four separate slave-raiding parties within six months in search of Cooke’s slaves in the Seminole territory. But he was unsuccessful in tracking down the claimed blacks and requested military assistance, a precursor to the use of the military as slave raiders. But McKenney denied the request: “the military cannot be employed in arresting Indian negroes.” **51** Yet they could be as they had been before. Even Governor Duval had threatened the use of military force to an assembly of Seminole chiefs if they refused to turn over fugitive slaves.

In 1828, the Florida legislature effectively commissioned Indian Agents as mercenary slave-raiders, receiving pay of ten dollars from the claimants of runaway slaves: “Be it further enacted. That it shall be lawful for any Indian agent within this territory to demand and receive from the owner, employer or overseer the torn of ten dollars for each runaway slave taken up within their respective agencies.” Once a free black was seized from Seminole territory, no matter what the government promised the chiefs, there was no fair trial or tribunal to truly discover whether the real “owner” was a white man or a Seminole. The Seminoles were well-aware of the blatant injustice and double standards practiced by these highly biased territorial courts. Chief Jumper complained:

“The laws of the whites appear to be made altogether for their own benefit, and against the Indians, who can never under them get back any of their property; if it once gets, no matter how, into the white people’s hands, we fear the laws will leave to us nothing.” **52**

This is partially why the Seminole chiefs refused to turn over the claimed black slaves, even though the government insisted that they were attempting to “secure property” before making a fair judgment. **53** Col. George Brooke volunteered to assist Humphreys in retrieving slaves, capturing four blacks with the aid of his troops for a Georgia claimant Mrs. Hannay. **54** Once Humphreys became a member of Florida’s legislative council, he urged that slave claims should only be submitted to territorial courts rather than Federal courts. White claims were definitely ensured success over Seminole claims if solely determined by the Florida territorial courts. Seminoles now couldn’t even provide evidence unless the case involved a disputing Seminole claimant. **55** Humphrey himself was among the claimants for “lost negro property,” along with numerous other delegates in the legislature. **56** He would lose 59 of his slaves in the mass revolt at the start of the Second Seminole War. **57** Woodburne Potter recounted numerous instances of whites illegally seizing land and blacks from Seminole territory:

“A man by the name of Floyd was employed by an Indian woman to recover some negroes for her, and instead of presenting a mere power of attorney for her signature, she found, alas! It was a bill of sale for all of her negroes! Another individual was requested by Miconopy, Governor of the Seminoles, to draw a piece of writing for him, to which, without suspicion of its character, he attached his name; it was soon after discovered to be a conveyance of a large tract of land!” **58**

In 1826, John Hicks, Duval’s appointed head chief to the Seminole tribe, led a delegate of “six other distinguished chiefs” to Washington. Duval wanted to entitle Hicks the “governor of the red men” in order to establish his control over the “bad men” of the Miccosukee tribe. Hicks had been imposed onto the Miccosukees as a head chief in a fixed election to replace Neamathla. Despite the fact Hicks was a pro-white chief, he spoke as a true representative of Seminole interests in Washington. This was probably, as Duval noted, because his own constituents were attempting to kill him. **59**

Duval hoped that government officials in Washington could convince the chiefs that any continued resistance against the white man was futile. The chiefs, to the contrary, were hoping to call the Federal government’s attention to their suffering in the desolate reservation and the need for fertile lands and rations to avoid starvation. On May 17, the chief delegates arrived in Washington to meet Secretary of War James Barbour



Painting of Tukose Mathla, or John Hicks, ca. 1826.  
Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

and President John Quincy Adams. Barbour repeated demands that the Seminoles hand over the runaway slaves and move west. The chief delegates told Barbour: “We have already said we do not intend to move again.” Hicks recalled some details of the meeting: “I was told in Washington we were not to have any provisions” and that “if our horses and cattle go across the line we must not go and get them.” The chief noted: “This is not the way to make us friendly.”

The delegates reiterated their refusal to remove and requested the extension of the northern limits of the reservation to include the Big Swamp, which would appropriate fertile lands into the reservation. John Hicks resolutely declared that the tribe was not at all interested in leaving their homeland: “Here our navel strings were first cut and the blood from them sunk into the earth and made the country dear to us.” Adams and

Barbour conceded to their proposal to extend the reservation north into the Big Swamp and issued out funding for relief of the reservation. The chiefs returned to Florida satisfied that they had received justice. **60**

Floridian planters didn't necessarily support the complete, immediate removal of the Seminoles out west. At least for the time being, the slave claimants and speculators preferred to keep them right where they were until "their possessions may be wrested from them." They hoped to extend the jurisdiction of the Florida territory in defiance of Federal authority so that "these claims will be substantiated, and the descendants of negroes who have passed hereditarily from generation to generation, will be alike subjected to the fraudulent control of these men." **61** While white slave speculators were pressing on the blacks in the Seminole reservation, Coweta Creeks were hoping that the Seminoles would be forced west and placed under their jurisdiction. With the Indian Springs treaty, the Creeks claimed that a "large number of negroes are in possession of the Seminoles and unjustly withheld from them." **62**

Despite the concessions that Washington made to the Seminoles, little changed in the reservation. The Seminoles had no alternative but to leave the reservation and raid the white settlements of the Suwannee and Aucilla areas. Many abandoned the reservation to reside on their former lands in the Suwannee region. The Florida legislature responded with brutal laws punishing any Seminole found outside of the reservation. Those who wandered outside the reservation limits were whipped for punishment. One band of Seminoles had threatened to take vengeance on the whites for several members of their tribe who they presumed had been murdered by whites in their long absence. On June 21, 1825, a detachment of twenty troops was sent to quell this Seminole camp. To the surprise of the Seminoles, the troops emerged out of the Cabbage Swamp onto their encampment located about twenty-eight miles from St. Augustine. They rushed the party of soldiers in the rear, attempting to seize their rifles and flee. Against orders, a soldier discharged a pistol which caused the soldiers to accidentally fire a volley of shots at the Seminoles. The entire town withdrew to the swamp and then fled the area.

Outraged at the blatant aggression, the camp's inhabitants broke up and returned to their respective towns to report the incident. The Seminole chiefs demanded redress for the wrongs that they suffered and began to organize war parties to retaliate against the white settlements. In turn, an "Indian War" was declared by the white settlers who took up arms and assembled in their towns for safety. **63** The situation was calmed once the three Seminoles who were supposedly killed by the whites returned, along with promises of reparations for the wrongs inflicted by this military detachment. An outbreak like this

clearly depicts the fragile peace that existed between the white frontier and Seminole reservation.

In October 1825, Superintendent of Indian Affairs George Walton ordered the Tallahassee Creeks, under their chief Chefixico Hajo, to move from their encampment on the Suwannee River to Tampa Bay. But when his people arrived, “in so destitute a condition,” they were refused the on-hand rations from the Indian Agency. Half of Chefixico’s party immediately left, crossing back over the Suwannee to their old camping grounds at Aucilla. Prior to this, many others were leaving the vicinity of Tampa Bay and returning to their old settlements in the Suwannee and Aucilla areas as drought ravaged the reservation and rations failed to be issued. **64** Based on earlier reports, it was apparent that Governor Duval knew full well that Seminole raids resulted from their starvation and destitution due to the unsustainable reservation lands, not their “savage nature.” Nevertheless, he would answer to the demands of white planters, using outright force to contain them in the reservation limits. In early 1826, Duval “engaged in collecting and ordering the Indians who were west of the Suwannee river into their boundaries.” Duval succeeded in constraining most of the disaffected Seminoles within the borders of the reservation except for the Miccosukees. An estimated two hundred Miccosukees continued to settle and cultivate lands within the vicinity of Tallahassee. **65**

In July of 1826, the Seminoles prepared to elect their head chief. The whites saw an opportunity to place their own compliant chief in power. In response to requests from the Indian Agent, Colonel Brooke commissioned Captain Francis Dade as head of the two companies sent to the Indian Agency. The excursion was over one hundred miles along the old Indian Trail. When they arrived at Chief Micanopy’s town of Okihumpy they found the settlement abandoned. A black Seminole interpreter came out to inform Dade that the inhabitants of the town were in the swamp and prepared to fight if the command followed them. Wishing to avoid a conflict, they continued on to the Indian Agency where they would enforce the election of the white favorite Miccosukee chief John Hicks. Just as John Hicks became the leader of the Miccosukees through a show of military force in which Duval fraudulently manipulated the tribe’s election, he became the leader of the Seminole Nation under fraudulent circumstances. The presence of Dade’s command was a direct message to the Seminole and black chiefs that failure to make the right choice would result in drastic consequences. After John Hicks received a majority vote, Lt. McCall recalled: “No disturbance had occurred anywhere; Micanopy, governed by the advice of the Agent and the presence of the troops, having wisely yielded to circumstances he could not control.” **66**

John Hicks became the nominal leader of the Seminoles. Yet the black leaders who advised the Seminole chiefs, the young Red Stick Creek warriors, and the Miccosukees still contained the real power in the tribe. As tensions remained high on the Florida frontier, whites blamed the blacks among the Seminoles for provoking the hostilities. As Indian Agent Gad Humphreys was sending slave-raiding incursions into Seminole territory, he stated:

“The negroes of the Seminole Indians, are wholly independent, or at least regardless of the authority of their masters, and are slaves but in name. The great influence the Slaves possess over their masters...is uniformly exercised in exciting their jealousy of the whites.” **67**

Duval began to adopt the opinion that outright coercion was necessary to constrict the local Miccosukee and Red Stick Creek refugees south into the reservation. The pretext came when some Creeks in the area killed two white men in Georgia, and then pillaged and burned down their houses. In response, “His Excellency the Governor has sent an express to give notice to Capt. Dade” reported a Pensacola newspaper, “and, in the mean time, has dispatched Col. Blount, an Indian chief, with a party of Indians to quiet disturbances.” **68** In late 1826, Duval commissioned Captain Francis Dade to arrest and suppress the Miccosukee and Red Stick Creek settlements in the Aucilla and Suwannee areas. Afterwards, Dade was “actively engaged in arresting and disarming the Indians, many of whom are painted for war, and display hostility.” **69** Dade’s initial incursions provoked retaliation from the Creek refugees at Aucilla. In early December, a party of Creeks murdered a man, his four infant children, and a slave west of the Aucilla River. This was the pretext for full-scale military operations to forcefully relocate all native refugees from Middle Florida south into the reservation. Duval sent out dispatches to Col. Brooke and Col. Clinch requesting military companies for support. The white settlers of Tallahassee readied their arms and bunkered down in preparation for an “Indian war.” A large mounted militia force scoured the Aucilla area under the command of Richard K. Call. Duval detached Capt. Dade from his station on the Suwannee to the Aucilla area where he successfully captured “8 or 9 painted Indians, evidencing hostile intentions.” While Dade had probably captured the culprits, Duval was now suggesting that it would be necessary “to carry the war into the enemy’s country” if the tribe refused to be “driven into the confines marked out for them by the treaty of 1823.” **70**



Over the next four months, the Seminoles and blacks grew fully acquainted with the extent of Dade's brutality. Not only did he capture fifteen to twenty Creeks believed to have been involved in the murders, but drove most of the refugees back into the reservation limits through coercion. In the mean time, his brutal and efficient use of force gained him notoriety among the Seminoles and Red Sticks. Years later, the blacks and Seminoles would remember Dade very well when they would mow down his regiment at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War. In the pretext to the second US military invasion of the Seminoles, few historians consider the historical backdrop of Dade's past encounters with the tribe. Amidst the Second Seminole War, a St. Augustine correspondent pondered the causes of the war:

“The Indians were called upon to comply with the treaty. They were all to live beyond a line drawn across the peninsula. To this district called the `nation' most of them retired, but some were always found straggling outside. They were found as far west as Tallahassee-they hunted from thence to the mouth of the Suwannee, as they do now. Major Dade, about the year 1827, was employed in restricting them.” **71**

The correspondent concluded: “Perhaps the savage enmity which resulted in his death was then first excited.” As Andrew Jackson instituted his Indian Removal Policy, slavery began to play a huge role in forcefully removing the Seminoles from Florida. In early 1832, whites in Florida were petitioning for “armed force” to be used to prevent “aggression by the Indians or attempt of an insurrection among the slaves.” The Payne's Landing treaty was forged at a time when “1600 Warriors & over 1100 Slaves (belonging to the Indians) now resid[e] in the Seminole Indian Nation many of whom are traversing the Country adjoining the northern Boundary of the Indian Nation.” **72** The combination of these factors exploded into what is now called the Second Seminole War.

### **A White Man's Treaty, Osceola's Defiance, War Begins**

The 1828 presidential election of Andrew Jackson proved ominous for the blacks and Seminoles of Florida. The 1830 Indian Removal Act only heightened the suspense of what was to become of them. The esteemed US general who had ordered the destruction of the “Negro Fort,” burned down their towns at Miccosukee and Suwannee in a full-scale invasion, and commissioned a slave-raiding excursion on the remaining black stronghold at Angola, now rose to the most powerful position in the expansionist, pro-

slaveholder government determined to remove and enslave their population. Jackson was responsible for the reign of terror that had obliterated their communities, kept their population in a state of fear, and constrained them within a miserable reservation on the constant brink of starvation and death. Now his policy of “Indian Removal” and slavery expansion was to be officially established as the highest law of the land in what would be a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing and enslavement. If he was a nightmare as a military general and during his brief tenure as Florida governor, what would happen to them during his presidency?

The five indigenous “nations” targeted for removal in the Southeast were acknowledged to be the “Five Civilized Tribes” for emulating aspects of white society. But the 1823 discovery doctrine had justified white acquisition of indigenous territory based on their lack of civilization, established state authority, and “ownership title” to the land. The Europeans assumed state power over the lands based on discovery, and thus natives only had a “right of occupancy” based on grant from the “proper authorities.” The doctrine assumed that natives didn’t cultivate the soil and failed to make improvements on their land. Because whites subjugated the land, according to God’s orders in the Bible, their land claims supposedly took divine precedent over native claims. So did this mean that “civilized” natives who “subjugated the land” had a right to their territory? The Indian Removal Act said no. Nevertheless, Manifest Destiny and white hegemony over the land charged forward with belief in divine support. The true pretext for “Indian Removal” in the Southeast was not the divine right espoused by either doctrines, but the production of cotton on fertile lands that were occupied by natives. “Indian Removal” and slavery expansion were intertwined concepts in the South. Removing natives from desirable, fertile lands and the expansion of cotton production were accompanied by the expansion of slavery. As demand for the new fertile lands and cotton prices rose, the demand for slaves rose simultaneously. Slave speculators now looked at the large number of available blacks in the Seminole territory with an insatiable appetite. The expansion of the Cotton Kingdom was now also more threatened than ever by the Seminole slave refuge and the black Seminole maroons. But, paradoxically, “Indian Removal” for the expansion of the Cotton Kingdom in Florida was also hampered by the efforts of white slavers to enslave the blacks among the Seminoles. The black Seminoles refused to leave Florida unless guaranteed their freedom and safety, strengthening the Seminoles in their efforts to resist the US government. Black Seminole defiance and militancy made it impossible to completely reconcile slavery and “Indian Removal” in the Southeast.

Yet slavery would prove to play an even more important role in delaying “Indian Removal.” As the natives and blacks were drastically outnumbered by the whites three-

to-one, resistance seemed hopeless. Five thousand Seminoles and blacks, a thousand of whom were warriors, were constrained within a destitute, defenseless reservation and surrounded by 34,731 Floridians who had the military support of the US government that was determined to remove and enslave them. The entire Florida white population was determined to steal their lands and seize the blacks to sell on the slave market. But there was one beacon of hope for the Seminoles and blacks: the slave population numbered 16,000, almost half of Florida's total population. An additional nine hundred were free blacks concentrated in St. Augustine and Pensacola. The fact that the combined number of Seminoles, black Seminoles, black slaves, and free blacks outnumbered the whites in the territory was not lost on white Floridians. If they unified to resist whites in the territory, the Florida frontier would be devastated. The presumed impossibility of such occurrence still failed to ease their anxiety. As early as 1823, Andrew Jackson recognized that a dense white frontier population surrounding a constricted Seminole reservation was necessary to "overawe the Indians, and keep down the insurrection of the Blacks, of which there must be a large number in the Floridas at some future day." **73**

In 1832, Secretary of War Lewis Cass commissioned Col. James Gadsden to oversee the Payne's Landing treaty. Cass claimed the purpose of the treaty was to alleviate the "Florida Indians" who were in a "suffering condition" and "unable to provide the necessary food for themselves." Gadsden was to encourage the Seminoles to "accept a relinquishment of their lands in Florida, and to remove them to the Creek country, west of the Mississippi," and "to become a constituent portion of that tribe." **74** This was one of the major objections that the Seminoles had to the removal policy. For one, placing the Seminole Nation under the jurisdiction of the Creek Federation would compromise their independence and autonomy. The Red Stick Creeks that had long incorporated under the Seminole Nation were also strongly opposed to becoming "a constituent portion" of their long-term adversaries, the pro-white Lower Creeks. But most importantly, Seminole incorporation into the Creek Federation in the western territory would almost certainly guarantee the enslavement of their black allies. The Creek leaders claimed a large portion of the black Seminoles and emigration out west under this condition would allow them to easily seize all the blacks. As long as the blacks and Red Sticks were violently opposed to removal, so was the general Seminole Nation. In fact, Governor Duval declared the first step to Seminole removal was to break up "the runaway slaves and outlaw Indians congregated at two points in the Peninsula." **75**

In May of 1832, Gadsden met with an assortment of Seminole chiefs and their black advisors to negotiate emigration at Payne's Landing. Abraham, the black Seminole head leader notable for his power in political decisions, was chosen as the interpreter for



Negro Abraham,

“Negro Abraham,” engraving of black Seminole leader Abraham, from *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, John T. Sprague, 1848.

the Seminole chiefs. Abraham was born a slave of Dr. Sierra of Pensacola before he ran away to the Seminoles. During the War of 1812, Abraham joined up with Col. Edward Nicholls' force of Red Stick Creeks, black maroons, Seminoles, and various other tribes. He escaped death and enslavement at the "Negro Fort" massacre, fighting Jackson's forces at Miccosukee and with the black regiment at the battle of Suwannee. Abraham had then placed himself under the protection of Seminole head chief Micanopy and rose to play a very important political role in the tribe as his advisor. **76**

The Seminole council agreed to send a delegation of seven chiefs out west to investigate the land that the treaty offered in the Oklahoma territory. The chiefs were to report back to the general nation on their return to formulate the decision of removal. The treaty at Payne's Landing includes a provision that amounted to a four hundred dollar bribe for the two black interpreters, Abraham and Cudjo. Cudjo was a black Seminole hired to interpret for the US side. Abraham, sense-bearer to Micanopy, was said to have held a controlling influence over the head chief during the negotiations. Capt. Sprague recounted:

"His principal slave, Abraham, was the most noted, and for a time an influential man in the nation. He dictated to those of his own color, who to a great degree controlled their masters. They were a most cruel and malignant enemy. For them to surrender would be servitude to the white; but to retain an open warfare, secured to them plunder, liberty, and importance." **77**

In the midst of negotiations, Gadsden privately conferred with Abraham and agreed to add the provision for a Seminole delegation to investigate the territory in return for a two hundred dollar bribe. Gadsden informed President Jackson that he could not have procured the treaty without this bribe. **78** Capt. John T. Sprague also noted: "The mischievous influences of the whites, through the black interpreters, operating upon the malignity and suspicions of the younger class of Indians, nearly defeated the object." **79** In November 1834, Gadsden reported that the Seminoles refused to honor the treaty because "it is a 'white man's treaty,' which they did not understand, as the interpretation of the negotiation was false." **80**

Once the delegates reached the Oklahoma territory, they found the climate unappealing for its severe winters. General Thomas Jesup reported that the Seminole chiefs "cannot live in that country...in consequence of the coldness of the climate." Their black allies were also "averse to moving to such a cold climate." **81** Indian Agent Wiley

Thompson reported that the Seminole chiefs opposed the treaty because it meant integration with their Creek enemies, which would compromise Seminole independence and guarantee the enslavement of their black allies:

“The principle causes which operate to cherish this feeling hostile to emigration are, first, the fear that their reunion with the Creeks, which will subject them to the government and control of the Creek national council, will be a surrender of a large negro property, now held by those people, to the Creeks, as an antagonistic claimant.” **82**

Thompson commented further on the principle role of the black Seminoles in preventing the principle chiefs from supporting removal: “A third cause of hostility to emigration is the influence which it is said the negroes, the very slaves in the nation, have over the Indians.” **83** Staff officer Woodburne Potter concurred that the black maroons were integral to Seminole opposition to the treaty: “opposition of the slaves themselves to being sold to the whites would excite all their energies to prevent emigration, for they dread the idea of being transferred to sugar and cotton plantations where they must be subject to the surveillance of the overseer.” **84** Governor Duval proposed that the “slaves belonging to the Indians must be made to fear for themselves” before emigration could have been successfully enforced. **85**

Nonetheless, US officials were maneuvering behind the scenes to impose the treaty. As the chief delegates returned from the Oklahoma territory, they made a waylay stop at Fort Gibson in Arkansas. Before they prepared to make their way back to Florida, Indian Agent John Phagan and three other Federal agents proposed a treaty to confirm the chiefs approved the western lands. The treaty claimed:

“Whereas, the Seminole Indians of Florida, entered into certain articles of agreement, with James Gadsden...And whereas, the said agreement also stipulates and provides, that a delegation of Seminoles should be sent at the expense of the United States to examine the country to be allotted them among the Creeks, and should this delegation be satisfied with the character of the country and of the favorable disposition of the Creeks to unite with them as one people, then the aforementioned treaty would be considered binding and obligatory upon the parties.” **86**

The treaty at Fort Gibson manipulated an aspect of the Payne's Landing treaty which gave no authority to the delegates to make the final consummation. The original provision of the Payne's Landing treaty held that "should they be satisfied" with the Oklahoma territory then the treaty could pass, which was understood to include the general Seminole Nation. However, the Fort Gibson treaty switched the wording to specifically ascribe the duty of passing the treaty to the chief delegation. The Seminole delegates initially refused, insisting that they only had the authority to investigate the land and report back to their people on its conditions. Indian Agent John Phagan would not accept this and refused to continue home until the delegation would consent to the treaty. **87** The chiefs caved in to Phagan's groundless threats and supposedly signed the treaty. It was widely recognized beforehand that the Seminole delegates had no authority to do so. Gadsden himself had acknowledged this in a letter to the Secretary of War before the Fort Gibson treaty: "The final ratification of the treaty will depend upon the opinion of the seven chiefs selected to explore the country west of the Mississippi river. If that corresponds to the description given, or is equal to the expectations formed of it, there will be no difficulty on the part of the Seminoles." **88** When the chiefs returned home, most of their Seminole followers believed that they were guilty of signing them over for removal, forcing the chiefs to renounce the treaty for their own safety.

Furthermore, Andrew Jackson did not deliver the Fort Gibson treaty to Congress until December of 1833, nine months after it was supposedly signed. Congress would not even ratify the treaty until April of 1834, over a year afterwards. Many claim that treaty was manipulated throughout the delayed time period afterwards. At the time, Major-General Ethan A. Hitchcock questioned:

"It is remarkable that although this treaty was begun in 1832, and alleged to have become completed not very long afterwards, President Jackson did not send it to the Senate for confirmation until 1834, and no attempt was made to execute it until nearly a year after that, by which time the Indians had almost ceased to think of it. Why was this delay? Did President Jackson know, or suspect, that there was something wrong in the history of the treaty? All of the circumstances go to show that the President, in view of his determination to remove the Indians, and not thinking it probable that he could obtain any other treaty, decided not to be over-scrupulous in the matter, and at length sent the fraudulent treaty to the Senate; and as the Indians had no one to speak a word for them, the Senate, in a sort of matter-of-course way, ratified the treaty." **89**

Whatever the circumstances that brought about the fraudulent treaty, the Seminole majority was now more influenced by their black maroon allies, the young Red Stick Creek warriors, and the Miccosukees, all of whom would prove to be the most valiant, vindictive, and ferocious warriors and determined, resolute opponents to removal.

The Indian Agent assured an assembly of Seminole chiefs that, “the President will defend you and your property from all persons, white as well as others” in response to the “idle reports” about an “intention to take from you your negroes.” **90** But the Seminoles had enough experience to know that the claim was laughable. Public records at the time prove it. Florida delegate Richard Keith Call requested permission from President Andrew Jackson to purchase the black Seminoles in order to weaken the Seminoles:

“I have received letters from some of my friends at Tallahassee today, requesting me, if possible, to obtain permission from the government to purchase the Indian right to certain negroes residing among the Seminoles, and supposed to belong to the Indians. If there is no objection to such a purchase, and I presume there can be none, there is no measure which would contribute so much as this to the removal of the Indians. The negroes have great influence among the Indians, they are better agriculturalists, and inferior huntsmen to the Indians, and are violently opposed to leaving the country. If the Indians are permitted to convert them into specie, one great obstacle in the way of removal may be overcome.” **91**

Andrew Jackson affirmatively replied: “There can be no reason for not giving a permission to purchase their slaves as it appears to me, directing the agent to see that they obtain a fair price for them.” After years of kidnapping blacks in the Seminole territory, harassing Seminole chiefs with false slave claims, and petitioning delegates to assist them in retrieving blacks in the Seminole territory, why did slaveholders suddenly want to purchase them (an act that subtly recognized that they had no inherent right to the black Seminoles)? The answer is simple: they knew they had no legal right to own them the entire time. Their very example of freedom was intolerable to Southern planters. The slaveholders of Alachua County also petitioned President Jackson, this time stating their right to seize and enslave the black Seminoles:

“While this lawless and indomitable people continue where they are, the owners of slaves in our territory, and even in the State contiguous, cannot for a moment, in





“Osceola of Florida,” stone lithograph by George Catlin, 1838. Source: *Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC4-4564.*

anything like security, enjoy the possession of this description of property... There are, it is believed, more than five hundred negroes residing with the Seminole Indians, four-fifths of whom are runaways, or descendants of runaways.” **92**

Andrew Jackson responded to the letter promising that if the charges were found correct there was to be “speedy remuneration for the property taken.” This was consistent with Jackson’s policy since the “Negro Fort” massacre: to “return the stolen property and negroes to their former owners.”

In the mean time, the Seminoles and their black allies were acquiring a vast quantity of arms and powder from Cuban fishing ranchos along the southwest coast of Florida. In fact, their principle supply of arms and powder was acquired through these trading stations on the coast, where they could have access to modern weapon technology. It’s very possible that the blacks maintained contact with their Cuban trading partners, whom they established mutually profitable relations with, since their Angola settlement on the Manatee River. The former allies to the Angola community provided assortments of arms and provisions to the rebels. Indian Agent Wiley Thompson reported on a settlement southeast of Charlotte Harbor composed of runaway black slaves, Red Sticks, and Spanish traders. According to Thompson, they were a “lawless motley crew” with an “imposing influence” on the Seminoles. **93** Although it’s quite possible that Spanish traders sympathized with the Seminole-black cause, they preferred to maintain their most profitable customers and the tribe was equally dependent upon them for guns and goods. Since the Seminoles were extremely poor, the purchases mostly relied on the wealthier blacks who probably received a good return on their surplus crop. Thompson would further report that the Seminoles purchased an “unusual quantity of lead and powder” with an arsenal of forty or fifty kegs. He would go on to suggest a “location of a strong force at Tampa Bay” to “coerce these refractory people” and “crush the hopes of those who have been tampering with them.” **94**

As natives and blacks veered away from traditional Seminole authorities, a simple warrior was on the rise to become the most powerful leader in the tribe. In 1804, Osceola was born into the Red Stick Creek tribe on the Chattahoochee River as the son of a Scottish trader named Powell. In 1808, the Creek tribe officially divided between pro-white Lower Creeks and the anti-white Red Stick Creeks. While Lower Creeks had adopted white traditions like private property, the Red Stick Creeks determinately sought to maintain hold of their cultural practices which were threatened by the encroachment of white settlers. A Pan-Amerindian movement had spread to the Upper Creeks of Alabama, or Red Sticks, emphasizing native unity and traditional cultural practices in response to

forced assimilation. In 1812, a war broke out between the two factions, with the US military coming to the support of the pro-white Lower Creeks. In March 1814, the Red Stick Creeks were defeated at Horseshoe Bend. In August, Jackson's treaty impositions were so intolerable, stripping the Creeks of 23 million acres in Georgia and Alabama, that a large portion of the Red Sticks chose to escape down into Florida rather than submit to this embarrassment. The young Osceola was among them.

The Red Stick Creeks, the Miccosukees, and the black Seminoles, became the most defiant factors opposing the US government. Osceola represented a resistant, strong-headed class of young warriors who were making their influence felt in the Seminole Nation. On the other hand, the traditional chiefs were becoming little more than figureheads representing the old structure. Most of the old chiefs made it known to US military officials that they were willing to emigrate on US terms, but they were prevented from doing so by the imposition of the "young men" and "warriors" who paid no attention to their authority. As whites would attempt to force a change in the Seminole power structure by weeding out the Red Sticks and blacks, power was distributed to those very forces. Compared to these increasingly influential groups, the old chiefs seemed relatively conservative. Osceola, neither a chief nor a Seminole, but very powerful in the nation by 1834, exemplified this radical change in power.

In October 1834, Indian Agent Wiley Thompson issued an assembly at Fort King to convince the Seminole chiefs to move west peacefully. Before the assembly, Captain J.B. Russell informed Thompson

“of the settled determination of the majority of the influential chiefs, to disregard the obligations imposed by the treaty of Payne's Landing, and that the most malignant feelings were indulged in towards Charley Emarthlar, who had expressed himself in favor of emigration. His life is in danger, and that of his family.” **95**

On October 23, the council convened. Prior to the council, Micanopy informed Thompson that the chiefs' council had rejected Thompson's order to embark from Tampa Bay at an earlier date. Thompson was astounded at this outright refusal to comply with his orders. He told Micanopy to sleep on his decision and come back the next day with a "better talk." Osceola whispered to head chief Micanopy throughout the proceedings urging him "to be firm in his resolution." Black Seminole leader Abraham, as before, also contributed to Micanopy's steadfast determination. Lt. George McCall observed the influence that Abraham held over Micanopy in these negotiations:

“This negro, Abraham, exercised a wonderful influence over his master; he was a very shrewd fellow, quick and intelligent, but crafty and artful in the extreme. For a negro, he had a remarkably high and broad forehead; but an awful cast in his right eye, which gave to his gentle, insinuating manner a very sinister effect. I doubt not that he had on occasion, as usual, much to do with keeping the chief, who was of a vacillating character, steady in his purpose.” **96**

Thompson delivered the usual paternalistic rhetoric to the council: “The President does not believe that any of his red children here are so dishonest and faithless as to refuse to go.” He addressed their complaints similarly: “Your father, the President, sees all these evils, and will save you from them by removing you west.” One chief after another expressed their indignation and refusal to emigrate, obviously fearful that they would face death from their own people if they didn’t. Motivating the chiefs in their determination, Osceola spoke to them aloud in a private consultation:

“My Brothers! The white people got some of our chiefs to sign a paper to give our lands to them, but our chiefs did not do as we told them to do; they done wrong; we must do right. The agent tells us we must go away from the lands which we live on—our homes, and the graves of our Fathers, and go over the big river among the bad Indians. When the agent tells me to go from my home, I hate him, because I love my home, and will not go from it.”

“My Brothers! When the great spirit tells me to go with the white man, I go: but he tells me not to go.— The white man says I shall go, and he will send people to make me go; but I have a rifle, and I have some powder and some lead. I say, we must not leave our homes and lands. If any of our people want to go west we won’t let them; and I tell them they are our enemies, and we will treat them so, for the great spirit will protect us.” **97**

In council with Thompson, Holate Mico responded to the agent: “I never gave my consent to go west; the whites may say so, but I never gave my consent.” Jumper claimed the Payne’s Landing treaty had no validity as it violated the Camp Multrie treaty: “We are satisfied to go until the end of our twenty years.” Even Charley Emathla, a pro-white chief, claimed the whites forced them into the treaty. He added: “The agent, Major



Painting of Micanopy, ca. 1825. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

Phagan, was a passionate man, and he quarreled with us after we got there. If the agent had done his duty all would have been settled and there would be no difficulty.”

Micanopy would even deny that he signed the treaty. When Thompson showed Micanopy his signature, Osceola intervened in his defense: “although his mark was upon that paper, he meant only to deny that he had signed such a paper as was then interpreted to him” Jumper further clarified that the Treaty at Payne’s Landing gave no authority to the chief delegation to make the decision for removal.

Thompson threatened Micanopy that the US government would withhold any further annuity payments to the Seminoles if they remained in Florida. Osceola told him that neither he nor his warriors “cared if they ever received another dollar from their great father.” Thompson continued speaking but was sharply interrupted by Osceola: “the decision of the chiefs was given; that they did not intend to give any other answer.” **98** Osceola’s eventual rise to Seminole leader started in these famous proceedings. At one point he stood up, calmly moved forward to the treaty of Gibson, raised his knife, and put

it through the treaty proclaiming, “The only treaty I will sign is with this!” **99** After the dramatic outburst, the meeting broke up in confusion.

The outcome of the negotiations was that five of the main chiefs refused to emigrate. Thompson disbanded the five chiefs in-sync with the practice of former governor Duval to marginalize uncooperative chiefly authority. The War Department noted that the measure was of “questionable character” and that the “reaction will be injurious.” It goes on further to note that the Seminoles will “oppose more vigorously the project of emigration” and “will have little difficulty in finding instruments and means for this purpose” due to the “comparatively wealthy negroes mingled with them.” **100** This meant that the black Seminoles with connections to Spanish traders could easily purchase sufficient arms and ammunition to oppose the US military. Knowledgeable of this, Thompson forbade the Seminoles to purchase arms and powder. Osceola indigently responded:

“Am I a negro? A slave? My skin is dark, but not black. I am an Indian—a Seminole. The white man shall not make me black. I will make the white man red with blood; and then blacken him in the sun and rain, where the wolf shall smell of his bones, and the buzzard live upon his flesh.” **101**

In early June 1835, after a heated dispute, Wiley Thompson placed Osceola under arrested and had him confined in irons under guard within Fort King. With great difficulty, it took four soldiers to overpower him. Osceola remained in a frenzy shouting verbal abuses towards Thompson for hours after his arrest. Apparently, he spent the night reflecting that Thompson’s life had now run its course. By the next morning, his anger had subsided and he became overly submissive, signifying his willingness to approve the treaty and induce others to do so. But Thompson refused to let him go free until he had assurance of his good faith. Sending for some of the friendly chiefs to intercede on his behalf, he made a solemn pledge to Thompson that he would return within five days and sign the treaty in council. Sure enough, he arrived five days later with 79 of his followers to witness his affirmation of the treaty. That day, Thompson exultantly wrote of Osceola in a letter to the President: “I have now no doubt of his sincerity, and as little that the great difficult is surmounted.” There were some stories circulated in the abolitionist newspapers after 1839 that Osceola’s black wife was seized and sold into slavery under the orders of Thompson, but there is little evidence to substantiate that claim. Osceola supposedly burst into frantic rage as they took his wife away and was then imprisoned

himself. **102** Thompson naively continued to write about Osceola with great admiration: “Powell, one of the most bold, daring, and intrepid chiefs in the nation, and one that has been more hostile to emigration, and has thrown more embarrassments in my way than any other.” **103**

As white Floridians sighed in relief at the news of Osceola’s conversion, the anti-removal party was busy plotting and garnering their strength to resist removal. Osceola was planning for the right time to strike at Thompson himself. This would be the first move in the three-front offensive to strike back at the white settlements of Florida. Osceola and the new Seminole leadership were a breath of fresh air for the Seminole people who had grown disillusioned with the handful of conciliatory chiefs. Tired of compromise and false negotiations with white officials, the restless Seminole population began to support militant resistance. While Osceola’s resistance to emigration was characteristic of the young Red Stick warriors of the time, he was also undoubtedly influenced by the sixteen blacks who comprised his band. **104** At the very least, his defiance had some backbone with the support of his black Seminole followers.

As debate raged on between Seminole factions on the “emigration question,” the black Seminoles were carefully choosing their allies. Indian Agent Wiley Thompson claimed to oppose the enslavement of the black Seminoles because “it is reasonable to suppose that the negroes would en masse unite with the malcontent Indians,” and prolong the removal date. In April 1835, Col. Alexander Fanning predicted that slave speculators would ruin the attempt to remove the Seminoles by the end of the year. He believed that the “discontented chiefs” would probably emigrate with the compliant chiefs, but that the interference of slave raiders would cause the black Seminoles to join the “discontented” chiefs and give them the strength to resist the government:

“Under an impression that the Indian Negroes can be bought for little or nothing, speculators will shortly be flocking in the Country – The Negroes, who are bold, active and armed will sacrifice some of them to their rage. This is not all: they will quit the party of their owners who are disposed to emigrate and join the discontented chiefs who only want this encouragement to resist the mandates of the Government.”

**105**

In late 1835, a large Seminole council at the Big Swamp decreed that any chief who sold or disposed of their property in preparation to emigrate would be put to death. Thompson had demanded that all the Seminole chiefs dispose of their cattle to the Indian

Agency, who would then sell their cattle and reimburse them with the proceeds in the Oklahoma territory. Thompson heard about the edict and now conceded that “actual force must be resorted to for the purpose of effecting the removal.” **106** But the sale of cattle was indefinitely postponed from the threat of the anti-removal party. Holato Mathla, a pro-white chief, panicked and quickly assembled 450 of his followers to take refuge at Fort Brooke. Fearing that the proceedings of their secret council had been divulged, the anti-removal party now moved to make an example out of the sell-out chiefs. Chief Charley Emathla was the first victim of the Big Swamp decree. Returning home from Fort King after selling his cattle, he was waylaid by Osceola’s band of Micosukees. Aware that his life was threatened, Emathla had remained far in advance of the rest of the party for their own protection. Osceola fired first before eight other musket balls would penetrate through his body. Afterwards, an assortment of gold and silver received from the cattle sales was found on his body. Osceola forbade any of his warriors to touch it because it was “made of the red man’s blood,” and threw off the coins into every direction. **107**

In the mean time, the black Seminoles maneuvered through the sugar plantations of East Florida, recruiting and procuring the loyalty of the slave population in the vicinity. Throughout December, multiple skirmishes took place between the military and Osceola’s men, further raising tensions. On December 17, Osceola’s band made the first strike of the war, devastating the plantations of Capt. Priest at Wacahouta and Capt. Simmons at Palatka Road, eight miles from the town of Micanopy. On the 18<sup>th</sup>, Col. Clinch detached a force of 150 militiamen under Colonel Warren to scout the area and possibly drive out the disaffected Seminoles. As his command left, Warren detached three baggage wagons to their destination. The wagons were attacked and raided by sixty Seminoles under Osceola as they passed over the prairie, but the wagon escort escaped to Micanopy unharmed. Shortly thereafter, Captain M’Lemore’s company came upon the scene and charged forward against Osceola’s warriors. But only twelve men responded to the call and the company was forced to treat. In turn, eight of the men were killed, six were wounded, and only one wagon was recovered unharmed. The affair known as the Battle of Black Point was the first of the war. **108** By the end of December, Florida’s powder keg completely erupted.



## Chapter 6

### “A Negro, Not an Indian War”: The Second Seminole War (1835-1838)

#### **Three-front Assault: Slave Uprising, Thompson’s Assassination, Dade Massacre**

In Key West, during the winter of 1835, Mayor William Adee Whitehead recalled that the entire town was on edge in the apprehension of a Seminole surprise attack. When a drum sound was heard in the middle of one night, the whites panicked and formed a patrol in fear that “the sound heard *might have been* some signal agreed upon between the Indians and Negroes, and it was therefore advisable that some of the houses of the latter should be visited.” Whitehead recalled that “the improbability of any cooperation of the Negroes with the enemy was not allowed to have any weight” and the patrols avidly searched the various slave quarters of the city. Whitehead recalled humorously that the “drumbeat” was actually the sound of a dog thumping his leg on a water cistern while scratching off his flees. **1** Such paranoia and fear were widespread prior to the Seminole War, although few truly believed that their slaves would unify with their “savage” enemy.

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, a familiar fear spread across the Florida frontier. Aware that the Seminoles were preparing to resist removal with their black allies beside them, Floridians conjured the familiar boogeyman of slave insurrection. But few, aside from a handful of military and government officials, could accurately gauge the extent of the slave threat they were facing. Planters balanced their faith in the “contentedness” of their slavery property with the actual realization that Seminole-black relations had long been a viable alternative from bondage. But while aware there was potential for a unified slave-black Seminole-Seminole front, few seriously considered the prospect of their slaves rising up against them. Floridian slaveholders somewhat considered, but strongly underestimated, the black Seminoles, free blacks, and plantation slaves as a serious factor of Seminole resistance. On December 22, 1835, East Florida planter mistress Corinna Brown noted: “There was some alarm that the negroes should rise & fight with the Indians, but this fear has subsided & peace & good order reigns.” **2**

This was only several days prior to the outbreak of what was arguably the largest slave insurrection in US history.

There are multiple reasons why an insurrection with the magnitude of the East Florida slave revolt has been marginalized, ignored, or simply forgotten by mainstream history: For one, the orthodox historical belief that there were no large-scale slave revolts or uprisings after the Nat Turner revolt of 1831; the Southern press was effectively censored following the Nat Turner revolt, fearing that news of slave unrest could incite another revolt; many Seminole War historians have failed to distinguish the plantation slaves, newly emancipated at the outbreak of the war, from the black Seminole maroons who had long been Seminole allies; the 1836 “gag rule” that prohibited Congressional discussion of abolitionism or any topic involving slavery; the press reports at the time that claimed the Seminoles had “captured” or “stolen” plantation slaves during their raids, making it appear to outsiders as if the rebel slaves were taken against their will. But letters, reports, diaries, and other sources of information from Floridians, military officials, and Seminole War participants make it clear that many were aware that their slaves had allied with the Seminoles, plotted the uprising, and left the plantations on their own free will. In addition, planters, mostly incapable of believing that their slaves could possibly harbor any animosities towards their state of bondage, often used the terms “stolen” or “captured” interchangeably with running away. They wanted to make it appear, in the words of a Seminole War officer, as if their slaves were “attached to their owners from motives of gratitude and affection.” **3**

Most traditional and even many revisionist Seminole war historians have failed to recognize or distinguish the hundreds of plantation slaves who rose up in arms at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War. Some historians have done so, such as Kenneth Wiggins Porter’s excellent work on the involvement of slaves in the Seminole War, but still failed to place their actions in the context of a large-scale slave revolt. Even the revisionist history on slavery that has emphasized slave resistance and revolts, discussing the black Seminoles in-depth, has failed to mention the St. John’s River uprising as a distinct slave rebellion. It becomes even more amazing that this slave revolt has been discarded from the pages of history when considering its scale of white death, property-loss, slave participation, duration, and intensity. The estimated number of slave participants ranges from four or five hundred to over a thousand. Florida historian Canter Brown claims that “When open warfare commenced in December 1835 and January 1836, hundreds-if not 1,000 or more-bondsmen cooperated by deserting to Indian and black settlements.” **4**

To contemporary observers, the Second Seminole War appeared to be an all-out race war between whites and people of color. US politicians who debated the Seminole war at the time surely believed the conflict was drawn along racial lines. Expansionist politician Thomas H. Benton spoke to the Senate of the desolation of 41,000 square miles in Florida “made so by the ravages of colored races upon the white!” **5** Blacks in Florida at the time usually belonged to one of three categories: 1) Plantation slaves concentrated on the cotton and sugar plantations of Middle and East Florida 2) Free blacks in the vicinity of St. Augustine and Pensacola who had attained their freedom under Spanish rule 3) The black maroon allies to the Seminoles who were either born among the black Seminoles, of mixed Seminole-black blood, lived their lives in Seminole territory, or were more recent fugitives. All three of these groups would come to play a pivotal role in the initial outbreak of the Second Seminole War.

The revolt handicapped the powerful sugar economy of East Florida, inflicting more destruction, loss of civilian life, and loss of property than any other event in the long, expensive, and bloody war. A number ranging from four hundred to a thousand slaves, a larger number than any other recorded slave insurrection, joined the Seminoles and their black allies in eradicating the Florida frontier, secretly corresponding with their emissaries, hiding them about the place, and taking up arms from their dead masters when the uprising began. While apparently a failure, some slaves still remained among the black Seminoles when they received their freedom years later, meaning that a handful of slaves had openly revolted against their bondage and actually won – something that was unheard of again until the Civil War.

From the summer to the winter of 1835, the black Seminole and Seminole leaders worked to recruit slaves in the St. Augustine plantations and build up arms on the southwest Florida coast for the eventual conflict. Covert recruitment melded ties between field slaves and the black Seminoles. Yaha Hajo, a Seminole war chief affiliated with head chief Micanopy’s black advisor Abraham, and black Seminole leader John Caesar, second hand to King Phillip, were mostly responsible for the recruitment. Caesar was a very influential and intelligent black Seminole sub-chief. He was commissioned by the chiefs to the plantations on the St. John’s region to “hold out inducements to the negroes to join them.” Obviously these “inducements” were promises of freedom and autonomy if the plantation slaves joined the resistance. As the black Seminole leaders secretly moved among the slave population, they “endeavored to seduce them from their allegiance to their owners, with promises of liberty and plunder.” **6** A military officer reported the presence of black Seminoles “tampering with the negroes” on the sugar plantations of

Cruger and Depeyster. <sup>7</sup> This “tampering” was forging an alliance with the East Florida slaves and plotting the uprising against their owners once the conflict broke out.

It was understood that the first Seminole and black assault would coincide with a general uprising of slaves in the region. Frank Berry, a former slave from Jacksonville, believed that the Seminoles could be credited for “inciting many uprisings and wholesale escapes among the slaves.” <sup>8</sup> General Thomas Jesup would later report not only the close connection between the plantation slaves and black Seminoles but the “understanding that a considerable force should join on the first blow being struck.” <sup>9</sup> General Duncan Clinch foresaw the collusion between plantation slaves and black Seminoles: “The whole frontier may be laid waste by a combination of the Indians, the Indian negroes, and the negroes on the plantations.” In October 1835, Clinch reported the planter fears of a “secret and improper communication between the refractory Indians, Indian negroes, and plantation negroes.” Again in December,

“All the information I receive in relation to the movements of the Indians, represent them as being in considerable force, and manifesting a determination to engage in War, murder, and plunder. It appears also that they are joined by the negroes, and if they are not promptly put down, this spirit may extend to the plantations.” <sup>10</sup>

General Jesup later became aware of the secret arrangement between the Seminoles, black Seminoles, and slaves to join together in arms at the outbreak of war:

“Having been apprised, by prisoners taken in the preceding campaign, of an arrangement entered into previous to the war, through the Seminole negroes, between the Indians and their slaves, that so soon as hostilities should commence, the latter were to join them and take up arms, I informed the Indians that all their negroes must be separated from them, and sent out of the country.” <sup>11</sup>

In anticipation of a possible slave uprising, General Hernandez wrote Governor Eaton, requesting “that a part of the militia should be held in readiness to protect the Inhabitants from any danger”:

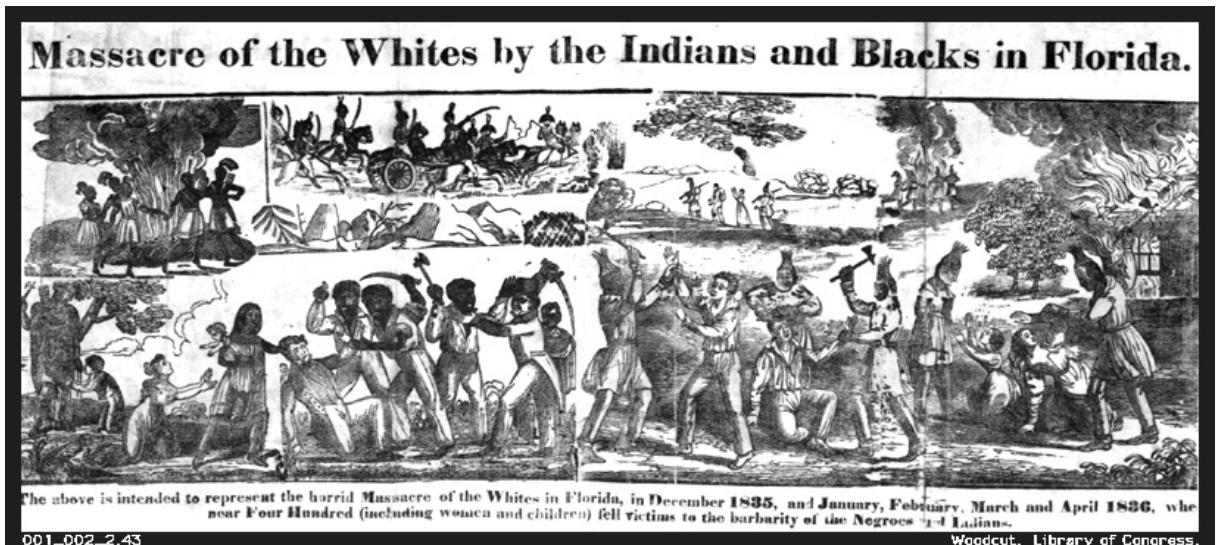
“Much apprehension is already manifested by the community at large on this subject. And particularly as there are a large number of Negroes amongst the Indians, who

may be under the influence of Abolitionists of the North, whose machinations, are now endangering our safety.” **12**

The slaves hid the black Seminoles about the place in preparation for the attack. On December 26, 1835, the Seminoles, black Seminoles, and black slaves initiated the most coordinated uprising of indigenous people and blacks in the history of the United States. Chief Emathla, or King Phillip, and black Seminole John Caesar, with an estimated force of 100 to 120 blacks and Seminoles, raided and burned down five plantations on the St. John’s River in two days. **13** On December 31, the Jacksonville *Courier* reported that Mr. Levy’s plantation was burned several days before “but we are confident it was the act of negroes.” **14** Hundreds of local slaves fled to the Seminoles, under arms and covered in war paint to symbolize their new allegiance. East Floridian Earl C. Tanner recounted:

“The general plan of the Indians has been to lurk about the plantations until they can kill the few whites to found and then by force and persuasion carry off the negroes who are immediately painted and armed. In this way near 400 have been already lost in E. Florida and there is not now in all the country east of the River St. Johns a person attending to his usual avocations.” **15**

A letter from St. Augustine lamented that the present crop was burnt and destroyed and there were no hopes of planting for the approaching season or even the following one: “in the meantime starvation must be the consequence with hundreds who, heretofore, were in comparatively easy circumstances.” **16** Hundreds of wealthy families who had lived easy off of the exploitation of slave labor were thrown into starvation and absolute poverty at the hands of their own “property.” One sugar plantation fell after another as the Seminoles, maroons, and plantation slaves combined in a frenzied scourge of revenge and retaliation. An account summarized the horrors East Florida planters experienced - the culmination of abuses and oppression they had inflicted on the Seminoles and blacks for many years - “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.” **17** Wealthy planters, “who from a competence acquired by industry and persevering enterprise,” cried a report from



“Massacre of the Whites by the Indians and Blacks in Florida,” engraving depicting the slave uprising at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War, from *An Authentic Narrative of the Seminole War*. D. F. Blanchard, 1836.

Source: *Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division LC-USZ62-366*.

St. Augustine, “have, in many instances, been suddenly overwhelmed with absolute poverty and the deepest distress.” **18** The refugees of St. Augustine had formed a committee pleading with the Federal government to supply them relief and emergency rations to save them from starvation. What had once been a bustling region with a highly lucrative slave-based sugar economy now found itself crushed under the retaliation of the very people who had been excluded and exploited to build its wealth. Myer M. Cohen, an officer during the first months of the war, wrote in his account:

“The plantations extending from Cape Florida to Augustine, were visited in turn, and nearly all the buildings, including the sugar mills, were destroyed. It is estimated that property to the amount of two hundred thousand dollars was burnt in one week. Nothing was left except the storehouses containing corn and provisions; these were reserved by the Indians for their own consumption. Independently of this destruction of property, the loss to some of the planters was ruinous, in respect to their negroes; upwards of three hundred having been carried off; Col. Rees alone lost about one hundred and sixty.” **19**

In the month of January alone, five hundred families were driven from their homes “in a situation bordering upon starvation,” and sought refuge in St. Augustine “and other fortified places.” **20** As the world was falling apart around them, the planters were aware of who they had to fear. They assembled three hundred of their slaves within St. Augustine to prevent them from joining arms with the Seminoles and blacks: “It was feared...that their sympathies would be with the Indians, and that they would aid in concert with them.” **21** Most of these slaves had “lived on the frontiers in the neighbourhood of the Indians, spoke their language, and many of the men had wives among the Indian negroes, and the Indian negroes had wives among them.” **22** As the slaves crowded within St. Augustine, the planters felt “strong apprehensions...that they would fire the town, and that, during the confusion resulting therefrom, the Indians might rush in.” **23**

The slaves were evacuated from the St. Joseph’s plantations of Bulow, Williams, Dupont, and Hernandez. They would have undoubtedly disaffected with their counterparts had they not been constrained in the city. The refugees within the city formed a militia patrol. But when they attempted to stock up on arms and ammunition, they found that only thirty or forty rusty muskets, rifles, and shotguns were left in the city, not ten of which could fire. Furthermore, all the powder had been bought up by a party of Seminoles before hostilities broke out. The free blacks and urban slaves in St. Augustine had secretly assisted the uprising by providing the Seminoles and plantation slaves with all the good arms and ammunition from the city’s stores. In apprehension, the planters took their slaves to Anastasia Island. Shortly after, the Seminoles destroyed the St. Joseph’s area. **24** The conflict was appearing to be, as Thomas Benton put it, a war of the “colored races upon the white!”

Plantation after plantation was laid to waste. On the large plantations, slaves absconded in unbelievable numbers. At Spring Garden on the St. John’s River, a plantation owned by an absent overseer from South Carolina, more than three hundred slaves were reported to have been “carried away” by the Seminoles. Woodburne Potter reported the horror: “The scene of destruction of the east side of the river, and along the St. Johns River, is truly heart-rending.” The “principle ravages” occurred on the east side of the St. John’s River, from St. Augustine to the south. Near the Halifax River, the Seminoles destroyed the plantations of Depeyster and ran off with about sixty slaves. His “negroes, with but one or two exceptions,” were “captured and taken off.” They devastated Major Heriot’s plantation and moved off with eighty of his slaves. **25** While Joseph M. Hernandez, East Florida militia leader, was escaping from a Seminole raid on his St. Joseph’s plantation, “so closely was he pressed, that the Indians captured about a



“The Indians and Negroes Massacreing the Whites in Florida, in January 1836,” woodcut engraving depicting the slave uprising at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War, from *A True and Authentic Account of the Indian War in Florida*, Saunders & Van Welt, 1836.

dozen of the negroes as he was in the act of taking them away.” 26 Potter reported a number of East Florida slaves flocking to the Seminole ranks:

“But the principle ravages had been along the east side, from St. Augustine to the south, wherever a settlement could be found. Near the Halifax River they destroyed the buildings of Mr. Depeyster, with whose negroes they formed a league, and being supplied by them with a boat, crossed the river, and fired the establishment of Mr. Dummett; but a faithful servant who had concealed himself when he found the Indians approaching, succeeded in extinguishing the flames before they attained much headway. Major Heriot’s plantation was laid waste – his houses were consumed, and eighty of his negroes moved off with the Indians.” 27

Almost every plantation from St. Augustine to Cape Florida was consumed by the uprising. By January 6<sup>th</sup>, even the isolated Miami River plantation of Richard Fitzpatrick, a territorial council member, found itself under imminent threat from a Seminole invasion. James Wright, the overseer, was forced to evacuate all the slaves and



local white families. But Wright faced considerable difficulty removing Fitzpatrick's sixty slaves, who realized that they themselves were not threatened by the Seminoles and desired to join them. Fitzpatrick wrote that Wright "was obliged to abandon the plantation, leaving everything behind him except the negroes, which by great exertions he removed, and thus prevented them from falling into the hands of the Indians..." **28**

Some of the plantations burned down were the wealthiest in the United States, being the main vestibules of the large sugar industry in northeastern Florida. The uprising eradicated sixteen large sugar plantations in the month of January alone. **29** The East Florida planters evacuated or bunkered down in absolute terror at their imminent destruction. A St. Augustine refugee explained why the white residents had good reason to fear:

"Now just conceive their position-eight hundred or one thousand warriors, animated by sentiments of hatred and revenge, and well aware what is to be their fate by losing their superiority-with them three or four hundred negroes of their own, better disciplined and more intelligent than themselves, to whom there is a daily succession of runaway negroes from the plantations, supplied with arms and ammunition from the deceased whites. Conceive these people living upon roots, if necessary, for weeks entire, flying before regular charges of disciplined troops, or avoiding fortresses or stockades; but from ambushes and retreats cutting off the most valuable lives of individuals, or attacking and destroying valuable properties." **30**

While reports and letters decried the "savagery" and "barbarity" of the Seminoles and blacks in their massacres of the East Florida whites, one account conceded that an escaped slave, "who had enlisted in the cause of the enemy," felt pity for and protected Mrs. William Godfrey and her several children from the Seminoles, who sought her out because her husband had enlisted in the East Florida militia. The escaped slave had left his own children in bondage and worried that the whites would possibly harm them if he was found a culprit for murdering a family. He provided the starving Mrs. Godfrey and her children with food, water, and blankets, even helping them escape from their miserable, diseased hide-out in the swamp "although at the risk of his own life!" **31**

In April 1836, East Florida marshal Samuel Blair suggested that "the present condition of the Country is such as to require unusual vigilance in relation to its slave population" and that it was generally believed the fugitive slaves from St. Augustine "held communication with the Indians" at the war's outbreak. English traveler John

Benwell, finding himself entrenched in Seminole war fighting while traveling through Florida, encountered a fugitive slave in the vicinity of East Florida: “He refused to tell me his master's name, but said there were hundreds of negroes fighting with the Indians, six from the same plantation as himself.” **32**

In a letter to government officials in May 1838, Gad Humphreys, former Indian Agent to the Seminoles, advanced a claim for fifty-nine slaves that fled from his Alachua plantation: “My heaviest loss consisted in negroes; a valuable gang of thirty-four of whom were captured by the enemy in the summer of 1836; some twenty-five others absconded before the war commenced, and took refuge in the Indian country.” **33**

In June, Benjamin A. Putnam wrote a letter to the Secretary of War Lewis Cass: “Many have escaped to and joined the Indians, and furnished them with much important information and if strong measures were not taken to restrain our slaves, there is but little doubt that we should soon be assailed with a servile as well as Indian War.” **34** While conceding to the slave threat, Putnam was unable, or perhaps willing, to admit what the war already was. General Thomas Sidney Jesup, on the other hand, conceded to the war’s true character. In December 1836, Jesup warned that the possible results of the slave revolt could be drastic if it spread, going so far as to declare the conflict “a negro war”: “This you may be assured, is a negro, not an Indian war; and if it be not speedily put down, the south will feel the effects of it on their slave population before the end of the next season.” Jesup, being a newcomer to the war, did not realize that the St. John’s River valley had been feeling its effects for over a year by this time. Intelligence reports soon made him aware that the “depredations committed on the plantations east of the St. John’s were perpetuated by the plantation negroes, headed by an Indian negro named John Caesar.” **35**

A total of 21 sugar plantations in East Florida were obliterated in the first few months of the uprising, destroying the region’s extensive sugar industry. Woodbine Potter estimated the great costs that the insurrection inflicted on the East Florida plantation economy: “The loss of these planters is incalculable – it cannot fall short of two millions of dollars in improvements alone, independent of the immense inconvenience which they must suffer in not being able to make their crops.” **36** East Floridian Jane Murray Sheldon reported that it eventually became general knowledge that the slaves had conspired with the Seminoles in the outbreak of hostilities:

“We remained in St. Augustine two years, during which time I saw many Indian prisoners, who were brought in to be sent West. There were a good many negroes captured with them, and it came to light that the negroes were in sympathy and had

aided them in the first outbreak. I saw a number of the Cruger and Depyste slaves and from them learned that they had secreted the Indians near there until the main body came up.” **37**

The slave revolt would continue to play a central role throughout the first two years of the Seminole war, contributing to its successes and failures, climaxes and downturns. Many of the unique features of the Seminole war, for instance, its prolonged length, could be attributed to the momentum furnished by the defected slave population of the St. John’s River region.

Coordinated with the St. John’s River uprising, the black-Seminole offensive struck in two other fronts. On December 25, Osceola led his band of sixty Miccosukee warriors to assassinate Indian Agent Wiley Thompson in vengeance for his imprisonment and mistreatment, as well as for ardently attempting to enforce Seminole removal. For several days, Osceola’s band of Miccosukees sat in the bushes outside of Fort King awaiting the right time to strike. On the 28<sup>th</sup>, they received their chance when Thompson and his partner Lieut. Constantine Smith took a stroll on the path just outside of the fort. As soon as the two men reached the crest of the hill, Osceola’s band opened fire and instantly killed them both. Thompson’s body was found pierced with twenty-four musket balls and Lieut. Smith’s body with thirteen. The Miccosukees immediately scalped them and mutilated their bodies, proceeding over to the sutler’s store a mile down the road where they killed three of the men inside and set the building on fire. They then hurried to the Wahoo Swamp to join the principle force of Seminoles and blacks in the main ambush. **38** Yet for his reputation and legacy of violence, Osceola was also known for carefully advising his followers to spare the lives of women and children: “It is not upon them that we make war and draw the scalping-knife, it is upon men; let us act like men.” **39**

Alligator, a main Seminole chief, reported that the rebels had prepared for the ambush on Major Francis Dade’s regiment as soon as it commenced from Fort Brooke “as the negroes there had reported that two companies were preparing to march.” **40** He was speaking of Luis Pacheco, the slave employed to guide Major Dade’s force from Fort Brooke to Fort King. Luis was hired from Mrs. Pacheco by Capt. John C. Casey to guide Dade’s forces through the wilderness. He was a literate and highly intelligent slave who spoke English, Spanish, French, and Seminole. **41** In 1824, he had learned the Seminole language when he escaped from his master, Major James McIntosh, to Seminole lands



Viewing the demise of Major Dade and his command, 1847. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

and remained there for several years. During his time in the reservation, he had developed close ties with the black Seminole leadership and communicated with them as he led Dade's column to the black and Seminole grounds. Pacheco notified his black friends of the route he intended to lead Dade's detachment and what would be the stopping places, instructing them on where they could best conceal themselves to ambush the regiment. **42** Dade's regiment numbered 102 soldiers and 8 officers. Under the command of Micanopy, Alligator, Jumper, and Abraham, 180 Seminoles and blacks awaited the ambush behind trees and high palmettos in a pine barren outside of the Wahoo Swamp. When Osceola's band failed to arrive on time for the attack from Fort King, the black-Seminole council agreed not to pass up this opportunity to wait for him.

On December 28, Dade's force arrived to its destination. **43** Major Dade and Luis Pacheco stood side by side leading the column behind them. At eight o'clock in the morning, Micanopy fired the first rifle and Major Dade instantly fell dead from his horse. Pacheco made such a sudden drop to the ground that the few survivors rightfully suspected his collusion with the ambush. Pacheco, hiding in the tall grass, managed to

survive the onslaught. The Seminoles spared his life on two separate occasions when Jumper intervened on his behalf, and then he proceeded to move off with the rebels when the battle was over. A survivor of the attack noted his suspicions about Pacheco: “We have since learned that this fellow shammed death – that his life was afterwards spared by the intercession of the Chief, Jumper, and that being an educated negro, he read all the dispatches and letters that were found about the dead, to the victors.” **44**

Over half of Dade’s command laid dead on the ground after the first volley of shots. The surviving soldiers and officers were sent into disarray, firing wildly and sporadically and taking cover behind a six-pound cannon, before the few survivors fell back and established a small breastwork for protection. When the survivors ran out of ammunition, the blacks entered the log-pen and put them to death. Only three soldiers managed to escape, only one of which would live long enough to tell the story. A total of eight US officers and ninety-eight soldiers lay dead on the battlefield. In contrast, the rebels only suffered three dead and eight wounded. Waiting until their Seminole allies had left the vicinity, the blacks went about the battle ground brutally mutilating the dead bodies of soldiers, killing the survivors, and plundering their possessions. They cried out “what have you got to sell?” in mockery of the US troops who had always humiliated them when they showed up at the forts to trade. Private Ransom Clarke, the sole survivor of the attack, depicted this scene in horror:

“Immediately upon their retreat, forty or fifty negroes galloped up on horseback and alighted, tied their breasts, and commenced with horrid shouts and yells the butchery of the wounded, together with an indiscriminate plunder, stripping the bodies of the dead of clothing, watches, and money, and splitting open the heads of all those who showed the least sign of life, with their axes and knives, and accompanying their bloody work with obscene and taunting derisions, and with frequent cries of “what have you got to sell?” **45**

But staff officer Woodburne Potter refuted some of these exaggerations of brutality after he later examined the battle scene:

“I must confess that the appearance of the body on the 20th of February did not seem to indicate that such violence had been committed on him, although one of the slain (a private) was found in a truly revolting condition — a part of his body had been cut off and crammed into his mouth! The negroes stripped all the officers and some of

the men of their clothing, but left many valuables upon their persons, which were discovered upon examination by Major Mountfort, of General Gaines' command, and an account carefully taken by the Major, in order to transfer the articles respectively to the deceased's relatives.” **46**

The Seminole and black rebels clearly remembered Francis Dade's prior commissions in Florida. In the winter of 1826 and spring of 1827, Governor William Duval ordered Dade to forcefully round up the Seminoles and blacks back into the reservation limits. During this time period, the Seminoles and black became well-acquainted with the extent of Dade's brutality. He was also commissioned to intimidate the main chiefs of the Seminole Nation into accepting the election of pro-white Miccosukee chief John Hicks as head chief. On the day of the election, Dade arrived at the Indian Agency with his regiment behind him to ensure that Micanopy and other anti-white chiefs would accept John Hick's inauguration. Perhaps their memories backtracked to their past encounters with Dade when they tore apart his command with the same ruthless force he had once used against them. **47**

The coordination of multiple strikes began the rebellion. It was a unified offensive of Seminoles, black Seminoles, black slaves, and free blacks in St. Augustine. The forces of the oppressed in Florida united in solidarity against their common oppressor on several fronts. No native people in history would fight the US government as effectively as the Seminoles, drawing out huge sums of money from the public treasury, inflicting large losses of civilian and soldier lives, and dragging out the war longer than any other war in US history up until Vietnam, forcing the Federal government to concede their right to remain on their lands. No slave revolt would reach the scale and intensity of the black plantation rebels who eliminated Florida's lavish sugar plantation-complex in the St. John's River Valley. No other slave rebels or liberation fighters would win their right to liberty again until the Civil War. In this sense, 19<sup>th</sup> century Florida became the historical amalgam of black and indigenous militancy and successful resistance in the United States.

### **The Second Seminole War, US Imperialism, Seminole Victories**

If the US military had a precedent to the Vietnam War, it wasn't thousands of miles away in a distant jungle, but right at home in one of its territorial possessions. Over a century before the Vietnam War, the US was tied down in an unwinnable, prolonged,

and costly conflict in the Florida territory. The Second Seminole War and the Vietnam War were the only wars the United States ever lost. In both instances, the US occupation fought an enemy force knowledgeable of the surrounding environment, tolerant of the hostile climate, camouflaged by its surroundings, supported by the population, skilled in guerilla warfare, and resilient in resistance. The officers, soldiers, and other participants in the war would come to eventually oppose the war policy. The war created popular protest due to its bottom-hole expenditure of public wealth, high casualty rate, and inhumane methods. While the US forces possessed superior training, modern weapon technology, and an almost endless amount of resources to expend, they were to be constantly defeated at the hands of a rag-tag army of guerilla warriors. The US forces would resort to brutal methods that accomplished little other than increasing public opposition and the resentment of the rebel insurgency. Even though the war's opponents perceived the conflict as inherently unjust, the spectrum of acceptable public debate was limited to quarreling over the most efficient means to win the war. Even through politicians and newspapers criticized the unlawful tactics in carrying out the war – the betrayal of negotiations, the use of bloodhounds, the killing of prisoners - they never opposed the very policies of native extermination and slavery expansion on which the war was based.

The war's opponents ranged from pacifists to radicals. Abolitionists, most notably Ohio Congressman Joshua R. Giddings, denounced the Second Seminole War as little more than a slave-hunting raid for the profits of the South's slaveholding elite. At a time when the South repetitiously used the slogan of "state's rights" to defend slavery, the true intentions of the war had to be kept quiet from the general public. News of the Federal government expending millions of tax dollars to retrieve fugitive slaves would have provoked widespread public outrage against the war. The gag rule of 1836 kept discussion of slavery in Congress under wraps until Joshua R. Giddings would bring up the issue in connection with the Seminole War in 1841. More accurately, the general intention of the war was to destroy the "bad example" that armed black maroon settlements had on the South's slave population. The successful Vietnamese revolution also posed a "bad example" for the Asian Orient, giving other colonized powers the motivation to overthrow colonial powers, i.e. "the domino effect." The spread of drapetomania and Communism were synonymous. The black Seminoles were the potential "domino effect" for slavery in the South - a threat to the most fundamental institutions of elite power. Congress never turned down a dime requested for the war, spending no less than forty million dollars in preserving the stability of Southern slavery and hunting down rebel slaves. Around 1,500 US soldiers died in the conflict - the

majority of deaths resulting from epidemic outbreaks in the Florida swamps. **48** And, after the costs in soldier's lives and vast public expenditure, the war was still largely a failure in its initial goals. While most of the Seminoles were removed, a resilient faction of Seminoles and Miccosukees continued to inhabit the extensive and impenetrable Everglades. Most of the black maroons and rebel slaves were conceded their freedom in order to divide the resistance and prevent any further slave insurrection, as well as to procure their services as guides, interpreters, and diplomats in the war.

A day after the attack on Dade's regiment, a Seminole scout reported back to the rebels that US troops were planning to cross the Withlacoochee River, coming to support Dade's regiment in quashing the Seminole and black uprising. General Duncan Lamont Clinch commanded two hundred regulars and 460 militia volunteers under General Richard Keith Call. By the time Osceola had reached the Wahoo Swamp from Fort King, the ambush of Dade's forces was already over. But he and his band, eager for action, decided to confront Clinch's force. After a drunken celebration the night of the Dade "massacre" and Thompson's assassination, Osceola and Alligator assembled their parties together and quickly hurried over to the Withlacoochee Cove. John Horse, also known as Gopher John or John Cavallo, was a sub-chief in Alligator's band and commanded the black fighters in the surprise assault. General Clinch's regiment had yet to receive word of the Dade "massacre."

On December 30, the Seminoles and blacks posted themselves in a hammock on the south side of the Withlacoochee River, waiting to intercept Clinch's forces as they crossed the river. Deceived by his guides, Clinch found the river difficult to ford and the current very rapid. Finding a small canoe, he moved his regiment over the river seven to eight men at a time. When his regulars had all crossed over, Osceola let loose a shrilling war-whoop and the rebels began to shower bullets down on the US soldiers. The hotly-contested battle lasted an hour and fifteen minutes. The Seminoles and blacks primarily aimed at the military officers in order to "pick off the big braves, then massacre the big knives at close fight with their tomahawk." **49** The rebels had chosen the right time to attack. Call's volunteers were spectators on the other side of the river, unable to cross it in time to support Clinch and the regulars. The US troops suffered a total of 63 casualties in the surprise attack. A soldier in Clinch's regiment recalled the fight:

"The Indians kept up a continual screeching and yelling, noise enough to frighten the timid. They would commence with a low growling noise which finally bust into a fiendish yell which rang through the forest. Their habit is to yell after each shot, casting themselves prone, falling upon their left side, in which position they load



their rifles and again peer through the thicket to get good aim. This stratagem of falling is to throw the white man on the wrong scent, as it is customary to fire at the flash of the Indian's rifle." **50**

Clinch's regiment eventually charged forward and forced the rebels to relinquish ground, retreating to the hammock in the rear and beyond. Clinch's regiment held the battlefield in the end, but suffered overwhelming losses compared to the Seminoles and blacks. **51** Osceola and Alligator's forces numbered some 250 warriors, including thirty black Seminoles. Even though the blacks were only a small minority of the force, they suffered disproportionately. Two of the three warriors killed in the assault were blacks belonging to Micanopy. Afterwards Micanopy forbade his blacks to participate in the conflict, causing many to disregard his authority as head chief. **52** Osceola sent a prophetic message to General Clinch after the battle:

"You have guns and so have we; you have powder and so have we; you have men and so have we; you men will fight, and so will ours into the last drop of Seminoles' blood has moistened the dust of his hunting-ground." **53**

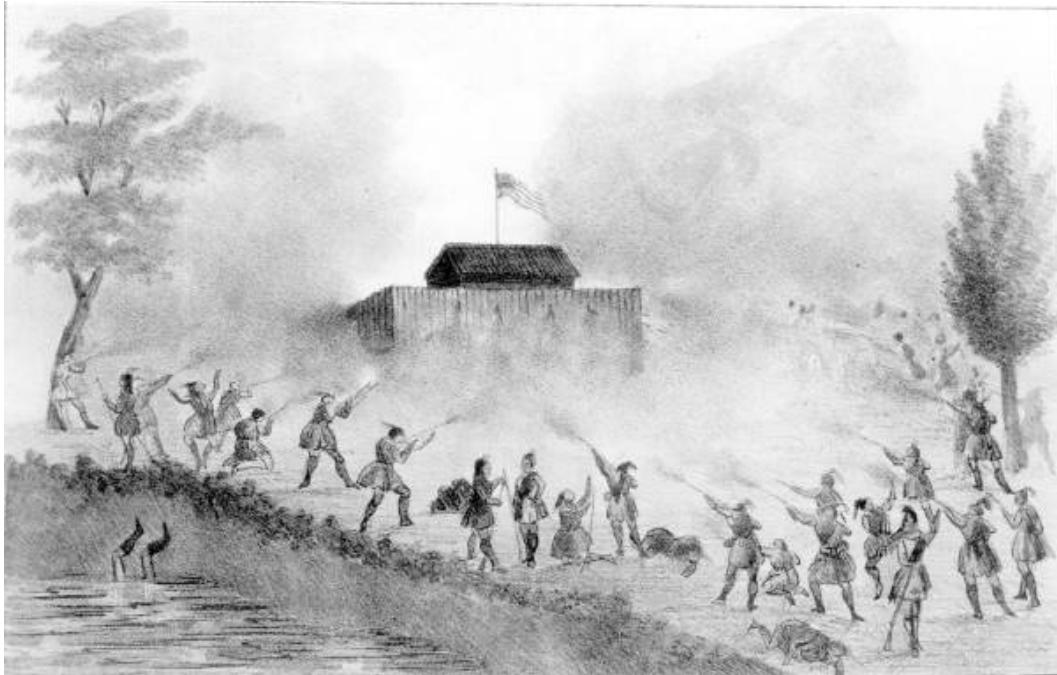
The daily influx of runaway slaves from the East Florida plantations filled up the black Seminole ranks, contributing highly to their initial successes in the war. A week into 1836, Capt. F.S. Belton wrote from Fort Brooke: "This place is invested by all the Florida Indians in the field, with a large accession of Negroes, particularly from the plantations of Tomoka & Smyrna." **54** In late January, Lieutenant Joseph Harris noted of the Seminoles: "They have been strongly reinforced of late by runaway and stolen negroes." It was no wonder that when Major General Scott assumed command at the start of the war, he "was directed to allow no pacification with the Indians while a living slave belonging to the white man remained in their possession." **55** This order from Andrew Jackson blatantly proved that the primary intention of the war was for hunting down fugitive slaves. The US government was to make it clear that the Seminoles would not live in peace as long as the blacks remained among them. When Congress would debate why the initial military campaign against the Seminoles was unsuccessful, there was no mention that the main focus and policy of the war was to hunt down fugitive slaves and black maroons.

After defeating Clinch, General Edmund Gaines was next. While at first glance it seemed that the rebels were indiscriminately fighting US military aggression, at a closer

look it was apparent that they were highly motivated by revenge. Dade, Clinch, and Gaines all had a past of hostile encounters with the Seminoles and blacks. Gaines was responsible for much of the terror that they had endured between 1816 and 1818. Under the command of Andrew Jackson, he had ordered Clinch to destroy the “Negro Fort.” This was first strike of the First Seminole War. He then ordered Major Twiggs to destroy the Miccosukee settlement of Fowltown in November 1817. Now in late February 1836, almost twenty years later, Gaines’ regiment made its way into the Wahoo Swamp. Facing persistent fire, he ordered his men to establish a large breastwork of logs as a base for operations. General Gaines noted: “I have now near me the principle force of Seminole Indians with their black vassals and allies.” **56** Gaines acknowledged that the black Seminoles were not merely runaway slaves but Seminole allies, foreshadowing his later defense for the freedom of the black Seminoles in a Louisiana civil court.

Gaines enthusiastically predicted that he would wipe out the rebels here and bring the war to an end, but his expectations were quickly disappointed. On February 28<sup>th</sup>, the rebels began laying heavy siege onto his breastworks and trapping his regiment inside. Gaines estimated the rebel force at around fourteen to fifteen hundred warriors, believing that he was under attack from the “principle enemy force.” In other reports, the number of Seminoles and blacks at the battle was estimated at around 970 warriors - 800 Seminoles and 170 blacks. Gaines exaggerated the number, unable to believe that a rebel force with inferior numbers could possibly hold his regiment down. **57** The siege persisted for six long days. The Seminole women and children supplied weapons and provisions about three miles from the battleground in the large cypress swamp, while the warriors relentlessly laid siege to the breastworks from three sides. Gaines’ men desperately awaited the arrival of reinforcements from General Clinch as hunger quickly spread throughout the camp. After three days, they resorted to slaughtering their own horses for food and then their dogs. The provisions and ammunition in the camp had been exhausted by this time. Retreat for the soldiers would have met instant death under a barrage of fire. But the breastworks were sufficient to defend them in the mean time. Out of one thousand soldiers, only four men were killed and 34 wounded over the period of the siege.

The Seminoles and blacks sought to replay the Dade “massacre.” Vengeance for the “Negro Fort” atrocity would have finally been theirs. But black Seminole chief John



“Attack of the Seminoles on the Blockhouse,” ca. 1836. From the 1837 Gray & James series of lithographs on the war. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

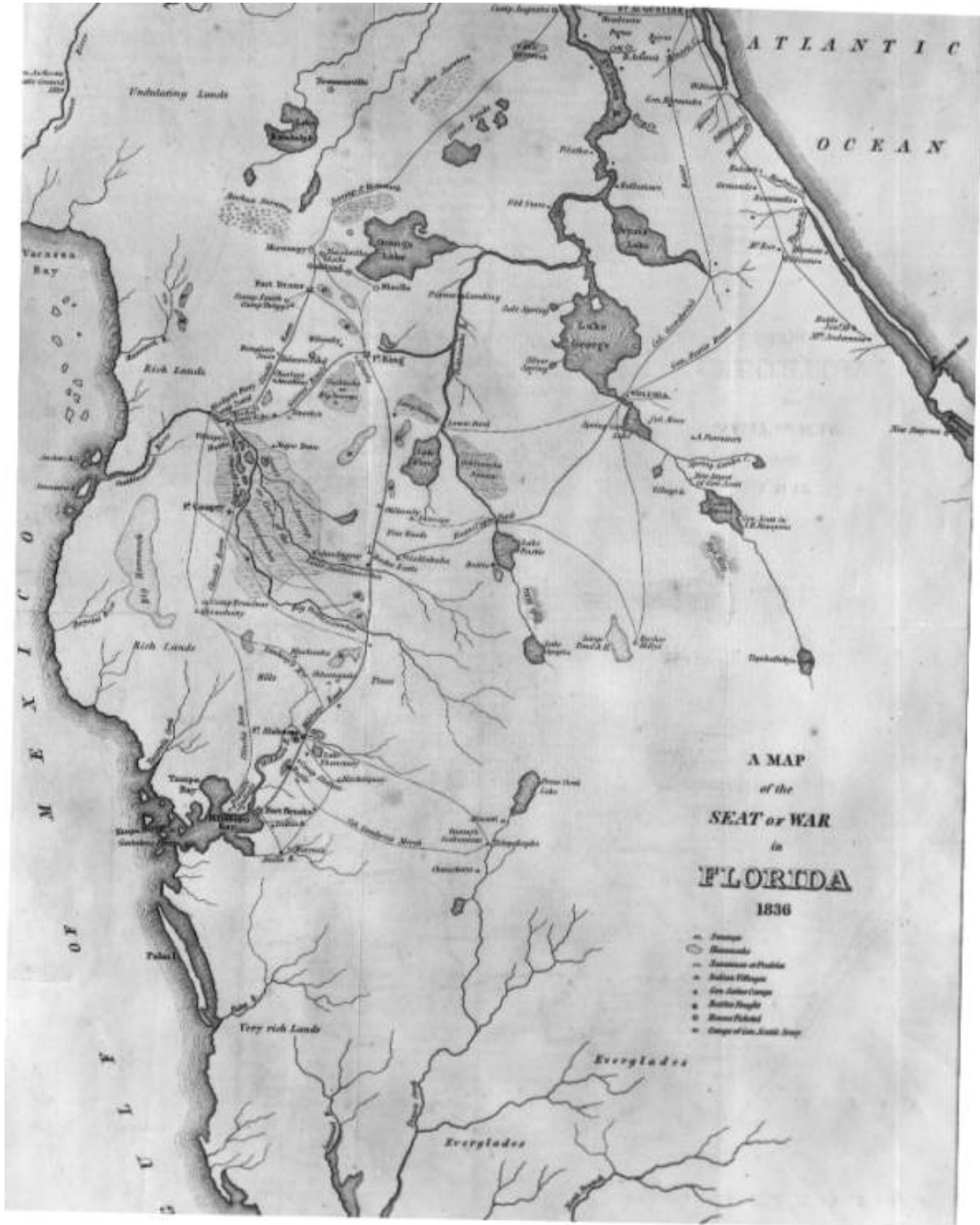
Caesar, aware that Clinch was coming with large reinforcements, unilaterally put an end to the battle. On the night of March 5<sup>th</sup>, Caesar arrived at the US post, waving a white flag and shouting: “the Indians are tired of fighting, and wished to come in and shake hands.” **58** Fighting now ceased and the Seminole leaders began debating over whether to negotiate. Caesar was “next to the negro Abraham in his importance & influence among Indian negroes and Indians.” **59** But he had failed to consult with the other chiefs and principle warriors, mistakenly believing that his influential position in the Seminole Nation gave him the authority to make negotiations on behalf of everyone. Caesar’s actions were considered borderline treason and some of the chiefs and warriors now called for his execution. But Osceola intervened to save Caesar’s life. They warriors angrily disbanded when their chiefs agreed to negotiate with the whites.

Why did Osceola, the most avid and most uncompromisingly anti-emigration chief of them all, come to the defense of Caesar? On any other occasion he would have been the first to execute any chief that attempted negotiations without consent from the council, as Charley Emathlar had learned. That he intervened to save John Caesar points

to the particular respect he held for his black allies, who comprised the majority of his own band. In negotiations, the chiefs told Gaines that they no longer desired war, offering a ceasefire if he allowed them to peacefully reside south of the Withlacoochee River. But these negotiations never fully came to a closure and nor were they intended to. The war could not end as long as the Seminoles continued to harbor runaway slaves, as ordered by the President. Clinch arrived with provisions at the request of Gaines and quickly opened fire at the sight of the Seminole camp. As the rebels dispersed, two Seminoles and one black were killed and five were wounded. **60**

From the battle of Withlacoochee to August, the US military was defeated on the two major battles out of six different engagements. The other four engagements were only minor skirmishes that had no major impact whatsoever on the war effort for either side. **61** The war so far was a great success for the blacks and Seminoles. The Seminole-black guerilla warfare, as well as Florida's intolerable climate, impassable swamps, and uncharted territory, made it impossible for large bodies of troops to find them. The sweltering heat, worn clothes, bad food and water, and epidemic outbreaks weakened the US ranks. General Scott listed the difficulties of military operations in Florida: "We found the heat...so oppressive...that the troops could not execute even ordinary marches...the water was tepid...causes of distress and disease the swamps and hammocks which were traversed...the necessity all were under the greater part of the time." **62** Troop discontent was unusually high. General Thomas Jesup later reported: "The service is a most arduous one in Florida, so much so that not a man whose term of service expires will re-enlist." **63** As widespread disease and intolerable heat made any incursions into Seminole territory impossible, General Scott temporarily halted operations for the sickly season. The rebel bands continued to strike at random, killing several troops and then vanishing into the thickness of the swamps. Osceola threatened to "protract the war to three years." To affect this, the chiefs split their warriors into numerous small hit-and-run guerilla parties. **64** The initial victories in the war encouraged the rebels and convinced them that they could even successfully repel the military for long enough to force the US government to negotiate.

Attacking a relatively small army of scattered warriors in an uncharted mass of 47,000 square miles was an incredibly difficult task. There were no roads, bridges, trustworthy guides, or available transportation for provisions. The rebels could use the swamps and high grass marshes as cover for guerilla war tactics that chipped away at the military's resolve. The women and children were far removed from the reach of US operations and couldn't be captured for the use of extracting information. The Seminole



A Map of the Seat of War in Florida, 1836. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.



Portrait of General Winfield Scott during the Florida War, 1836. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

and black families had been sent south, near Cape Sable and Ten Keys, prior to the offensive operations of the war to prepare weapons and food. <sup>65</sup> Over a six month lull, Seminoles and blacks rejuvenated their forces deep within the swampy marshes of Florida's inland. They planted crops and gathered weapons as powerful politicians and military officials panicked in disarray. The army could not even locate them for this period of time. General Jesup would later acknowledge that "we have as little knowledge of the interior of Florida as we do the interior of China." <sup>66</sup> On April 30, General Scott wrote about the evasive resistance force and the difficulty of executing military operations in Florida:

“I am more than ever persuaded that the whole force of the enemy, including the negroes, does not exceed 1200 fighting men. It is probably something less. Of that force I am equally confident that not 500 have, at any time since the commencement of hostilities, been brought within the same ten miles square. In all our operations within the last thirty days, we have not found a party of probably more than 130; but parties of ten to thirty have been encountered almost everywhere. No Indian women, child, or negro, nor the trace of one, has been seen in that time. These, non-combatants, it has been evident to us all, have been removed beyond the theatre of our operations.” **67**

Military officials and Congressmen were in disbelief that the US military could be trumped by a small number of guerilla black and Seminole rebel warriors. Jackson was furious at the fact that his long-term Seminole and black enemies continued to successfully defy him long into his presidency years. He called a court of inquiry into the “unaccountable delays” of the Seminole campaign. **68** General Scott’s European-style of “civilized open warfare” proved inefficient against the hit-and-run tactics of the rebels. Everything about General Scott’s campaign was similar to the European style of warfare. He had brought along a “band of choice musicians and marquees of furniture,” and pompously decked everything with refined luxuries. Scott was completely unprepared to face guerilla warfare in the diseased swamps of Florida. **69** In the court of inquiry, generals Gaines and Scott fiercely attacked one another, each attempting to shift blame to the other for the war’s failures. Tactics were debated, explanations were given, and it was decided that a renewed strategy with a new leader were needed, but the principles of the war were never questioned. The problem was Scott’s inability to execute a successful “Indian war,” not the official policy that no peace could be reached until all fugitive slaves were captured and returned to their masters. The court would attempt to adjust the US military strategy for combating the Seminole and black guerillas, first by decommissioning Scott from his command of the war effort. **70**

Richard Keith Call was commissioned as temporary commander of the Florida war after Scott was ordered to retire, but faced the same challenges and obstacles as his predecessor. In 1818, Call gained notoriety as a commander in Jackson’s attack on the black Seminole settlement at the Suwannee River and would later rise to the high levels of Middle Florida planter society, then to governor of the territory. Eighteen years after his failure at the Suwannee, he now pursued the black warriors in a renewed Federal war effort for their enslavement. He was among the many antagonistic characters who had attempted to seize and enslave the black Seminoles for years. But during the summer,

while the government was debating, the rebels operated with apparent impunity. They made a spirited assault on Col. Clinch's successful plantation, located twenty miles northwest of Fort King. Since it was occupied as a military post during the war, he had renamed it Fort Drane. In July 1836, due to raids and depredations in the vicinity, Clinch was forced to abandon his plantation and fall back to Micanopy. Osceola, with about a hundred of his followers, seized the plantation and occupied it with pride that they had driven Clinch back in closer proximity to the white settlements. **71**

On August 12, Major Pearce led a force of 110 soldiers out of the town of Micanopy to attack Osceola's band of blacks and Miccosukees. At the arrival of the troops, the rebels were driven back into a nearby hammock where they stood their ground. In the midst of the battle, the entire Miccosukee tribe arose from the swamps. The force of 400 to 500 warriors lined up on the edge of the swamp for half a mile. The battle commenced for an hour and fifteen minutes. Major Pearce retreated and left Osceola's band in control of the field, reporting casualties of one dead and sixteen wounded from the skirmish. **72**

Once the summer season came to an end, the Federal government could once again pursue the blacks and Seminoles who had been quietly amassing their strength within the central and south Florida swamps. On October 10, General Call, commanding a combined force of 1,050 soldiers, Creek mercenary slavers, and mounted Tennessean volunteers, crossed the Withlacoochee River. Lieut. Col Gill of the Tennessee Brigade was dispatched to attack the "principle negro town" situated between the Withlacoochee and a stream flowing into it. The Tennessee militiamen reached the stream which was the town's principle barrier of defense. The Seminoles and blacks disputed their passage for two hours until retreating. They lost twenty-five warriors while the Tennesseans suffered three dead and eight wounded. This was the worst and only major defeat the rebels had suffered yet in the war.

As Call's regiment approached the Wahoo Swamp, some 200 black and 420 Seminole warriors assembled in the swamp with their women, children, and possessions prepared for retreat in the rear if it became necessary. Even if the warriors were to retreat, they realized they could be forced to surrender if their women and children were taken as hostages. The participation of rebel slaves had become generally understood by this time. General Jesup wrote: "at the battle of Wahoo, a negro, the property of a Florida planter, was one of the most distinguished leaders." **73** The rebel slaves from the St. John's River uprising had already proven themselves brave combatants and integrated into the higher levels of the Seminole and black military structure. When the Creek mercenaries entered the Wahoo swamp, they immediately came under heavy fire from the Seminoles and



blacks. These were the same slave-raiding mercenaries who had accompanied the US at the “Negro Fort,” the battle of Suwannee, the raid of Angola, and constantly harassed the blacks with slave raids and claims for slaves in the Seminole territory.

The Seminoles and blacks retreated through the Wahoo Swamp and quickly made their way across the Withlacoochee River as their enemies sloshed through the murky, waist-deep swamp water behind them. The allies managed to cross the Withlacoochee River bank and hold off their enemy from there, as their women and children remained close behind them prepared to retreat. The Seminoles and blacks hid behind logs and stumps to avoid the volleys of shots from the US forces on the other side of the river. Call eventually ordered the retreat when supplies became low and it was concluded that the river was impassable without enduring severe losses. Plus the troops had lost their resolution and determination to continue the fight. Call recalled: “The men, dispirited by exertion and fatigue for which they were unprepared, with scanty food, lost that fortitude and resolution so indispensably necessary in this peculiar warfare.” **74** Call’s regiment suffered heavy casualties with 15 dead and 30 wounded. **75** This severe defeat assured the Federal government that Call was unfit to command the war. On the other side, the rebels celebrated jubilantly over their victorious stand, perhaps even believing that they had a good chance of success at repelling the whites.

The 750 Creek mercenaries that accompanied Call into the Wahoo Swamp had been contracted by Jesup during his service in repressing the Alabaman Creek uprising. In September, John Campbell had entered into a written contract with the Alabaman Creeks under Jesup’s orders, offering payment and additional “plunder as they may take from the Seminoles.” **76** This would logically extend to the black Seminoles, “property” of the Seminoles. Later into the war, Jesup admitted that he had initially promised the friendly Creeks possession of any black Seminoles they had captured under service in Florida:

“The Creek Indians had been promised a reward for the captures they should make of Negroes belonging to citizens of the United States. Had compensation not been promised they would have taken no prisoners, but would have put all to death. I compromised with them by allowing them twenty dollars for each slave captured. They were entitled, agreeably to the promises made to them before they entered the service, to all Indian Negroes and other Indian property captured by them.” **77**

## **Converting the Army into “Negro-Catchers”: Slave Raids, Hostages, Escape from Fort Brooke**

Soon after the crushing defeat at the Wahoo Swamp, General Thomas Jesup replaced General Call as main commander of military operations in Florida in early December. Jesup was not oblivious to the real aspects of the war. He was willing to admit that the blacks were the largest obstacle to US victory, going so far as to label the conflict a “negro war” rather than an “Indian war.” Jesup thought the importance of the black Seminoles and runaway plantation slaves could not be ignored if the resistance was to be effectively fought. He estimated the main Seminole and black allied force to number 480 to 800: “the latter, perhaps, the more numerous.” 78

Jesup would completely alter the face of Florida military operations over the extent of several months. He commanded an army of ten thousand soldiers, but sent small mobile detachments to raid the enemy camps instead of large concentrations of force like his predecessors. The defeat of Major Dade, General Scott, General Gaines, General Clinch, and General Call proved that a large regiment in the Florida swamps became an easy, immobile target for black and Seminole guerilla warfare. On December 3, the day before he was commissioned commander, he detached Colonel Cawfield, leader of the Creek mercenaries, to burn down a black settlement on a lake flowing into the Ocklawaha River and capture its inhabitants. The Creeks destroyed the village and captured 41 black women and children, some of the first captives of the war. Jesup praised the piratical raid: “The service was performed in the most prompt and handsome manner.” 79 Jesup’s slave-raiding missions proved to be the turning-point of the war and proved the first real significant US victories.

As the Creek mercenary bands scoured the Withlacoochee, Jesup believed that Micanopy, Jumper, and King Phillip were fleeing southeast to the Kissimmee region to avoid the army. Throughout January, Jesup commissioned Cawfield’s Creek mercenaries for raids on the Withlacoochee Cove to break up the black Seminole settlements. But the settlements were found largely abandoned, most of the warriors and their families having fled before the raids and moved their provisions to safety. Only Osceola’s band of Micosukees and blacks fully remained. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, sixteen “Indian negroes...of Powell’s band” were captured. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, an additional 36 blacks were captured. Overall 52 blacks and three natives from Osceola’s camp were captured in the Panosufkee Swamp, while Osceola himself just barely managed to escape with his family and three warriors.



U.S. Marines searching for the Indians during the Florida War, ca. 1835-1842. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

Jesup reported the “victory” of operations on the Withlacoochee River for seizing this large band of women and children. **80** The highly disproportionate number of blacks among his followers shows that the black allies had strongly sided with those chiefs and subchiefs determined to resist removal.

On the 21<sup>st</sup>, Colonel Foster’s band commissioned raids south of the Withlacoochee. They overtook a small party and killed two warriors. As the remaining warriors escaped, the soldiers captured twenty women and children, nine of whom were black. **81** On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Cawlfieid’s regiment raided the small black and Seminole settlement of Seminole sub-chief Osuchee. Osuchee, a chief of “some note,” die fighting along with three of his warriors. The soldiers captured seventeen women and children, eight of whom were black. **82** On the 27<sup>th</sup>, the raiders met fierce resistance from a small

band of warriors. A sergeant and two marines were killed in pursuit of the hostile band. An officer noted: "It is not known that more than one negro woman was killed, belonging to the enemy; about twenty women and children were taken, the greater part of whom were negroes." Lieutenant Chambers, with a band of Creeks, had "gallantry attacked...succeeded in capturing the horses and baggage of the enemy, with twenty-five Indians and negroes, principally women and children; the men having all fled into the swamps." **83** The women and children taken during this raid were members of Abraham's family.

While the raids broke up the black Seminole settlements, they failed to capture a single warrior or important chief. Jesup acknowledged this in frustration: "In all the numerous battles and skirmishes that have taken place, not a single first-rate warrior has been captured, and only two Indian men have surrendered." **85** But he had found the women and children to be effective hostages for coercing negotiations. Ben, a "slave" of Micanopy taken prisoner in the raids, informed Jesup that Abraham and Jumper were in the neighborhood and would agree to come in for negotiations if they were assured protection. Jesup sent Ben out with a promise of peace and safety for any who would come in to negotiate. He held Ben's family hostage until he would return and promised him freedom if he was successful. **86**

Abraham made his appearance in the camp bearing a white flag. He walked up to Jesup's tent with "perfect dignity and composure." He stuck his staff in the ground and waited for Jesup's approach. Abraham had expected to be hung, but "concluded to die, if he must, like a man, but that he would make one effort to save his people." Alligator, Jumper, and Abraham agreed to hold negotiations on February 18<sup>th</sup>. Until the conference took place, they assembled chiefs for negotiation and ceased all hostilities. Jesup had directly sent the peace offer to the principle black leader Abraham in recognition that the war was indeed a "negro war." Since removal meant enslavement for the blacks, black political power in the Seminole councils meant the logical stance of steadfast refusal. Jesup acknowledged the influence of the blacks over the Seminoles as the main contributor to the strength of the resistance: "The warriors have fought as long as they had life, and much seems to me to be the determination of those who influence their councils – I mean the leading negroes." **87**

While the Seminoles and blacks were gathering their chiefs to negotiate, their women and children were left with Jesup to ensure good faith. Jesup noted: "Twelve hostages have been left with me, one of them a nephew of Micanopy." **84** Thinking pragmatically, Jesup made the point to note that he would have no problem with completely eliminating the Seminoles if it would have proven more efficient: "We may

conquer them in time, and may destroy them, it is true; but the war will be a most harassing one, and will retard the settlement and improvement of this country for years to come.” **88** By any means necessary, he wanted to end the war and save the costs in money and white lives. Thus he became opposed to the inefficient policy of immediate removal:

“I have required a strict observance of the terms of the treaty, and have demanded immediate emigration as an indispensable condition. There would be no difficulty in making peace and giving immediate security to the country if it were not for that condition.” **89**

Later he would come to conclude that the policy to allow no peace while a “living slave belonging to the white man” remained in Seminole possession was what was truly prolonging the conflict.

A large band of blacks and Seminole, unaware of the peace negotiations, commenced a very bold and determined attack on Fort Mellon, located on Lake Monroe. They were determined to revenge the assortment of raids that were afflicting them. The six hundred warriors were led by chief Wild Cat and Louis Pacheco, the former slave who had guided Major Dade’s regiment into a fatal trap. Their spies concluded that the base was poorly manned and armed, and would be favorable for an outright attack. On February 8, the men at Fort Mellon awoke to the shrilling war whoop of a Seminole surprise attack. The soldiers were sent into disarray, firing sporadically into all directions at the highly mobile, hidden attackers. Captain Mellon was killed almost minutes into the siege. Fifteen more soldiers were wounded. A steamer in the lake fired a six-pounder and cleared the left flank of the fort. But the warriors continued to pound the front and right flank of the fort with heavy fire. The siege continued for nearly three hours before the warriors grew weary and retreated. After being repulsed, Wild Cat gathered three hundred warriors for reinforcements for a renewed strike. This is when they learned of the peace negotiations and ceased any further attack. Although unsuccessful, it spoke volumes on the bravery of the Seminoles and blacks for making an open offensive on a well-defended US military fort. **90**

Jesup had made notable advances for the war effort during his two month offensive. While the Seminoles and blacks had kept their women and children hidden from US incursions, Jesup’s small raiding parties had managed to take 124 black and Seminole women and children captive – more than all of his predecessors combined. But

as no principle warriors had yet surrendered and the blacks remained a strong influence over their allies, Jesup knew he needed to try more daring measures to make negotiations stick. On March 6, the Seminole and black leaders consented to peace based on Jesup's renewed terms of emigration. Jesup "granted to the Indians the most liberal terms," including a provision to guarantee the freedom of the black Seminoles:

"The Seminole and their allies who come in and emigrate to the west, shall be secure in their lives and property; that their negroes, their bone fide property, would accompany them to the west." **91**

This was a significant shift from over six decades of US policy. Since the Seminoles began to harbor fugitive slaves during the American Revolution, white planters in the South had remained determined to retrieve their "lost property," even the blacks who were descendants of runaways. But the pragmatic Jesup was more concerned with ending a prolonged, costly, and deadly war than the property of slaveholders. Jumper, Cloud and an assortment of Seminole sub-chiefs consented to the terms of surrender. Among them was John Cavallo, a black Seminole sub-chief who was rising in influence in the tribe. His signature reveals his substantial rise in importance in the Seminole-black leadership. The only major chief who held out was Osceola. He reportedly, "folded his arms and walked away moodily," when he was informed of the negotiations. He was thenceforth discarded from the council of Seminole chiefs for failing to "imbrue his hands in the blood of his captives." Micanopy later signed on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Emigration was now set for early June. **92**

Recognizing black influence over the Seminoles, Jesup had succeeded in persuading the Seminoles to emigrate by guaranteeing protection of their black allies. Easier said than done, now he only had to maintain peace until the scheduled time for their removal. Notably, Jesup carefully distinguished between "their allies" and "their negroes, their bone fide property" in the treaty provision. Floridian slaveholders were outraged. The war was commenced to return their property and this act on the part of Jesup completely undermined their goals. A meeting of wealthy planters in St. Augustine concluded: "The regaining of our slaves constitutes an object of scarcely less importance than that of the peace of the country." Slaveholders dominated the Florida government, giving them considerable power to exert pressure on Jesup and push their demands onto the Federal government. Not longer than two weeks after the treaty was signed, slave speculators and claimants were already swarming into the black and Seminole camps

around Fort Brooke in search of blacks. Jesup noted the “trifling impropriety on the part of the white population on the frontier” who were interfering with his plans to end the war. **93** On March 18<sup>th</sup>, less than two weeks after the treaty, a group of Florida slaveholders who had lost slaves and fled to Charleston to escape the war complained to the Secretary of War about Jesup’s peace treaty:

“There is no stipulation for indemnity, on the part of the Indians, for such property of the inhabitants as had been captured by said Indians, and destroyed. Nor is it, we are told, exacted from them that they should even make restitution of such stolen and other property, to wit, negroes, etc., as they now have in possession, or as has been invited into their country and allowed refuge from their owners.” **94**

In May, Jesup, having secretly capitulated to the demands of the Florida slaveholders, still openly maintained that he was opposed to returning the blacks and replied to the planters that it was not his job to capture their property:

“Nothing is now to be apprehended, unless it is the imprudence of citizens of Florida. The officious interference of some of them has already embarrassed the service, and from the public papers I discover that certain citizens of Florida, who, I presume, were unwilling to trust their persons nearer to the Seminoles than Charleston, are denouncing me and my measures. I only have to say, in reply to them, that I can have no agency in converting the army into negro-catchers, particularly for the benefit of those who are evidently afraid to undertake the recapture of their property themselves.” **95**

Hundreds of Seminoles and black began gathering at Fort Brooke. Several of the main Seminole chiefs, with hundreds of their followers, reported to Jesup that they would comply with emigration. **96** Most of the army speculation underestimated the strength of the principle Seminole force. The low estimates of Seminole warriors served two purposes: 1) to underestimate the general demographics of the Seminole nation so to make their presence appear minimal 2) to explain the inability of the US military to discover the main Seminole force. Jesup was considerably surprised at the sizable black and Seminole army that was assembling for emigration at Fort Brooke:

“I have been trying to learn from those now present the number of warriors in this part of the country; and, to my great surprise, I find that there are not less than twenty-five hundred red warriors-good warriors-and not including lads, or negroes, who fight as well as the best of them.” **97**

As time passed on, many of the Seminoles and blacks became reasonably skeptical of Jesup’s intentions. Jesup noted: “The majority of Indians doubt the sincerity of our promises.” **98** They proved correct in their suspicions. Jesup began with good intentions but eventually capitulated to slaveholder interests. Between March and June, Jesup betrayed the treaty and undermined the fragile peace that he worked to create, setting the precedent for emigration to fail. First he believed the black Seminoles “should feel themselves secure; if they should become alarmed and hold out, the war will be renewed,” but would start to alter his position the more pressure he received from powerful slaveholder interests. **99**

On March 29, Jesup wrote Colonel Warner with the hopes to “induce the Indians and Indians negroes” to return the “negroes taken from the citizens during the war.” **100** On April 8, Jesup made a secret agreement with Seminole sub-chief Coa-Hadjo to return the slaves “taken during the war,” on the pretense that a Seminole chief council made the agreement. **101** In later treaty negotiations with the Seminoles and blacks, General Hernandez would question Osceola: “Are you prepared at once to deliver up the negroes taken from the citizens? Why have you not surrendered them already as promised by Coa-Hadjo at Fort King? Have the chiefs of the nation held a council on this subject?” **102** This confirmed that Seminole sub-chief Coa-Hadjo had been solely guilty of the betrayal, although he was probably not the only Seminole chief prepared to hand over the fugitive slaves. Yet Coa-Hadjo had no authority to make agreements in representation of the entire Seminole Nation, being a relatively obscure and unimportant Seminole sub-chief. Hernandez also made it clear that Coa-Hadjo had only made a promise to be considered by the chief council, not a binding agreement. Nevertheless, Jesup now began pressing demands for the Seminole chiefs to turn over the rebel slaves from the St. John’s River uprising.

And while Coa-Hadjo only promised to hand over blacks “taken” during the war, it was almost impossible to distinguish many black Seminoles who had long been free with recent runaways. After the “agreement,” Coa-Hadjo handed over two hundred black Seminoles and runaways into the custody of the military, including Abraham and most of the other main black leaders. By this time, Jesup noted: “The negro portion of the hostile



force of the Seminole nation is entirely without a head.” **103** However, he underestimated the viability of some of the influential blacks, such as John Horse, or Gopher John, to lead their people under the enormous pressure of slaveholders.

The black Seminoles, feeling their freedom grow more precarious by the day, would now hold out from coming in to the Fort Brooke camp. The continuous influx of slave-raiders and speculators into Fort Brooke also made many blacks averse to coming in. Jesup reported: “the arrival of several Floridians in camp for the purpose of looking after and apprehending negroes spreads general consternation among them.” He cited the example of thirty “Indian Negro men” who had been near his camp on the Withlacoochee in late March, but dispersed when two or three white Floridians came in looking for their slaves. **104**

On May 25, angry over the vast number of blacks who had left or still not come into Fort Brooke, Jesup wrote to Col. Harney:

“If you should see Powell again, I wish you to tell him that I intend to send exploring and surveying parties into every part of the country during the summer; and that I shall send out and take all the negroes who belong to white people, and he must not allow the Indians or Indian negroes to mix with them. Tell him I am sending to Cuba for bloodhounds to trail them, and I intend to hang every one of them who does not come in.” **105**

Some of the Seminole chiefs, like Coa-Hadjo, were preparing to betray the blacks right before embarking to New Orleans. **106** On June 2, Jesup seized ninety black Seminoles and sent them off to New Orleans. **107** One observer reported the frequency of slave raiders entering into the Fort Brooke encampment:

“A company, ramifying into Georgia, was formed to speculate in the negro property of the Indians. Individuals came into the Territory, (Cooly was one of these) with their pockets full of powers of attorney. The negroes became aware of this, grew alarmed, and fled from Gen. Jesup's camp.” **108**

On June 2, the seven hundred Seminoles and blacks who had assembled at the Fort Brooke encampment for emigration escaped overnight. Osceola, Wild Cat, Miccosukee chief Sam Jones, and the black Seminole sub-chief John Horse led the mass escape. At this point, John had apparently taken command of the blacks in the absence of any viable leaders. Micanopy and other head chiefs were forced to leave the camp. The

Red Stick Creek warriors, blacks, and Miccosukees contributed to forcing the main chiefs to leave under the threat of death. Micanopy's reluctance to leave invoked the warrior segment of the Seminole Nation to elect the fiercely anti-white Sam Jones as head chief. **109** Chief Nethlockemathlar, a pro-white chief, later recalled the scene:

“In the summer of 1837, I assembled my band at Fort Brooke, determined to emigrate; but through the means of the negroes, interpreters, and Spaniards, who supplied powder, dissatisfaction was created among the young men, concerting with the Creeks, caused them to enter the camp at night, forcibly removing our baggage, women, and children, and threatening us with instant death if we declined following them, or gave the alarm.” **110**

The refugees fled into the Florida interior from Fort Brooke. Their crops were fully cultivated in preparation for the summer. The momentary peace had allowed for the rebels to stock provisions, gather weapons, and revive their forces deep within the Florida swamps. They refused to continue fighting until the whites struck first. But they knew the sickly season prevented any further US military incursions for the rest of the summer. For the time being they wished to live peacefully in their settlements, taking a breather from the long and exhausting state of warfare. **111** Enraged at the persistence of the rebels, Jesup proposed completely wiping out the Seminoles as the only viable solution to the war: “The Indians, generally, would prefer death to removal from the country, and nothing short of extermination would free us from them.” His logic was that patriotic Seminole population was determined to die rather than emigrate: “No Seminole proves false to his country, nor has a single instance ever occurred of a first-rate warrior having surrendered.” **112**

Aware that what he was dealing with was a “negro war,” Jesup delved into history to find out how the British Empire quelled the black maroon uprisings in Jamaica. With great success, the British Empire had employed Spanish bloodhounds to track down rebel black maroons in Jamaica. Jesup now used this historical fact to explain why they should be employed in Florida:

“To rid the country of them you must exterminate them. Is the government prepared for such a measure? Will public opinion sustain it? If so, resort must be had to the bloodhound and the Northern Indian. We may harass them, and ultimately destroy them, but it will cost as much time and treasure as the war carried on by the British

government against the Maroons. I have no books to refer to; but that war, if I remember right, was terminated by the bloodhounds.” **113**

While Jesup would never actually employ the Cuban bloodhounds, General Zachary Taylor would purchase and use them years later during his command of the Florida War. Jesup’s statements prove that, contrary to what was claimed, it was for the purpose of tracking down the black Seminole maroons rather than red Seminoles.

### **“Deliver Up The Negroes”: Slave Revolt Ends, Betrayed Negotiations, Escape from Fort Marion, Christmas Victory**

As his communications suggest, General Jesup was already well-aware that the black Seminoles had long standing ties with their Seminole counterparts. He intentionally distinguished the “plantation negroes” from the “Indian negroes.” In June 1837, he was actually acknowledging that the revival of the war meant a growing alliance between runaway slaves, black Seminoles, and Seminoles when he said: “The two races are rapidly approximating; they are identified in interests and feelings.” He cited the example of the East Florida slave revolt and a runaway slave from the St. John’s plantations who led the allies at the battle of Wahoo:

“I have ascertained that, at the battle of Wahoo, a negro, the property of a Florida planter, was one of the most distinguished of the leaders; and I have learned that the depredations committed on the plantations east of the St. John’s were perpetuated by the plantation negroes, headed by an Indian negro, John Caesar.” **114**

He summed up the dilemma he was facing in bringing the war to a close. If the Seminoles remained they and their black allies would continue to provide refuge for fugitive slaves, but if the Seminoles were immediately removed it would only leave a void for the black Seminoles and runaway slaves to occupy. Now the only viable solution he could conceive of was divide-and-conquer: to convince the Seminoles to hand over the runaway slaves in exchange for a reservation in South Florida:

“Should the Indians remain in this Territory, the negroes among them will form a rallying point for runaway negroes from the adjacent States; and should they remove the fastnesses of the country would be immediately occupied by the negroes. I am

sure they could be confined to a small district near Florida Point, and would accept peace and the small district referred to as the condition for the surrender of all runaway negroes.” **115**

In May 1837, a letter from Savannah echoed Jesup’s fears:

“The Indians were conducted to this neighborhood by a runaway negro from this section. The negro is well known to me, and a great villain he is— he is fled to the Oakafanoke, or in that direction, and fears are entertained that he may conduct, the next time, a much greater number.” **116**

Aware of black influence over the Seminoles, Jesup probably knew that measure would fail. Although Jesup had earlier told the Secretary of War that he opposed turning his forces into an “army of negro-catchers,” this is exactly what he would do. In effect to his orders, the army now became officially commissioned slave-catchers. In July, Jesup gave the orders: “Their negroes, cattle, and horses, as well as other property which they possess, will belong to the corps by which they are captured.” **117** Ninety of the blacks captured from Coa-Hadjo were returned to their owners in East Florida. Ninety more had been sent out of Florida to New Orleans. Seventeen remained with Jesup, Abraham’s family being among them. **118** Going back on his initial contract with the Creeks, Jesup provided eight thousand dollars in compensation to the mercenaries for the eighty blacks they had captured in the campaign. If some of the captives were ascertained to be their owner’s property than they would be returned to slavery, but others who were more useful, such as Abraham’s family, were to be considered “public property.” Around this time, Jesup had begun offering freedom to black Seminole leaders to procure useful informers, spies, and negotiators among them. Holding his family hostage, he would now utilize the diplomatic and political abilities of black Seminole leader Abraham to serve US military operations in Florida. Jesup noted: “The Seminole negro prisoners are now the property of the public. I have promised Abraham the freedom of his family, if he prove faithful to us; and I shall surely hang him if he be not faithful.” **119** At this point it seemed like death was a sure thing for Abraham. On the one hand, he was guaranteed freedom for his family if he cooperated and death if he didn’t, but his former Seminole allies now aimed to kill him for his “betrayal.” Jesup wrote to Zachary Taylor:

“The Indians have threatened to kill Abraham, & I have ascertained from prisoners secretly taken that they have actually appointed twenty warriors to kill him. I desire that he be informed of their intention. It will insure his fidelity, and convince him that nothing short of the entire submission of the Indians can secure him from the danger which menaces him.” **120**

By using the captives as diplomats, guides, and informants for the US military, General Jesup began recognizing the importance that the black Seminoles could serve in undermining the resistance. Micanopy’s slave Ben had been promised freedom if he successfully brought in Abraham with his own family held hostage as leverage. Black Seminoles Toney and Cudjoe were also used for military purposes in exchange for the freedom of their families. Jesup and other military officials in Florida gave more importance to the threat that the black Seminoles posed to institutional slavery than individual slaveholder claimants. They encouraged the slaveholders to cease from pursuing their claims if they wished to protect the system of slavery as a whole. Jesup considered what to do with the blacks purchased from the Creek raiders. If the black Seminoles were enslaved, they would only incite other slaves to rebel as they had on the St. John’s River valley. They could possibly become a larger threat if they were taken to the plantations than if they were allowed to remain free in the Florida swamps. Jesup was becoming more convinced that returning the rebel slaves to bondage was also impossible. For this reason, Jesup considered the possibility of exporting all of the captive blacks to the US African colony of Liberia:

“To end all difficulty on that subject, I have purchased the Negroes from them on account of the public for eight thousand dollars. There are about eighty of the negroes, besides Abram’s family, and those who are free; some of them, perhaps, may be found on investigation to be the property of citizens... It is highly important to the slaveholding States that these negroes be sent out of the country, and I would strongly recommend that they be sent to one of our colonies in Africa.” **121**

Secretary of War Joel Poinsett replied to Jesup’s proposal:

“In reference to your redemption from the Creek warriors, of the slaves captured by them...such of them as are runaways should be restored to their owners... There does

not seem to me to be any authority with the Executive to send them to Africa, but that measure can recommended to Congress for its sanction.” **122**

Organized and random acts of slave violence peaked during the first several years of the Second Seminole War. In July 1837, a Capt. Gilliland was found dead 150 yards from his horse on the road from Suwannee to Newnansville, his body and his horse both full of buckshot. It was widely believed that runaway slaves in the vicinity were responsible for the murder. In August, two slaves named Tom and John were arrested, tried guilty for his murder, and then executed. Tom and John had run away from the plantation of Micajah Dean “for the purpose and with the expectation of joining the Seminole Indians, whom they know to be at war with the Whites.” In midst of their escape, the two fugitive slaves had murdered Gilliland for any provisions they could find on him. Before their execution, the judge reprimanded them for attempting to escape to the Seminoles, a not so subtle message for any others who would contemplate doing so:

“Suppose you had joined the Indians, what would have become of you? They would hardly have treated you well; they would have been afraid to trust you; they would have made you *slaves*. But if they had not; if they had made you Leaders and Chiefs, what would you have gotten by it? Why, if you escaped death from the hands of white people, you must at the close of the war, have been restored to your master, or sent out of the country, to some far away place, where your condition would be infinitely worse than it ever was *here* until *now*.” **123**

In the fall of 1837, the tides of war began to change. A series of dramatic events would lead to the climax of the war. Jesup commenced a combination of negotiations, operations, and tactics that revolved around the return of fugitive slaves to their owners. General Hernandez, commander of militia forces in East Florida, was commissioned in late 1837 to return the runaways from the St. John’s slave revolt. Throughout his campaign, he succeeded in returning 300 runaway slaves “who had been captured by the Indians.” **124** Fugitive slaves from the East Florida slave revolt began to turn themselves back over to their owners. The momentum from the large slave uprising of the 1835-36 winter slowly died. Over eighteen months of harsh conditions and constant war would begin to wear on the newly free blacks. Even the brutality of plantation life seemed relatively appealing compared to the drudgery of constant war in the Florida swamps. A host of slaves who had escaped from Major Herriot’s plantation at the start of the war

turned themselves over to the military authorities at Fort Peyton and complained of facing hardship among the Seminoles: “They have been living on nothing but coonty, alligators, and fish, since they have been with the Indians. They represent the Indians to be entirely destitute of corn.” **125**

Some of the rebel slaves would choose to maintain their freedom with the black Seminoles no matter how uncomfortable. One report noted: “There was a party of Negroes on Cedar Creek who were all runaways, and, when they learned they were to be returned to their masters, they resisted, telling the Indians that they had not taken them and that they would not give up.” **126** English traveler John Benwell, finding himself embedded in the Seminole war fighting while traveling through Florida, encountered a fugitive slave in the swamps of East Florida: “The fellow was in poor case, and begged for food, saying he was starving. I, therefore, desired the men to supply him with some dried venison and bread, which he ate with avidity.” **127** On November 30<sup>th</sup>, thirty or forty runaway slaves turned themselves over to General Hernandez to be “safely returned to their owners.” Those slaves that no longer wished to remain with the blacks and Seminoles would attempt to “abandon the Indians if they could find an opportunity to do so with safety.” **128** To avoid white retribution, the recaptured fugitive slaves told their masters that they had been “captured” and then cruelly treated by the Seminoles. By this time, the whites had become aware that they had aided the initial Seminole-black uprising, even taking up arms and fighting themselves, but they preferred to use them as guides and informants rather than simply kill them for treason.

This trend had drastic consequences for the resistance. Prior to September 4, 1837, there were a total of 400 Seminoles and blacks killed or captured throughout the entire period of the war, one hundred of whom were warriors. From September 4 until the end of Jesup’s commission in Florida in May 1838, there were a total of 1,978 blacks and Seminoles killed or captured, six hundred of whom were warriors. **129** The slaves who surrendered gave up information and served the US military in its operations. While the traumatic slave revolt bought some time and momentum for the Seminoles and blacks, temporarily increasing their forces, its downturn had ominous effects. On September 4, four runaway slaves, among them black Seminole leader John Phillip, a notable “slave” of main Seminole chief King Phillip, entered into a US military camp and turned themselves in. Besides John Horse, John Phillip had remained the only main black leader not previously captured in military operations or turned over through the betrayal of Coa-Hadjo. **130**

King Phillip was an influential Seminole chief who, with black Seminole leader John Caesar, had commanded the coordinated slave uprising on the St. John’s River



Coacoochee, or Wild Cat, engraving from *Exiles of Florida*, Joshua R. Giddings, 1858.

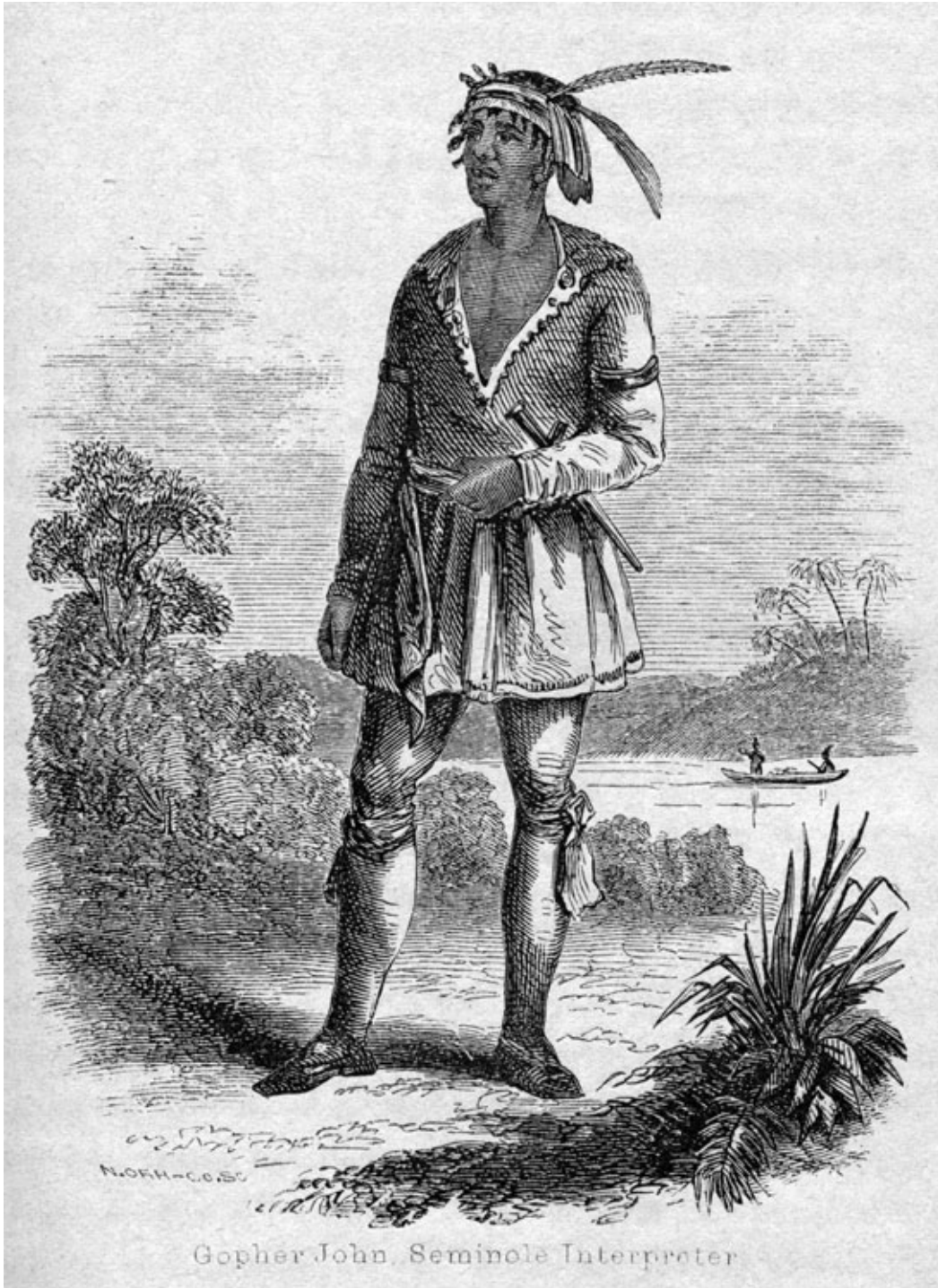


plantations at the outbreak of the war. The captured black runaways guided the US troops to some rebel encampments south of the St. John's where they proceeded to capture two parties of warriors numbering eleven Seminoles and blacks. Among these men was King Phillip, now the first important Seminole chief captured in the war. The whole of General Hernandez's operations under the guidance of the captured informants successfully resulted in the death or capture of 49 Seminoles and blacks. Among these were two influential chiefs. **131** The tides of the slave revolt were directly tied into better known events of the war. The momentum of the slave revolt died down simultaneously with the strength of the Seminole and black rebellion.

Coacoochee, or Wild Cat, the son of King Phillip, agreed to negotiate for peace. He arrived at St. Augustine under parley to argue for the release of his father, but was immediately taken prisoner under the orders of Jesup. He was only released as an emissary to the other chiefs urging them to come in for peace negotiations. If Wild Cat failed, his father and the other prisoners would be held "accountable" for his conduct. **132** Wild Cat was ordered to return in ten days to inform Jesup of his progress. **133** Yet Jesup described him in admirable terms as the "best warrior and ablest chief in the nation more talented and enterprising than Powell (Osceola)." **134** Capt. Sprague wrote about the light-hearted personality of Wild Cat: "He was twenty-eight years of age, in person slight, with the activity of a deer, and with a countenance bright, playful, and attractive." Yet the military officers in Florida were certainly aware that Wild Cat was not a chief to be taken lightly. Sprague also considered him

"by far the most dangerous chieftain in the field. War to him was a past time. He became merry by the excitement, and more vindictive and active by its barbarities, and the inefficiency of the enemy. When being pursued through deep swamps, he has stood at a distance, and laughed at and ridiculed the soldiers floundering with their arms and accoutrements in mud and water." **135**

On October 17, Wild Cat returned to St. Augustine, informing Jesup that Osceola and Coa-Hadjo had both agreed to come in for negotiations. They were accompanied by a hundred runaway slaves. **136** However, Wild Cat was merely a tool of Jesup's conspiring. By the time Wild Cat returned, Jesup had concluded that it was not only impossible to negotiate with the Seminole chiefs, but that "only powder and lead will be effective" to impose demands on them. **137**



John Horse, or Gopher John, black Seminole leader and interpreter, engraving from *Exiles of Florida*, Joshua R. Giddings, 1858.

This is because the head chiefs were unauthorized to make any treaty on behalf of the Seminole Nation without the consent of all the heads of the families, principle warriors, and subchiefs. The nation operated on a direct democratic consensus that differed from most native confederations, who were simply directed by chiefly authority from the top-down. Even when the majority of family heads supported a measure, those who dissented were not compelled to submit or assent. There was considerable autonomy and decision-making power in each of the small bands that comprised the whole of the Seminole Nation. Jesup found it considerably frustrating that even the oldest and more renowned chiefs could not influence the majority or make decisions on behalf of the entire tribe. The decentralized, democratic nature of the Seminoles prevented the general nation from wavering on their steadfast determination to remain on their homelands, or from surrendering their black allies. What replaced the old dynastic power of the Seminole Nation was a meritocracy, meaning individuals were respected and held power based on their own individual merits and resolution. This meant that leaders like Osceola, Gopher John, and Sam Jones became more powerful and influential than the conservatives Micanopy and Jumper because of their strong resolution in resisting the whites. The majority anti-removal opinion of the nation determined the leaders in charge and their degree of influence. Jesup was well-aware of this and notably peeved:

“Yahola Hajo declared to me...no reliance should be placed upon the promises of any of the Seminole chiefs; that, unable to control their sub-chiefs and warriors, they promised only to deceive. He informed me that the Seminoles acknowledged no authority in their chiefs to make any treaty without the consent of all the head families of the nation. That even when a larger portion of the heads of families should assent to a measure, those who dissented did not consider themselves bound to submit to or adopt it. He added, they would not tell the truth, and if I believed them they would deceive me. He said his uncle (Jumper) was desirous of emigrating, as were all the chiefs who were aware of our power; but the majority of the nation being opposed to it, their lives were in danger whenever they advocated the measure.” **138**

On October 20, black Seminole sub-chief John Cavallo, or Gopher John, led an advance party to inform General Hernandez of Osceola's coming arrival. Jesup warned Hernandez to watch out for Cavallo: “Wherever John Cavallo was, foul play might be expected.” **139** But Jesup was the one who was actually up to foul play. The next day, Jesup directed Hernandez to seize Osceola's party in the negotiations: “Let the chiefs and

warriors know that we have been deceived by them long enough, and that we do not intend to be deceived by them again. Order the whole party directly to town. You have force sufficient to compel obedience, and they must move instantly.” **140** On the arrival of the chiefs, the delegate met Hernandez at the encampment near Fort Peyton about seven miles southwest of St. Augustine. The Seminoles came bearing the white flag to signify the truce. On October 27, the negotiations began. In the middle of the proceedings, Hernandez interrupted with a list of premeditated questions for Osceola and Coa-Hadjo. A week before, Jesup had provided Hernandez with specific questions for the chiefs regarding the return of runaway slaves:

“Ascertain the objections of the Indians in coming in at this time. Also their expectations. Are they prepared to deliver up the negroes taken from the citizens at once? Why have they not surrendered them already, as promised by Coa-Hadjo at Fort King? Have the chiefs of the nation held a council in relation to the subjects of the talk at Fort King? What chiefs attended that council, and what was their determination. Have the chiefs sent a messenger with a decision of that council. Have the principle chiefs, Micanopy, Jumper, Cloud, and Alligator, sent a messenger, and if so, what is their message? Why have not those chiefs come in themselves?” **141**

They were thrown off guard from the unexpected questions. Osceola gave a few vague replies before he turned to Coa-Hadjo: “I feel choked; you must speak for me.” Hernandez quickly signaled for his 200 man force to surround the delegate under the orders “that they should be made prisoners.” The soldiers disarmed them, marched them to St. Augustine, and imprisoned them in Fort Marion. **142**

The actions of rebel slaves from the St. John’s River revolt were shaping the war behind the scenes. The rebel slaves who turned themselves over to military authorities provided information and guidance to Hernandez necessary to capture King Phillip and other influential chiefs, causing Wild Cat to arrange a parley for his father and use his own influence to convince others to negotiate, leading to one of the most notorious events of the war – the capture of Osceola. But on the night of November 29<sup>th</sup>, a band of twenty captive blacks and Seminoles made a daring escape from Fort Marion led by Wild Cat and John Cavallo. It seems that if John had once again used his cunning wiliness to thwart the objectives of the US government. Osceola and King Phillip remained behind in Fort Marion, having become weary, discouraged, and sick from the continuous warfare. They both eventually died in prison.

Even with the loss of two important leaders, the break for freedom had far-reaching effects for the continuance of the resistance. The black and Seminole forces were rejuvenated with the prison break and grew even more determined to resist the US military, now that the headmen in charge were the most steadfast group of anti-removal chiefs. Wild Cat was now the principle leader and one of the few remaining important Seminole chiefs. The escapees reached the Everglades settlement of Miccosukee chief Sam Jones. The anti-emigration chief and the Miccosukees were heading towards Fort Mellon to meet General Jesup and the other chiefs for negotiations. Even though these Miccosukees were the fiercest anti-removal group in the nation, they were still considering peace at this time. Wild Cat relayed information to Sam Jones about the betrayal at Fort Peyton, exaggerating the harshness of their prison conditions to deter the chief from negotiating with the whites. Sam Jones and his band withdrew from negotiations and communication with Jesup for precisely this reason. **143**

While the blacks and Seminoles made their escape from the St. Augustine prison, Jesup endeavored to capture some of the other main Seminole chiefs. Jesup detached a delegation of Cherokee peacemakers to “urge the necessity of fulfilling all their treaty stipulations.” **144** The Cherokee head chief John Ross succeeded in convincing the Seminole chiefs Micanopy, Jumper, Cloud, and Alligator, with eighty of their warriors, to come in for negotiations. On December 14, Jesup grew angry that Sam Jones had not arrived to negotiations, unaware that the escaped band of Seminoles and blacks had detailed his betrayal at the Fort Peyton negotiations to deter the chief from attending. But their suspicions were confirmed. In anger, Jesup seized Micanopy’s band, disarmed them, and sent them off to St. Augustine as prisoners of war. The Cherokee delegation had disregarded the commands of Jesup to persuade the chiefs to emigrate. Instead of relaying immediate removal as a non-negotiable condition of surrender, they had told the chiefs and warriors they could remain in Florida “on certain conditions.” The Cherokee chiefs, having suffered dispossession at the hands of the Georgian whites, sympathized with the Seminoles and urged them to hold out for as long as they could. After discovering this, Jesup had the Cherokee delegation expelled from the territory indefinitely. Perhaps Ross had also connived with the black Seminoles to bide them more time. Jesup hysterically believed that John Ross, the Cherokee chief, would use the compensation he received for Cherokee lands to start an armed uprising of indigenous people and blacks against the United States:

“If John Ross be allowed to get into his own hands and that of his council the amount to be paid for the Cherokee lands, he will have the means, as he will perhaps have the inclination, to rally the Indian force west of the Mississippi, as well as the black force within the Southern States and the Territory of Florida, against the United States.”

**145**

By the winter of 1837, the war was once again fully activated. Because the black Seminoles were excluded from national news on the war, there was no public outrage for Jesup’s earlier efforts to seize fugitive slaves and blacks from the Seminoles. Yet Jesup received harsh national criticism for his two-faced tactics dealing with Osceola. Responding to sympathy for the Seminole plight, Jesup fiercely fired back: “To save American blood, I would employ the dogs of Cuba, if I could obtain them, regardless alike of the cant of hypocrites or the bluster of demagogues.” **146** Instead of saving white lives, Lt. Robert Buchanan reported that the Seminoles were pretty much disposed to peace until Jesup’s betrayal in negotiations: “They reported that the Indians were disposed to adhere to the treaty made with General Jessup, but, owing to the treatment of some of those who had been taken and placed in irons, and the capture of Powel, they had not as much confidence in the good faith of the whites as they formerly had.” **147**

Following Jesup’s betrayal in negotiations, Wild Cat and John Horse escaped from Fort Marion, making their way south of the St. John’s River and deterring Sam Jones from negotiations. Colonel Zachary Taylor noted:

“This good intention on the part of the hostiles was frustrated in consequence of a number of the prisoners taken with Osceola Powel, having made their escape about that time from St. Augustine, was confined, and who I learn from good authority not only changed the intentions of the Indians as to surrendering, but their pacific dispositions to that of the most deadly hostility, representing to them that they had been most cruelly treated by the whites during their captivity, and which would be their fate if they put themselves in our hands.” **148**

The rebel forces had revived in the Kissimmee region of south-central Florida. Weakened after losing their main leaders and their fugitive slave allies, the black, Seminole, and Miccosukee forces assembled to make something like a last stand. Wild Cat, Alligator, Sam Jones, and John Cavallo were now leading the resistance. Colonel Zachary Taylor commanded his regiment to repress the resistance forces amassing in the

area. In August, 1837, General Jesup reported the concentration of “Indian negroes on the Kissimmee, Caloosahatchee, and Pease Creek.” **149** Colonel Zachary Taylor now “moved down the west side of Kissimmee” aware “that a portion of the hostiles were to be found in that direction.” **150** The rebels formed a small army of 380 warriors to confront Taylor’s regiment. **151** On the other hand, Taylor’s forces numbered 1,350 soldiers, militiamen, and volunteers, outnumbering the rebels almost three-to-one. Taylor was commanding the largest, most powerful force yet detached in Florida. **152** However, the black and Seminole resistance possessed modern firearms and sufficient ammunition to confront an army like Taylor’s. Before the battle, Taylor captured one of the Seminole spies and reported the weapons he found on the warrior: “He was an active young warrior, armed with an excellent rifle, fifty balls in his pouch, and an adequate proportion of powder.” **153** Jesup had earlier written his apprehension of Cuban traders supplying weapons for the rebels at Charlotte Harbor. **154**

On December 20, Taylor left Fort Gardner to pursue the rebels throughout the Kissimmee. His regiment searched through the marshes gathering intelligence on the location of the main force. The blacks and Seminoles, in the mean time, retreated for days to search for an optimal position of defense. They eventually set up their camp on a sheltered hammock about three-fourths of a mile into a murky cypress swamp. Their location would prove necessary for their success. There they waited for the encroaching military force. In front there was an impassable morass of saw-grass and palmetto. In the rear there was the sandy beach shore of Lake Okeechobee that could provide for a rapid retreat if necessary. **155** The encampment extended for more than a mile. **156** They cut down the grass in front in order to expose the troops to their fire, notching gun rests in the trees where the most skilled marksmen were posted. The look-outs were enveloped in moss to spot the advance of Taylor’s force. **157** Lt. Robert Buchanan said that the Seminoles and blacks were “posted in the strongest position that I have ever seen in Florida.” **158**

On Christmas morning, everything was eerily calm. Taylor’s command entered a large prairie where three hundred cattle were grazing with some Seminole ponies. They captured another young warrior “armed and equipped as the former.” He gave away the position of the rebels waiting for battle in the hammock about a mile to the right. The captured Seminole was John Cavallo’s brother-in-law, probably sent out as a decoy. He said that there were two thousand men, women, and children waiting in the hammock, more than two hundred of whom were warriors. **159** Once the Mississippi volunteers reached the hammock they immediately fell under heavy fire from the rebels. Colonel Gentry fell mortally wounded and the volunteers broke ranks in their retreat, never

returning to the battle. The blacks and Seminoles relentlessly showered bullets onto the five companies of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry until “every officer, with one exception, as well as most of the non-commissioned officers, including the sergeant major and four of the orderly sergeants, were killed and wounded of those companies.” **160** When the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry retreated and formed once again “only one of these companies had but four men left untouched.” **161** The intense fighting continued for two and a half hours. The 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry succeeded in advancing on the rebel front position. The 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry rushed the right flank on their rear position at Lake Okeechobee. **162** The allies gave one volley of shots before they hurriedly retreated and broke off into small parties of fifteen or twenty warriors. Captain Sprague reported: “Coa-coochee says not an Indian faltered, until the soldiers rushed upon them whooping and yelling, when they retreated in small parties.” **163** But the damage was done.

The United States suffered the worst defeat since the start of the war. It was easily the most decisive battle of the war, one that would determine its remainder. The US military suffered 139 casualties, 27 dead and 112 wounded - over ten percent of Taylor’s entire force. In turn, the blacks and Seminoles only endured 21 casualties, twelve dead and nine wounded. Although the US forces held the battleground afterwards, there was no victory celebration. The battleground couldn’t even be seen underneath the bloody bodies. Taylor described the sight of 139 bloody bodies on the battleground as “one of the most trying scenes of my life.” **164** The battle had convinced Jesup that military power was no longer a feasible solution to defeat the resistance. They commissioned the most powerful force they could muster, only to be absolutely decimated by a black and Seminole army less than a third its size. Taylor’s defeated regiment limped back to Fort Gardner, where he made the official report of the battle stating that he had “gallantly beaten the enemy.” **165** He may have driven back the Seminoles and blacks from their position, but nothing was really achieved in the battle. The only sure thing was that the largest military regiment commissioned in the Florida War was decimated by a rebel force only a third its size. Lt. Robert Buchanan reached a far different conclusion of the battle than Taylor: “A sad Christmas has this been, for us and our friends.” **166** The battle was a wakeup call and reminder to General Jesup that the war couldn’t succeed on the official conditions of surrender. New concessions had to be made.



## Chapter 7

# Achieving Freedom on the Field of Battle: The First Emancipation Proclamation (1838-1842)

Why wouldn't this war end? Some commentators blamed Seminole and black "savagery" for the continuance of the war, even opposing Jesup for attempting to "negotiate" when he should have been out there attempting to either remove or exterminate them. Others believed Jesup's two-faced negotiations were the problem, instilling distrust for the whites in the blacks and Seminoles. But following the battle of Okeechobee, Jesup now came to conclude that the official removal policy was the largest hindrance to closing the conflict:

"We require more than peace, we require emigration...if that policy is to be abandoned, a peace as permanent as that with Great Britain can be made with the Seminoles...If emigration is abandoned, I can, without mediation, place the whole body of Indians so far south as to secure to the country nine additional millions of acres." **1**

Yet as events unfolded, Jesup probably knew better. Placing the Seminoles in a South Florida reservation would have only worked if their black allies were protected, impossible as long as Floridian slave raiders, claimants, and speculators continued their efforts to enslave them. As long as the blacks continued to feel their freedom was at risk, the Seminoles would continue to oppose emigration. Such was what Jesup had learned in June 1837. Following the battle of Okeechobee, Jesup renewed his earlier skepticism of the removal policy and became willing to compromise. The pragmatic Jesup was primarily concerned with the war's high costs in money and white lives. On February 7, 1838, he entered into an arrangement with several Seminole chiefs, promising that he would negotiate on their behalf for a small segment of South Florida to be assigned for them in return for peace. On February 11, he wrote a letter to the Secretary of War arguing against immediate removal as an effective policy:

“As a soldier it is my duty, I am aware, not to comment upon the policy of the government, but to carry it out in accordance with my instructions. I have endeavored faithfully to do so; but the prospect of terminating the war, in any reasonable time is anything but flattering. My decided opinion is, that unless immediate emigration be abandoned, the war will continue for years to come, and at constantly accumulating expense. Is it not well worth the serious consideration of an enlightened government, whether, even if the wilderness we are traversing could be inhabited by the white man (which is not the fact,) the object we are contending for would be worth the cost? I certainly do not think it would; indeed, I do not consider the country south of the Chickasa-Hatchee worth the medicines we shall expend in driving the Indians from it. If I were permitted -- and it is with great diffidence that I venture to make the suggestion -- I would allow them to remain, and would assign them the country west of the Kissimmee, Okee-Chobee, and Panai-Okee, and east of Pease Creek, south, to the extreme of Florida. That would satisfy them...I respectfully commend the measure to your consideration, and that of the President, as the only means of terminating, immediately, a most disastrous war." **3**

Jesup gave orders for the Seminoles to separate from the blacks. On February 27, Jesup seized a party of allies and sent them off to Tampa for emigration. Lt. Sprague recorded: “Hallec-Hajo declared...at all events he would not separate from his negroes.” **4** On March 17<sup>th</sup>, Secretary of War Joel R. Poinsett coldly rejected Jesup’s proposal to abandon the emigration policy: “The laws of congress evince a determination to carry out the measure, and it is to be regarded as the settled policy of the country.” **5** Since Washington seemed to be adamant in sticking with its inefficient dogmatic policy, Jesup would now resort to drastic measures to get things done.

Over the course of this time, hundreds of Seminoles and blacks gathered at the Fort Jupiter encampment hopeful for successful negotiations. Jesup was in an extreme predicament now. He had promised the gathering crowd that they could remain in Florida, but now his hands were tied. The second that he informed them of the change in terms, the Seminoles and blacks would instantly feel that something was up, flee back into the swamps, and commence with hostilities. On March 20, Jesup ordered the chiefs to meet him in council. The chiefs refused, reasonably sensing a betrayal on his part. On March 21, he ordered Colonel Twiggs to seize the entire encampment instead, securing 513 Seminoles and 165 blacks, the largest catch of the war. **6** The official record of the captives at Fort Jupiter listed 151 “Seminole negroes” and fourteen fugitive slaves. **7** To ensure that the war would come to a close, he gave a huge concession in accordance with

his previous agreement in March 1837. To draw in the other blacks who remained with hostile parties, he authorized freedom for any blacks who agreed to emigrate out west:

“That all Negroes the property of the Seminole...who...delivered themselves up to the Commanding Officer of the Troops should be free.” **8**

As a result of Jesup’s proclamation of freedom, eleven to twelve hundred Seminoles and blacks surrendered. **9** The tribe almost completely abdicated to the terms of the treaty. Confirming Jesup’s assessment that the black resistance was the largest obstacle to Seminole removal, the Seminole resistance considerably waned following the loss of their black allies. This revolutionary order set the precedent for the Emancipation Proclamation of the Civil War. For the first time in US history, freedom for a disaffected slave population was granted on the field of battle following a long, militant struggle. Even though this was essentially a victory for the black Seminoles, a handful of runaways remained among them and they were included in the terms even if their former owners still disputed and agitated their claims. Even if it was only a handful, the Second Seminole War constituted the first and only successful slave revolt on US soil prior to the Civil War. The century-long black Seminole resistance finally resulted in official acceptance of their right to freedom. But neither Lincoln’s proclamation nor Jesup’s order resulted from higher moral notions of rights and freedom. Just as the Emancipation Proclamation strategically undermined the Confederacy, Jesup’s order now divided and considerably weakened the Seminole resistance. Pragmatism was required for success in both situations and both men were essentially pragmatists who cared more to achieve what they perceived as the necessary ends in war than the angry protests and outrage of slaveholders.

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, Abraham and a delegation of Seminole chiefs were commissioned west of the Okeechobee as messengers to convince the others to emigrate. Abraham had become a mediator on behalf of the US military since his capture earlier in the war. The chiefs were detached to bring in Seminole chief Alligator, leader of 360 Seminoles and blacks, among them John Cavallo. They left with news of Jesup’s proclamation to induce emigration. **10** On April 4<sup>th</sup>, Alligator surrendered at Fort Bassinger with 88 of his followers, 27 of whom were black. **11** Gradually Alligator’s entire band of 360 Seminole and black followers surrendered, a hundred of whom were warriors. **12** In May, the total twelve hundred Seminoles and blacks who surrendered were shipped out of Florida to the ports of New Orleans. On May 15, Lt. Reynolds

arrived at New Orleans. The Seminoles and blacks were to embark next to Fort Gibson for the Oklahoma territory. However, Reynolds ran into trouble with the New Orleans courts. A civil court held the claims of Creek mercenaries for 67 of the blacks in US custody. The Creeks had rejected Jesup's offer to pay compensation for the blacks he had promised them in return for military service, now avidly seeking to obtain them as they made their way to the western territory. Reynolds documented:

“Arrangements are made for the embarkment of the party for Fort Gibson, with the exception of sixty seven Negroes who are claimed by persons from Georgia; the civil authority I understand require these Negroes be not removed, it appears that Genl. Gaines presented himself as defendant, and contended, as the Negroes were prisoners of war, the civil authority had no right to arrest them from the Government's hands. The court however decided contrary, acknowledging the Indians alone as prisoners of war, and the negroes subject to attachment as the property of the Indians. As the case will not come on for some time and deeming (from all that I have been able to learn) that the claim is fraudulent, it will be necessary that the owners and witnesses remain. I do this at the instance of the U. S. District Attorney; the Indians and Negroes therefore, will remain in the Barracks until a decision be made. I will take all necessary measure in having them subsisted and properly quartered. Major Clark informs me, that he has communicated to you, the situation of the Negroes alluded to.” **13**

The several months of black Seminole emigration to the western territory were marked by fervent efforts of both Creek and white Floridian slave claimants to defeat Jesup's proposal. They used the civil courts of Louisiana to confine the blacks as they remained in New Orleans to await passage to the new territory. The Creeks argued that Jesup had promised them all the property that they had plundered from the Seminoles, including the black Seminoles. White slaveholders claimed that some of the blacks, including ones the Creeks claimed, were slaves the Seminoles had stolen during the war. In May, former Indian Agent Gad Humphreys petitioned the Secretary of War, claiming that some of the blacks taken out west were his. But in a twist of irony, General Gaines, the decorated military commander responsible for the “Negro Fort” massacre and lifelong enemy to the black Seminoles, became the defendant for their freedom in the court of law. He argued in court that they were taken as “prisoners of war” and property of the US government, not to be overturned by the claims of a civil court. Gaines would even

recognize that the black Seminoles were the descendents of runaway slaves and had remained in Florida for several generations:

“The court appears to labor under the impression, that the negroes in question were captured by the Seminole Indians, in the course of their hostile incursions upon our frontier inhabitants. Is this the fact? I will assume, for the learned council of the claimant, that he will never have the temerity to assert that they are among the number taken from our frontier inhabitants, in the present, or in any former war.” **14**

After the delay, the emigration party left for Arkansas on the 21<sup>st</sup>. They left behind 31 out of the 67 blacks claimed by the Creek slaveholders. Reynolds wrote: “These negroes, I am informed, do not belong to the Indians on whom the claims have been made.” **15** On June 28, the New Orleans sheriff turned over the 31 blacks to Lt. Reynolds in the absence of the Creek attorney. On July 11, Reynolds departed from New Orleans with Alligator’s band and the 31 blacks claimed by the Creeks. They were already two hundred miles west of Fort Gibson by the time the Creek attorney Nathaniel F. Collins had returned and realized that their claimed property had left. Even though most of the blacks had successfully avoided enslavement at New Orleans, with the assistance of some unlikely friends, the remaining blacks in Florida were still being hunted by both Creek and white claimants. Lt. Reynolds noted: “I was informed by Mr. Collins, the attorney, that there were many negroes coming within his claim, who are still in Florida.” **16**

After the blacks were removed from the conflict, a few hundred still remained in scattered pockets with their respective bands. Those who remained in Florida became aware of continued efforts to enslave their brethren out west and chose to opt for the Florida swamps rather than place their life and liberty at the discretion of their life-long enemy. But the blacks were no longer the dangerously powerful force they had once been. As a result, the Florida war quickly dwindled down in the months following Jesup’s emancipation proclamation. Jesup estimated that during his service in the Florida War, some 2,400 Seminoles and blacks were removed, seven hundred of whom were warriors – a significant portion of the total population. **17** What Jesup failed to note was his previous estimate of at least twenty-five hundred decent red warriors in Florida, not including the blacks or young ones who were actually superior fighters. **18** This meant that the total warrior population alone could have reached numbers of up to 3,500 or more. Since a far smaller number of warriors were seized for emigration in the war, it can

only be speculated that many were either killed or starved to death in the depths of the Florida swamps.

Facing the far superior US military, the Seminoles had largely depended on the fierce black resistance against slavery to defend their homeland. The blacks had been the most ferocious fighters in conflict after conflict, fighting on the frontlines to the death if necessary. Capt. Sprague noted this:

“The negroes, from the commencement of the Florida War, have, for their numbers, been the most formidable foe, more bloodthirsty, active, and revengeful, than the Indian. To surrender or be captured was to them slavery or punishment.” **19**

Well-aware of black Seminole determination, General Jesup defended his emancipation grant on the grounds that the black Seminoles were too defiant to have let them continue to remain in Florida. The runaway slaves among them had proven even more vindictive, initiating a total revolt that devastated the East Florida frontier. It was better for the safety of institutional slavery to have removed all of the disaffected blacks, Seminole and runaway, from Florida. General insurrection was still a very real possibility as long as they remained in Florida. Their threat to the Southern establishment was not a paranoid fiction, as was the case of rapid anti-abolitionist propaganda, but a looming reality that could not be suppressed without the vast loss of life and property. To the pragmatic military officials under Jesup’s command, placing the runaway slaves back onto the plantations was only giving them an open opportunity to bring more of their brethren back with them when they absconded to the swamps, as it was almost certain they would. Capt. Sprague’s notes extensively defend the pragmatic thinking behind Jesup’s order:

“Many of these negroes had escaped, others were captured, from the citizens of the Territory, and the state of Georgia. Years had elapsed, allowing sufficient time for them to have grown from youth to manhood, imbibing the habits of their captors; in many instances they had intermarried, and become sons-in-law of their masters. These habits could not be subdued, nor these ties broken, without a struggle. The Indian surrendered, confident that his property would be as much respected as his life. Indeed, so long a time had elapsed, that possession had banished from the Indian's mind all probability of a reclamation of the slave. It was folly to turn the negro, thus imbued, and with such ties, upon his white master. The indolence and waywardness of the native had become a part of his nature. The independence and

freedom so long enjoyed, unchecked, had unfitted him for any usefulness to the claimant. To have deprived the Indians of this property, on surrendering, would have greatly embarrassed the favorable results anticipated. True policy dictated otherwise. The negro, returned to his original owner, might have remained a few days, when he again would have fled to the swamps, more vindictive than ever; while his Indian master, between whom there was cherished a mutual affection, had embarked for Arkansas, dissatisfied and deeply wronged. These negroes had learned to speak the Indian language, which, together with a knowledge of English, and intimacy with the habits of whites, soon gave them an ascendancy, when the slave becomes the master. . . The lives of citizens, and their property, demanded that they should be sent far beyond the country with which they were familiar, and with which were associated many incidents calculated to foster a hostile feeling. The swamps and hammocks of Florida could, for years, be made safe retreats from bondage, where, without labor or expense, they might defy the efforts of armed men. It would require blood and money to besiege them, and when forced out, they could remove unseen to other strong-holds, which nature has so abundantly provided. Ten resolute negroes, with a knowledge of the country, are sufficient to desolate the frontier, from one extent to the other.” **20**

### **The Resistance on All Fronts**

While the main Seminole and black resistance was significantly diminished by Jesup’s effective campaign and the loss of the black allies, several prominent chiefs remained in Florida more resolute and vindictive than ever. Seminole chiefs Wildcat, Billy Bowlegs, and Sam Jones would lead small bands to raid white settlements and resist the US military for some years after. On May 15, 1838, command of the army was transferred from General Thomas Jesup over to Colonel Zachary Taylor. Some of Florida’s pre-colonial indigenous populations were now involved in the resistance, including small pockets of the Apalachee, the Calusa, the Tallahasseees, and the Uchees. Taylor enforced the removal of the 220 Apalachee from the Appalachicola region where they resided. The Apalachee did not resist and emigrated peacefully. How many of these Apalachees were black is not recorded but they had constantly suffered from white slave raids for years. During the year of Taylor’s command, the Seminole resistance went out of its way to avoid confrontation with the whites. From May 1838 to June 1839, only two officers and eight soldiers were killed in the search for Seminole settlements, excluding those who died from illnesses and other non-conflict related causes. Floridian settlers



The Army cavalry shooting down Waxe-Hadjo in the Seminole War, 1840-1841. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

constantly complained about their loss from “unprovoked savage raids” but the loss of Seminole property and lives far exceeded that of the whites. General Jesup recounted the total war that decimated the Seminoles: “The villages of Indians have all been destroyed, and their cattle, horses, and other stock, with nearly all their property, taken or destroyed.” <sup>21</sup> The *Florida Herald* proclaimed:

“Many of the Indians have been captured or destroyed. Every portion of the enemy’s country has been invaded. Every village, every hut has been demolished. Their fields have been laid waste, their cattle driven off, and the nation broken and dispersed in small fugitive bands, prowl through the wilderness, or hover on the frontier.” <sup>22</sup>

Some blacks were still to be found among the Seminoles. In February 1839, Taylor reported that he had sent 196 Seminoles and blacks captured in his campaign to the western territory. In March, Taylor shipped out 250 Seminoles and blacks to the western territory. Among them was Abraham. Seminole women were the most reluctant



to go. As the vessel departed, they taunted and lamented their warrior men for their cowardly conduct. One observer noted that the Seminole women “upbraided their men with cowardice, in refusing to die on their native soil.” **23** Earlier in the war, Jesup had reported the role of Seminole women in the conflict: “The women, to encourage the warriors in their determination – those who have lost their husbands in battle – sell their powder and lead to those who desire it for hunting, but distribute it gratis to those who promise to expend it only in war.” Aware that anti-emigration sentiments were pretty much unanimous among the Seminole Nation, he concluded: “Such a people you may destroy, but cannot readily conquer.” **24**

In May, the Seminoles and the US came to a peace for a short time as the army agreed to allow the small Seminole bands to reside in the land south of Pease Creek. General Macomb prematurely declared the war to be over. But minor hostilities broke out again when the Seminoles attacked and raided plantations throughout the month of July. On July 22, a force of 250 Seminoles led by Billy Bowlegs and several chiefs attacked Col. Harney’s encampment of thirty soldiers on the Caloosahatchee River, eighteen of whom were killed in the surprise attack. **25** The “Caloosahatchee massacre” was the formal re-initiation of the Second Seminole War. The Seminoles were denounced for breaking the peace agreement even though the whites had done so on numerous occasions. Yet the particular bands involved in the attack had not ratified the treaty with the whites. Ignorance of decentralized Seminole organization and loose federation accounts for the misconception. **26**

It was generally believed by whites that the black slave interpreter Sampson Forrester was responsible for betraying Harney’s encampment. Sampson’s story shared many similar aspects with that of Luis Pacheco’s. As a youth, Sampson had been “stolen” by the Seminoles and grown up learning their language and culture. He was later recaptured and employed as a scout and interpreter for the US government in the war. Sampson was in charge of scouting operations for Harney’s encampment on the Caloosahatchee River, spending most of his time with the Seminole camp at the Big Cypress Swamp. The day before the Seminole assault, Sampson returned from the Seminole stronghold “with reassuring news that the warriors were in a friendly mood.” **27** Relying on Sampson’s report, Harney decided not to post up his usual guard. Consequently, the Seminoles were able to penetrate into the camp without warning before the soldiers awoke in the morning. David Taylor, godson to Sampson, was questioned about the probability that Sampson had betrayed Harney at the Caloosahatchee. He replied:

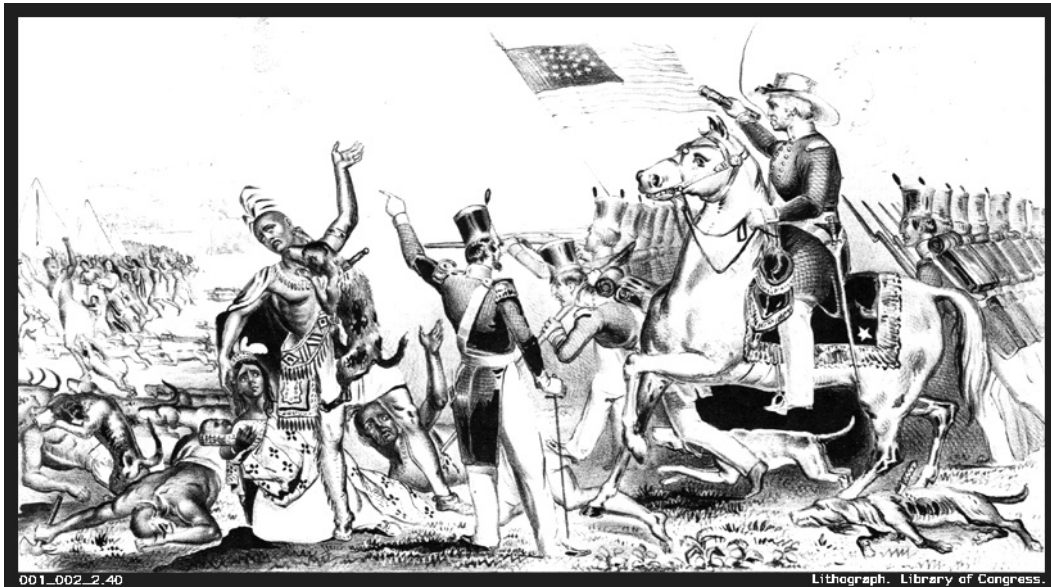
“I ‘member hearin’ ‘bout dat massacre, an’ I wouldn’t put hit past ‘im. I’ve heard ‘im say he done betrayed bofe white folks an’ Injuns. He useta brag about it. But I reckon dey be’n lotsa otha folk done de same thing... Samson Forrester was a sly one, all right. Once he was scoutin’ for de sojers an’ dey come to some Injun tracks all gwine the same way. De sojers stahts off the way de tracks gwine, an’ Samson he say: ‘Hold on dere! Y’all gwine de wrong way. An’ sho nuff, dem Injuns be’n walkin’ back’ards. So de sojers tu’n an’ go de otha way, and pretty soon dem tracks all be tu’ned de otha way and dem Injuns be’n runnin’ lickety-split an’ got away.”

## 28

The Caloosahatchee “massacre” that reignited the war unmistakably paralleled the Dade “massacre” that had sparked the war. The ruthless nature of Harney’s warfare in the Florida swamps and the assistance of the military’s black guide, who also had close relations with the Seminoles, led the warriors to completely devastate his regiment.

In late 1839, Governor Reid addressed the Florida legislative council to recommend the military fight “fire with fire,” meaning that more brutal tactics to crush the resistance would now be adopted: “We are waging war with beasts of prey; the tactics that belong to civilized nations are but shackles and fetters in its prosecution; we must fight fire with fire; the white man must, in a great measure, adopt the mode of warfare pursued by the red man.” **29** At the time, the small Seminoles bands were attacking scattered plantations and travelers on roads throughout the state. Reid set the precedent for the despicable use of Cuban bloodhounds to seek out the blacks. Following Governor Reid’s speech, the use of Spanish bloodhounds was authorized by the government. Captain Sprague wrote: “Accordingly, Colonel Fitzpatrick was authorized to proceed to Havanna, and procure a kennel of bloodhounds, dogs long noted in the West India islands for tracking down and pursuing the negroes.” **30**

In early 1840, 33 bloodhounds were imported from Havana. Secretary of War Joel Poinsett had authorized General Zachary Taylor for their use, declaring his “favor for the measure” as means of “ridding the country of the Indians.” The Secretary of War authorized that “every possible means” should be employed to “destroy the savage and unrelenting foe.” **31** These bloodhounds had once been infamously employed by the British to defeat the black maroon uprisings in Jamaica. Jesup had once noted this as a pretext to use them against his black maroon enemies in Florida. **32** While propagandists claimed the dogs were for the Seminoles, it was more like they were to track down the



“Hunting Indians in Florida with Bloodhounds,” lithograph on the war published by James Baillie, 1848. Source: *Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-89725*.

black maroons. Slave claimants were still on the hunt for remaining blacks in Florida. These bloodhounds had been specifically trained to hunt down blacks and were unable to trace the scent of the Seminole, failing to lead to the capture of more than one or two warriors. The dogs did little more than provoke public outrage at the despicable use of bloodhounds against human beings, protesting the U.S. government’s brutal and inhumane tactics in the war. Even Senator H.A. Wise of Virginia, a harsh critic of Congressman Giddings, introduced a resolution to inquire into the military’s use of bloodhounds in the war. Senator James Buchanan of Pennsylvania presented a petition to the Senate from the representatives of “the religious Society of Friends in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, and also citizens of the city and county of Pennsylvania, remonstrating against the employment of bloodhounds in the war against the Seminole Indians.” **33** The religious Society of Friends “prayed that Congress would put an end to war in Florida, by extending to the Seminoles a hand of friendship.” **34**

In early 1841, Congress debated further funding of the war. Five years into the war, Sprague reported that Congress continued “its liberality in appropriating means to defray the expenses of any newly-devised scheme to bring the contest to a close.” **35** By this time, the war had become unpopular amongst the military officers. The hypocrisy of

the slave states was apparent: the same pro-slavers who cried that Federal legislation or intervention against slavery was a violation of “state’s rights” supported the Federal government in a slave hunt to track down their fugitives. Federal intervention was selectively opposed or supported depending on what benefited Southern slaveholders.

On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1841, radical abolitionist and Ohio delegate Joshua R. Giddings delivered a fiery speech about the Seminole war. He proclaimed that the main intention of the war was for catching slaves rather than taking land. He brilliantly manipulated the gag rule on Congress that had infamously prevented any discussion of slavery. Giddings proposed to test the extent to which abolitionists could discuss subjects collaterally involving slavery. When the House rose in uproar with the intent to gag his speech, the Democrat chairman Mr. Clifford decided that Giddings’ remarks were in order and relevant to debate on the bill. Giddings replied to his objectors:

“I have not said...one word about the subject of abolition...I hold that if the slaves of Georgia or any other State leave their masters, the Federal Government has no constitutional authority to employ our army or navy for their recapture, or to apply the national treasure to repurchase them...such power would necessarily include the power to tax the Free States to an indefinite extent for the support of slavery, and for arresting every fugitive slave who has fled from his master, within the several States of this Union.” **36**

Although constantly interrupted with calls to order and spurious debate, Giddings bravely proceeded for three hours to document irrefutable evidence that slavery was the cause of the Seminole war to the “exquisite torture of the Southern duelists and slave-mongers, Georgians, Carolinians, and Virginians.” **37** Whig abolitionist John Quincy Adams left his seat and took a position in front of the clerk’s desk to joyously watch the distressed expressions of pro-slavery delegates. Giddings cited sufficient evidence to prove that the US military was interested primarily in capturing fugitive slaves and enslaving the black Seminoles in the Florida War. He cited Jesup as well as several other officers and government officials admitting that the blacks not only played a central role in the war, but that the war revolved primarily around slavery. With the gag rule still in place, Giddings brilliantly used the war to indirectly attack the institution of chattel slavery. He asserted that the tax-payers in the Northern Free States should not be held responsible for funding slave-catchers in the South when they had no stake in the institution. He sharply labeled the US military as a party of slave raiders:

“Our army was put in motion to capture negroes and slaves. Our officers and soldiers became slave-catchers, companions of the most degraded class of human beings who disgrace that slave-cursed region. With the assistance of bloodhounds they tracked the flying bondman over hill and dale, through swamp and everglade, until his weary limbs could sustain him no longer. Then they seized him, and for the bounty of twenty dollars he was usually delivered over to the first white man who claimed him. Our troops became expert in this business of hunting and enslaving mankind. I doubt whether the Spanish pirates, engaged in the same employment on the African coast, are more perfect masters of their vocation. Nor was our army alone engaged in this war upon human rights. They merely followed the example of a class of land-pirates who are ever ready to rob or murder when they can do so with impunity.” **38**

After the three hour-long speech, Slave State delegates took turns to attack Giddings. Georgia Democrat Mark Cooper ascribed the abolitionist views of Giddings to the whole Whig Party, even though only a handful of Whigs were abolitionists, in order to push the conservative Whig elites to suppress their own party members. Cooper denied that slavery had any relevance to the Seminole War:

“Slavery has as much to do with the Florida War, as had a certain breed of cattle in the lowlands, in causing that harassing border warfare kept up between the Highlanders and Lowlanders of Scotland. About as much to do the taking of game and fish...had in producing the war with Tecumseh and Black Hawk; or about as much as the stealing of ponies had in producing the Indian wars in Ohio; or that which resulted in the battle of Tippecanoe.” **39**

Cooper ignored the vast amount of evidence that Giddings had brought to the table, including a statement from General Thomas Jesup himself acknowledging that the South Florida lands the Seminoles inhabited were not nearly worth the war expenses:

“Is it not well worthy the serious consideration of an enlightened government, whether, even if the wilderness we are traversing could be inhabited by the white man (which is not the fact,) the object we are contending for would be worth the cost? I certainly do not think it would; indeed, I do not consider the country south of the Chickasa-Hatchee worth the medicines we shall expend in driving the Indians from it.” **40**

The Southern delegates grew ferociously critical of Giddings as one played off of the other. Mr. Black, a Georgia delegate, claimed that Ohio had discriminatory laws directed against their free black population. Then he excitedly held up his Bible and read, “Thou hypocrite, first cast the beam out of thine own eye,” as he pointed at Giddings. He promised to hang Giddings if he ever came to Georgia. Mr. Thompson, a Whig delegate of South Carolina, declared that the Whig Party was not responsible for the “obscurest of obscure individuals belonging to that party.” Mr. Bynum, another South representative, complained that “the speech of the gentleman from Ohio against the slaveholders of the South and their institutions was calculated to do incurable injury to that portion of the Union.” Mr. Downing, a Florida delegate, denied that his constituents were engaged in “stealing negroes from the Indians.” Mr. Alford of Georgia said that he would sooner spit on Giddings than listen to anymore of his abolitionist rant. Giddings replied: “Could I as easily wipe the stain of your blood from my soul, you should not live an hour.” Alford rose from his seat and shouted threats at Giddings before rushing the Congressman. He was placed under arrest before he could lay his hands on him.

After Giddings’ speech and the conservative Democrat replies, the Whig Party liberals and centrists tried to distance themselves from Giddings and the small handful of abolitionists in the party in order to avoid being perceived as radicals. The Whig Party elite influenced and urged the rank-and-file politicians to stray away from any abolitionist sympathies. But Giddings’ speech successfully turned the public’s attention to facts, documents, and records, heretofore only known by a handful of powerful men. He had made the public aware of the black Seminole cause and simultaneously won some credit to abolitionism. His interest in the black Seminoles of Florida continued for some years, until he compiled all of his research into the 1858 classic text, *The Florida Exiles and the War for Slavery: Or, The Crimes Committed by Our Government Against the Maroons, who Fled from South Carolina and Other Slave States, Seeking Protection Under Spanish Laws*. **41**

Some of the harshest war critics were military officers and soldiers. Most felt that the Seminoles were in the right, fighting for their self-determination and homeland. “The Indians,” said General Jesup, “are a persecuted race, and we are engaged in an unholy cause.” **42** As the war dragged on, army officers and soldiers became increasingly convinced that the official removal policy was not only inefficient but immoral and unjust. Most recognized that the treaty of Payne’s Landing was a fraudulent compact and that natives had a right to defend their lands. Lieutenant Samuel Forry wrote in a letter:

“The Seminole never wished to leave the soil of his fathers...and did any sub-chief or chief ever intimate such, he was led into it by the fawning machinations of unprincipled agents upon whose probity the government were wrong in relying. But when the treaty was once made, the dignity of the body ratifying it required that it should be carried into execution, and against this, with a determination of purpose strengthened by oft repeated wrongs of their agents and the vampyre-like pioneers of civilization who have been fast crowding upon them, the Seminoles have now contended for two successive campaigns.” **43**

Only a handful understood the correlation between the war and slavery. Field officer Woodburne Potter and Capt. John Sprague made it very clear in their accounts of the Florida War that: 1) The black Seminoles were the fiercest warriors in the Seminole resistance 2) That the Seminoles refused to leave Florida mainly because they feared their black allies would be seized by slave raiders 3) That the war began to seize the black Seminoles and rebel slaves from East Florida 4) That the black Seminoles influenced the Seminoles in resisting removal. Their contribution to our understanding of the Second Seminole War is invaluable. General Gaines’ defense of the black Seminoles in the New Orleans court did not completely wash his hands of blood, but suggests that he well-understood his life-long enemy. Major Ethan A. Hitchcock was one of the most adamant opponents of the war. He expressed his opposition clearly in his accounts of the Florida War:

“The government is in the wrong, and this is the chief cause of the persevering opposition of the Indians, who have nobly defended their country against our attempt to enforce a fraudulent treaty. The natives used every means to avoid a war, but were forced into it by the tyranny of our government.” **44**

Hitchcock spoke to officers in the Florida War and made note of their critical viewpoint on the official removal policy. In his account, it becomes clear that many military officers were cognitive of the facts behind the pretense to the war. Their general consensus was that

“the Treaty of Payne’s Landing was a fraud on the Indians: They never approved of it or signed. They are right in defending their homes and we ought to let them alone.

The country southward is poor for our purposes, but magnificent for the Indians—a fishing and hunting country without agricultural inducements. The climate is against us and paradise for them. The army has done all that it could. It has marched all over the upper part of Florida. It has destroyed all the towns and all the planted fields. Yet, though the Indians are broken up and scattered, they exist in large numbers, separated, but worse than ever. . . . The chief, Coocoochee, is in the vicinity, it is said he hates the whites so bitterly that ‘he never hears them mentioned without gnashing his teeth.’” **45**

Major Hitchcock even hoped in some way that the Seminoles would come out victorious against the US army: “The service is harder on me than on most others, for I know the cruel wrongs to which the enemy has been subjected, so I cannot help wishing that the right may prevail.” **46** Hitchcock corresponded with Secretary of War John Bell, giving him two letters expressing his opposition to the Seminole war. He narrated the causes of the war and proposed assigning South Florida for the remnant bands of Seminoles. The letters were so interesting that Bell gave them to the President Martin Van Buren for consideration. Van Buren rejected Hitchcock’s proposal but affirmed that his sentiments were probably correct:

“I have read with deep interest Major Hitchcock’s letters, which are now returned. They are highly instructive and evince entire sincerity. If peace, as suggested by Major Hitchcock, could be negotiated, leaving them a portion of the country, the tide of white population would roll in and do more service than an army.” **47**

Many soldiers refused to re-enlist in the war. Jesup reported: “Not a man who has served in this country, and who is worth retaining, will engage again; and unless the condition of the soldier be greatly ameliorated, or a different mode of filling the ranks be adopted, we cannot hope to keep up even our small army.” There was no romantic glory in service like the usual “Indian war.” Jesup added: “There is no inducement to any man to enter our service as a private soldier. . . . he has nothing to look forward to but to be turned out and starve when he shall be no longer capable of performing the duties of a soldier.” **48** Desertion became an everyday reality of the war. Colonel Harney ordered his troops to carry nooses not only as a threat to the Seminoles, but to any of his men who contemplated deserting. **49** The punishment for desertion in the war was harsh: “One deserter was sentenced to pay the government back for time lost and to receive fifty lashes with cowhide on his bareback. Other deserters suffered the same, in addition to six



months hard labor with a ball and chain attached.” **50** Capt. Nathaniel Hunter was among the soldiers whose moral conscience conflicted with their duty in the Florida War. He refused to obey Taylor’s order to take no more Seminoles alive as captives. He wrote in his diary:

“I’ve tried every argument to still my conscience, but this restless imp will not be quiet. It bores me to death with impertinent questions relative to the propriety of conduct in which I am engaged and when I answer in the hackneyed phraseology of the day - that I have no right to discuss the propriety of my order; that it is the duty of a soldier to obey; that government is but enforcing a treaty; that our enemies are barbarous murderers of women and children; and last, that I am paid for acting not thinking-Sister to the audacious imp reply, "Fiat justitia ruat calm." Have God and justice no claims upon you prior and paramount to a government that incites you to de commission of a crime? Will no compunctions deter you from wringing your hands in innocent blood, even though it be the command of a superior officer? Enforce a treaty, a compact begot in fraud and brought ford in the blackest villainy and now in process of condemnation aided by the vilest machinations man or demon could invent? Is not every act of the Indians sanctioned by the practice of civilized nations? Are they not sanctioned by expediency and revenge? Mark me-if in this unhallowed surface one drop of Indian blood should soil your hands like Lady Macbeth you may cry to all eternity, "Out damned spot". . . . Besides I'm opposed to fighting Indians anyhow.” **51**

### **Fighting “Fire with Fire”**

On May 6, 1840, command of the Florida War was transferred from General Taylor to Brigadier General Walker Keith Armistead. Major Hitchcock proposed a plan to Armistead to give up the southern half of Florida for the Seminoles who remained. In November 1840, General Armistead met for negotiations with main chiefs Haleck Tustenugge and Tiger Tail. Armistead had been authorized by the Secretary of War to bribe the chiefs or, if he failed, let them remain for an indefinite period in the territory south of Tampa Bay. Armistead ignored his recommendations in the failed negotiations. “Not only did he refuse to make the offer he was authorized to make,” Hitchcock reported, “but at the very time Halec was here in amicable talk he secretly sent a force into his rear, threatening his people at home!” **52** The chiefs and their followers fled to protect their homes only a week within negotiations. Yet the idea of a southern

reservation for the remnant Seminole bands continued to gain more support. Captain Harney was determined to avenge the massacre of his camp at Caloosahatchee. In December, he captured six “Spanish Indians” in a brief skirmish and immediately hung five of them from a tree. Afterwards he was promoted to the rank of Colonel for his “gallant and meritorious conduct.” **53** The hanging of several Seminoles in the Everglades by Colonel Harney angered the war council of chiefs. The war council, led by Sam Jones and the Prophet, a Red Stick Creek religious leader, declared eternal hostility and cruelty to the whites. Sam Jones snarled: “We have given them heretofore, when prisoners, a decent death, and shot them instead of hanging them like a dog.” **54**

Some blacks continued to fight with the small Seminole bands. In June 1840, Colonel Harney captured two of Wild Cat’s family members and a fugitive slave. The runaway slave was a cook on board the schooner *Comet*, which had wrecked near Mosquito Inlet in 1838, the whole crew of which was massacred except for himself, having joined Wild Cat’s band. The Florida *Herald* noted: “He is represented to be an intelligent negro and can give important information.” **55** An observer reported seeing a handful of blacks among the “Spanish Indians” in the raids on Indian Key in August 1840, “who, with others, were heard to speak English, and these last not in the dialect of the negro.” Hester Perrine Walker, a survivor of the Indian Key massacre, recalled the Seminole raid on her house: “There were probably runaway negroes among them, for when they got inside, we distinctly heard one say, ‘They are all hid, old man upstairs,’ and then they ran up.” **56** The black guides aiding the US military made their brethren in Florida aware of the conditions out west. Efforts to enslave the blacks in the Oklahoma territory convinced many in Florida to resist removal. Examining the situation from afar, General Thomas Jesup noted:

“I earnestly hope that the Executive will not permit the National faith, thus, pledged, to be violated; but that these Negroes, as well as all other Seminole Negroes who surrendered to me, be protected from capture by, or sale to, any of our citizens. The Florida War was occasioned, not so much by the indisposition of the Indians to emigrate, as by the attempts made by our own citizens, under the sanction of Officers of the Government, to obtain their Negroes. If the Government fails to act with promptness and energy in preventing interference with the Indian Negroes to the West, no matter how many troops may be there, no one can answer for the peace of the frontier.” **57**

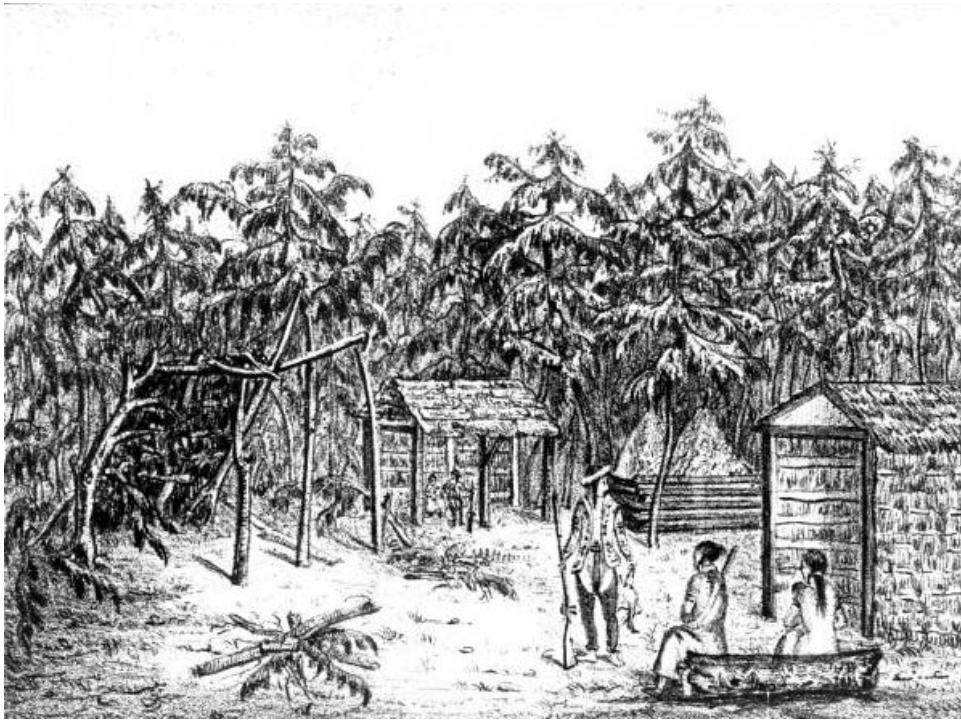
Many important black and Seminole leaders returned to Florida as messengers, interpreters, diplomats, and guides for the US military. The Seminoles and Miccosukees felt intense hatred and betrayal when they found their former allies assisting the whites. At the end of June, Billy Bowlegs, Sam Jones, various chiefs, and 120 principle warriors held a council for their common defense in the vicinity of Fort King, declaring that any messenger, whether red, black, or white, who came to their settlements preaching emigration would be put to death. **58** When the US forces commenced an attack on Halleck's band, Miccosukee fire targeted the Seminole and black "traitors" supporting the US military. They laid heavy fire particularly onto John Horse, who had become one of the most prominent black guides for the US military in Florida after returning from Oklahoma. **59** Captain Sprague recalled John as an interpreter during negotiations with the Seminoles: "The black interpreter, well known as Gopher John, stood in the vicinity. His tall person, gaudily decked for the occasion with ribands and silver work, rose far above the group, now cheerful and merry, who were to learn from his mouth that their plans were frustrated, and that they were captives; a result they little anticipated." **60** But Sprague considered the black guides to have played a significant role in prolonging the war:

"The negro interpreters and guides, some forty in number, were drawing daily pay. The opinions and acts of this class, who it is known had frequent interviews with the enemy, but whose services were necessary, did more to aggravate and prolong the war than any other cause." **61**

Lt. McCall also recalled his good friend John Horse returning to Florida as an interpreter and guide for the military:

"Gopher John, who had grown up from a long-legged, ill-looking negro boy to be a fine-looking fellow of six feet, as straight as an Indian, with just a smile of red blood mantling to his forehead, He dresses remarkably well, and has altogether a jaunty air that would fix your attention at sight. He retains his cognomen with the Indians as well as with the whites who lived in the Indian country before the war. The Gopher is with us as interpreter." **62**

The bands of Seminoles around the Ocklockonnee River near Tallahassee professed their determination to die on the Florida soil, putting fear into the hearts of the



Creek Indian Village on the Appalachicola River, drawing by French traveler Francis Castelneau, ca. 1838-1839. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

adjacent, thickly settled white populous. **63** The smaller numbers of the Seminoles became their strength. Those who remained were more difficult to find and too agile for a large army. Their villages and large cultivated fields were abandoned to be pillaged and burned by US soldiers in search of the small parties. The Seminoles, forced to live off the land, plundered and ransacked plantations. The bands remained constantly on the run through the swamps and barracks and carefully covered their tracks from pursuing troops. Governor Call issued the use of total warfare against the Seminoles:

“A few months of active pursuit, harassing the enemy and destroying their crops, will effect more towards bringing this disastrous war to a close, than years of negotiation. The Indian must be taught to feel our power and dread our punishment.”

By February 1841, a host of chiefs and their followers had amassed at Fort Clinch, agreeing to emigrate to the western territory. Messengers were sent out to the defiant chiefs throughout the territory to induce their surrender. By March, over 325 had gathered to embark out west. The only problem was the entrance of slave raiders into the camp. Capt. John Page wrote: "all the Indians said at once, they came here to look out for Negroes, and if they were not sent off, the Negroes that were out with the hostiles would prevent them from coming in." The Secretary of War authorized these raiders to enter the camp. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Armistead had them respectfully sent off so as not to ruin the negotiations. **65**

John Horse convinced his former ally Wild Cat to surrender. On March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1841, Wild Cat entered Fort Cummings, dressed in clothes from the wardrobe of a theatrical party he had plundered a year earlier. The whites held his twelve year old daughter as a hostage in the camp. She came running out of her tent on his arrival. Finding his daughter well-cared for, he broke down into tears and began to negotiate. He spoke through his former associate John:

"The whites dealt unjustly by me. I came to them, they deceived me; the land I was upon I loved, my body is made of its sands; the Great Spirit gave me legs to walk over it; hands to aid myself; eyes to see its ponds, rivers, forests, and game; then a head with which I think. The sun, which is warm and bright as my feelings are now, shines to warm us and bring forth our crops, and the moon brings back the spirit of our warriors, our fathers, wives, and children. The white man comes; he grows pale and sick, why cannot we live here in peace? I have said I am the enemy to the white man. I could live in peace with him, but they first steal our cattle and horses, cheat us, and take our lands. The white men are as thick as the leaves in the hammock; they come upon us thicker every year. They may shoot us, drive our women and children night and day; they may chain our hands and feet, but the red man's heart will be always free. I have come here in peace, and have taken you all by the hand; I will sleep by your camp though your soldiers stand around me like the pines. I am done; when we know each other's faces better I will say more." **66**

Wild Cat remained in the camp for four days, agreeing to Colonel Worth's bribe of four thousand dollars to turn himself over and thirty dollars for each warrior along with him. On March 9, he left Fort Cummings to collect and assemble his band, promising to return in ten days. On March 19, Wild Cat returned back to the camp unable to gather his followers and feared that the whites suspected he had betrayed their

negotiations. To alleviate his concerns, he repeatedly assured General Armistead of his desire to emigrate but requested an extended period to bring in his men. Throughout the proceedings he befriended Major Hitchcock. Hitchcock reported the feelings of Wild Cat to the continuance of war:

“He spoke at length of his people and their scattered condition; of their alarm and fear of danger through the treachery of whites. He said he had given up the war. He knew that it could not last forever. It had to end some time, and the time had come.”

**67**

Colonel Worth was unable to control himself in negotiations. He claimed that Wild Cat was attempting to deceive them, shouting he didn't care if the war continued for “another fifteen years longer.” Wild Cat replied humorously: “The Colonel talks like an old woman.” Throughout council, Wild Cat constantly mentioned Hitchcock as the only officer to understand his cause. Worth sarcastically told Hitchcock: “I believe I shall have to hand him over to you, Major. You have completely won his heart!” **68** Before he left, Wild Cat agreed to assemble his band at Fort Pierce for emigration. Throughout April and May, Wild Cat came to Fort Pierce with a number of warriors to be supplied with large quantities of provisions and whiskey. He continuously expressed his intention to emigrate but found it difficult to collect his people who were dispersed from the continued movements of US troops. Major Childs suspected that they planned to store sufficient provisions for the summer season and then retreat to the Florida interior. On May 21, Armistead ordered him to seize Wild Cat on his return to the garrison. **69** Wild Cat and a handful of his most influential followers, three of whom were black, were seized upon their entrance to Fort Pierce. They were immediately sent off to Tampa and shipped to New Orleans for the western territory. **70** However, Wild Cat's defense that he couldn't find his dispersed followers was legitimate. Major Hitchcock noted from his personal conversations with Wild Cat:

“It was necessary to have a few weeks in which to collect his people, for somebody who had been in must go out again and vouch for our peaceful intentions. Too much haste would spoil everything, for they would think it a trick and hide...His representation seemed to me reasonable and I told him so.” **71**

Many white Floridians considered this unlawful move justifiable, exultant about the removal of their most feared enemy. In May 1841, General Armistead resigned from command of the Florida War and was replaced by Colonel Worth. Worth was livid at Armistead's unauthorized move. He knew Wild Cat could prove strategically useful to the war effort if he remained as an asset to the US military in Florida. Worth gave orders to intercept the prisoners and return them to Tampa Bay. **72** Due to his unjust holding of Wild Cat, Worth became the second most successful commander in the Florida War. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, the prisoners were intercepted and returned to Florida. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, they arrived back to Florida. Wild Cat and his band were confined in irons surrounded by a guard of thirty soldiers. Their vessel sat two miles out from shore to prevent possible escape. Worth ordered Wild Cat to assemble his followers for emigration:

“The war must now end. You are the man to do it; you must and shall accomplish it. I sent for you, that through the exertions of yourself and men, you might induce your entire band to emigrate.” **73**

Wild Cat replied to Worth's speech, expressing his hatred for the white man but his determination to emigrate with his followers:

“I was once a boy. Then I saw the white man afar. I hunted in these woods, first with bow and arrow, then with rifle. I saw the white man and was told he was my enemy. I could not shoot him as I would a wolf or bear. Yet like these he came upon me. Horses, cattle, and fields he took from me. He said he was my friend. He abused our women and children and told us to go from our land. Still he gave us our hand in friendship. We took it. Whilst holding it he had a snake in the other. His tongue was forked. He lied and stung us. I asked but for a small piece of these lands-enough to plant and to live upon-far south, a spot where I could lay the ashes of my kindred, and even this has not been granted to me. I feel the irons in my heart...It is true I have fought like a man, so have my warriors; but the whites are too strong for us. I wish now to have my band around me and go to Arkansas.” **74**

However, he claimed it would be necessary to go free before he could successfully induce his warriors to go with him:

“You say I must end the war? Look at these irons! Can I go to my warriors? Coocoochee chained! No; do not ask me to see them. I never wish to tread upon my land unless I am free. If I can go to them unchained, they will follow me in; but I fear they will not obey me if I talk to them in irons. They will say my heart is weak, I am afraid. Could I go free, they will surrender and emigrate.” **75**

But Worth refused to let him go free from captivity. He told Wild Cat that a party of three or five prisoners would be set free as messengers. They were to return in an allotted period of time with the rest of his band. If not, Worth would hang Wild Cat and the remaining prisoners for the failure to promptly execute the mission:

“I say to you again, and for the last time, that unless the band acquiesce promptly with your wishes, to your last wish, the sun, as it goes down the last day appointed for their appearance, will shine upon the bodies of each of you hanging in the wind.”  
**76**

That night, the fireworks went off to celebrate the fourth of July. Wild Cat, hearing the celebration, asked a soldier: “What is that for?” Inquiring again, he only received silence in response. **77** The soldiers knew in their heart that they were celebrating their “freedom” while caging a man whose only crime was defending his homeland from intruders. Wild Cat earlier that day had humbly requested his freedom and was denied by the very men who would celebrate its cause that night. Such blatant hypocrisy accurately depicted the nature of the “Indian Removal” policy. Before the five messengers embarked, Wild Cat gave a powerfully emotional speech, pleading with them to remain faithful in the time that he needed them most, as he had remained strongly persistent in resisting the whites:

“Has not Coocooche sat with you by the council-fire at midnight, when the wolf and white man were around us? Have I not led the war-dance, and sung the song of the Seminole? Did not the spirits of our mothers, our wives, and our children stand around us? Has not my scalping-knife been red with blood, and the scalps of our enemy been drying in our camps? Have I not made the war-path red with blood, and has not the Seminole always found a home in my camp? Then, will the warriors of Coocooche desert him? No!” **78**



He turned his head as tears were profusely flowing down his face. Deep silence overcame everybody in the vicinity. Even soldiers and sailors who were actively working to quell the freedom of the Seminoles showed their sympathy through silence. The soldiers then unchained the five messengers and sent them out. As they were out assembling Wild Cat's band, the officers attempted daily to cheer up the prisoners, ensuring the integrity and good faith of the messengers. **27**

By the end of July, 189 of Wild Cat's band had progressively arrived to Fort Brooke in small parties. The messengers sent out by Worth had now successfully gathered all of his followers to the camp. Wild Cat's gloomy mood throughout his imprisonment quickly changed to jubilation. **79** He offered his services to bring others in for negotiation. Chief Hospetarke was one of the Seminole chiefs who promised death to any messengers coming to their camp preaching emigration. While most of the captives feared approaching the chief, Wild Cat successfully brought in Hospetarke and his eighteen warriors. He knew there were plans to seize the band and take them off to Tampa Bay for emigration. Hospetarke planned on accumulating provisions and heading off with his warriors back into the Florida swamps. **80** Negotiation took place in the cabin of a steamboat. Using John Horse as an interpreter, Worth encouraged the band to accompany him to Fort Brooke for emigration. When Hospetarke objected, Worth gave a signal to ready the surrounding troops and firmly addressed the chief:

“You and your followers have now come in to the white man's camp three times, have made faithful promises, and obtained all you wished for yourselves and families; none of these promises have you ever complied with. Such practices have existed long enough; it is now time they had come to an end. I have offered you peace, I have given you food and clothing, we have all treated you as friends. You have not been heretofore, nor are you now, disposed to comply with one single wish offered you. I have invited you to go to Fort Brooke; you say, No. I now say to you and the men seated here, you shall go, and be on the way before the sunsets. Not one of you will again leave the boat.” **81**

As soon as Worth finished, the cabin door was closed by bayonets and the soldiers surrounded the Seminoles with their swords drawn. Wild Cat was absent from the ambush. He came to the cabin later with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a rifle in the other, appearing intoxicated. This made it appear as if he had no foreknowledge of the deceit. Expressing surprise and indignation that he was made a tool of the whites, he successfully maintained his innocence and integrity among his brethren. **82** Wild Cat

would continue to assist the US military in assembling his Seminole and black brothers for emigration. By October, about 250 had gathered to emigrate, 18 of whom were black. **83** As the ship commenced out of Florida, Wild Cat bid farewell to his native land: “I am looking at the last pine tree on my land. It was my home, I loved it; and to leave it now, is like burying my wife and child.” **84**

## The War Ends

One of the most successful moves made by General Worth was continuing Jesup’s policy of treating the captive black Seminoles and fugitive slaves as prisoners of war. If a white slaveholder claimed a black Seminole or fugitive slave among the Seminoles as his property “to obviate all difficulty, the claimant of the negro in possession of the Indian, was, upon identifying and proving property, paid a fair equivalent, determined upon by a board of officers.” **85** In late August, chief Tiger Tail and his brother Nethlockemathlar sent an embassy to Worth expressing their desire for peace and “once more to take the hand of the white man in friendship.” **86** Wild Cat commenced out to negotiate. The fierce chief Tiger Tail was among those who promised death to the white man’s messengers in the chief council, but he began proving malleable to the idea of emigration. Tiger Tail and his brother agreed to collect their band but couldn’t turn themselves in until they held council with others on the subject, in which it was determined that they also wished to see Alligator to receive a correct opinion on the western territory. **87**

The black interpreter Sampson, who had assisted the Seminoles in the Caloosahatchee “massacre,” returned to the US side with a depiction of Seminole social relations: “The active war-chiefs...together with the young sub-chiefs...executed with fidelity the mandates of the council, or the wishes of Sam Jones or the Prophet.” **88** The composition of the remnants included Seminoles, blacks, Miccosukees, Red Stick Creeks, and even a party of Calusa. These remnants opted to follow the strongly anti-emigration chiefs Billy Bowlegs, Sam Jones, and the Prophet, a Red Stick Creek shaman. The high respect these chiefs had gained as a result of their strongly resolute anti-emigration stance allowed them to command the various chiefs, subchiefs, and principle warriors of the nation. The whites and pro-whites chiefs spoke angrily of the “young men disregarding authority”:

“Young men, who had grown from boyhood to manhood since the commencement of the war. Knowing no restraint, active and vindictive, they looked upon a white man as fair game, disregarding the advice and authority of those whose age entitled them to interpose and to exercise control.” **89**

On October 14, Alligator arrived back to Florida from the Oklahoma territory to negotiate with the Seminole remnants. The next day he sent out for Tiger Tail to have him to come into the white camp. A few days later, Tiger Tail arrived at the US camp followed by his band and agreed to comply with the US and search for chief Halleck-Tustenuggee in the interior. **90** Halleck-Tustenuggee was one of the most prominent leaders of the Miccosukees. He became infamous after murdering his own sister for expressing anxiety to surrender, slitting her throat and leaving her for dead. He declared that his band of thirty warriors would put to death anybody who even proposed the idea of emigration. **91**

After 1838, historians mention very little about black involvement in the Seminole war. However, there still remained a handful of blacks integrated with small Seminole bands and families. **92** By November 20, 162 were gathered from the bands of Tiger Tail and Nethlockemathlar, thirty of whom were black. Captain Wade captured 65 Seminoles and blacks, mostly women and children, who were immediately sent to Tampa Bay for emigration. By the end of November, young Seminole sub-chief Waxe-Hadjo surrendered his band of 47, twelve of whom were black. **93** But even if their numbers were minimal, Captain Sprague had previously noted that it would only take ten black Seminoles to ravage the whole Florida frontier from one end to the other.

The end was closing in for the Seminole remnants. Throughout 1842, as Seminole numbers rapidly diminished, their settlements and crops ravaged by military excursions, and the scattered parties pushed farther into the Everglades interior, the war became even more exhausting for the US military. It was almost as if each layer that was removed from the Seminole Nation and shipped out into the Oklahoma territory only revealed a fiercer and more resolute, determined group of hardcore Seminole patriots. The same could possibly be said of their black allies. In early 1842, Worth estimated that only 301 Seminoles remained in Florida. **94** The Miccosukees in particular remained deep within the Everglades. Most of their settlements were under the cover thick woods where light couldn't reach, cultivating crops on tiny enclaves in the midst of seas of tall grass and muddy water. No large army could possibly penetrate into this territory, essentially nullifying the superior numbers of the US military. Worth began to withdraw

some of the US military from Florida and boldly spoke in defiance of standard policy. In a letter to the Secretary of War, he declared that violent means could not bring the war to an end:

“The operations since June conclusively demonstrate, to my mind, the utter impracticality of securing them by main force. The object must be attained by pacific and persuasive measures, or not at all. Every exertion of force, while it tends to make the enemy more wild in his habits and savage in his nature, places the object in view, his total expulsion, more remote; and yet the commander, with so large a force, who fails to give it the highest activity, disappoints an inordinate public expectation.” **95**

As many of his predecessors, Worth suggested concentrating the remnant Seminole bands into a southern Florida reservation. The Secretary of War, J.C. Spenser, and a council of high-ranking officers did not consider Worth’s suggestions “politic, expedient, or judicious.” General Thomas Jesup was the only one to dissent, having learned from hard experience the necessity of the diplomatic route in dealing with the Seminoles. **96** On April 29, 1842, Halleck-Tustenuggee arrived for negotiations with the whites at Fort King. His band of seventy was to be taken prisoner in these peace negotiations. It was suspected that they intended to garner provisions from the US camps and return back to their swamps of refuge. Colonel Garland signaled for the soldiers to surround Halleck’s band and take them prisoner. **97** Through deceit, Worth was able to capture a quarter of the Seminole remnants at once. In July, Halleck and his total group of 120 followers were sent out west. As they left, Halleck bitterly told a US officer: “I have been hunted like a wolf and now I am to be sent away like a dog.” **98**

In May of 1842, the Secretary of War gave permission for General Worth to end hostilities with the remnant Seminole bands. The “extraordinary expenses” of the conflict had accumulated beyond reason for any further military expeditions on the estimated 240 Seminoles who remained. **99** By August, the native resistance was merely shadow of its former self. White hegemony was now to be enacted. On August 4, Congress passed the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, somewhat the predecessor to the Homestead Act of 1862, opening up the Seminole territory from Gainesville south to the Peace River for settlement. 160 acres of the “freed” land was to be granted to each white male applicant above the age of eighteen capable of bearing arms. The settlers were to protect five acres of land over a period of five years before given full entitlement to the 160 acres. This would ensure the armed protection of coveted Seminole land and its distribution to poor

backwoods yeomen. **100** The huge Federal land grab would theoretically establish land wealth for poor yeomen and allow them to become independent, propertied citizens. But most of the best lands were granted to large railroad companies, land speculators, and the slaveholding oligarchy that controlled the territorial government. The prospects for sugar in South Florida increased the demand and value of lands, consolidating into the hands of a small sugar planting elite. With the war over and the 1837 banking crisis subsided, the Florida planter aristocracy saw the means to renew their strength in sugar profits.

On August 5, influential chief Billy Bowlegs and a delegation of chiefs and sub-chiefs arrived at Fort Brooke for negotiations. The heads of all bands of the Seminoles agreed to the terms of peace in return for a South Florida reservation. On August 14, the war was officially declared over. **101**

The story of Seminole and black bravery cannot be exaggerated. Under the threat of one of the most powerful militaries in the world, they remained defiant after five separate invasions over a span of thirty years. The Seminole and Miccosukee rebels exhausted the resources of the most powerful white nation to achieve the right to stay where they live. The black Seminole struggle to maintain their freedom and autonomy is no less of an incredible story. It defined the struggle for freedom of millions of people of color in the United States for years to come. From the Patriots invasion; to the “Negro Fort”; to the battle of Suwannee; to the Angola raid; to the numerous slave raids into the reservation; to the second war; they faced a persistent assault on their freedom and autonomy. They agitated the largest slave rebellion in the history of the United States, destroying the powerful sugar plantation economy of East Florida. The blacks fought with the fiercest and most determined resistance throughout the Second Seminole War. They handed out brutal defeats that wiped out the most powerful infantries of the US military. They ruined the careers of many of the highest ranking generals and made the careers of some. General Taylor would go on to be a US president from his reputation of “Indian-fighting” in the Florida swamps.

The blacks and Seminoles tied down an army of slave-catchers that fought to protect a socioeconomic system of raw human exploitation and subjugation. Long before the Emancipation Proclamation, they forced one of the most powerful white colonial nations to grant them freedom after achieving victory on the field of battle. Contrary to the white settler expansionists in America’s “Revolutionary War,” they really defined the phrase: “Give me liberty or give me death.” Contrary to the white settler expansionists that dispossessed them from lands and stripped them of their liberty, what they fought for was real self-determined independence. Throughout the entire time period, the Seminoles and blacks were the living model of mutual aid. They were exemplary of people of color

unified in their common interest to oppose white supremacy and colonialism, but also in a mutual affinity that can only grow out of respect for one another's struggles. They organized on a grassroots basis of mutual defense and economic aid to establish a community of people from different continents. They were a spit in the face at white slaveholder arguments of intrinsic black and red inferiority. They were a genuine threat to the established order of the South. It was little wonder that the US did all in its power to crush this example of self-determination. It's no wonder that mainstream history has minimized the participation of the black Seminoles and rebel slaves, if the war is even discussed at all. Few have entertained the notion that the war's outbreak was characterized by a mass slave revolt. Today it would be a source of inspiration for people who resist US domination throughout the world and right here at home. It would show that people of color have strength once they are unified. The vast amount of effort that the US expended to divide the two peoples only further exemplifies this point.

## Chapter 8

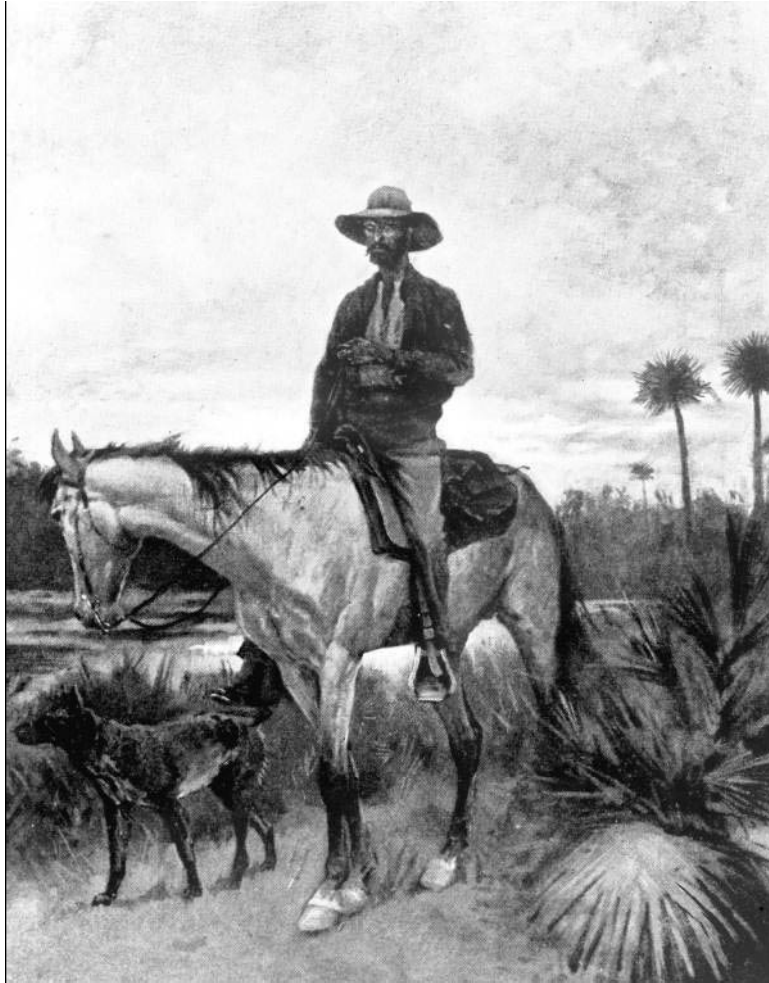
# “A Backwoods Revolution Against Capitalism” (1821-1860)

### Poor White Yeomen Challenge the Florida Aristocracy

Prince Archille Murat, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte and wealthy territorial Florida planter, summed up the conception of the poor white yeoman in Middle Florida elite society:

“These are poor citizens, in general possessing very little industry, who, having no means of purchasing lands, live on the lands of others, locating themselves on them until expelled by the proprietors. Their poverty originates entirely from their idleness and drunken habits, for those among them who are really industrious seldom fail eventually to make their fortunes... others remain in a wandering and unsettled state like rolling stones " which gather no moss," there exists no form of government; hence all disputes are amicably arranged by a fisty encounter.” **1**

The non-deferential poor white Floridian was born in the swamp. “Plain folk” in Antebellum Florida “shared a strong adherence to popular democracy, a hatred of Indians, and a strong sense of racial superiority over blacks, whom they believed were fit only for slavery. Their strong sense of individualism and resolve came from living on the isolated frontier.” **2** Yeomen and poor white squatters conceptualized independence as self-sufficiency and freedom from wage labor. They conceived themselves as equals to the upper-orders of wealthy planters and merchants, respecting but failing to defer to their “superiors.” Although poor whites didn’t directly challenge the aristocratic gentlemen who ran the state, they resisted any attempts that land speculators, planters, or state officials took to intrude on or compromise their economic and social independence. Otherwise, they sought unity and harmony based on their belief in white man’s popular democracy. In fact, their concept of economic independence was devised in contrast to the black slave. Laboring for a planter as an overseer or tenant was practically equivalent to slavery and compromised their very notion of white privilege. Not having to labor for anyone else or bow down to their “superiors” was a source of white pride and prestige.



“Cracker Cowboy,” illustration by Frederic Remington, August 1895.

Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

Poor whites often defined and conceptualized their identity in relation to slaves, making their sense of superiority only relative to others at the bottom of the social order. The same could be said for slaves who conceptualized themselves and their own sense of superiority by looking down and sneering at the “po’ white trash.” The idea of what it meant to be a yeoman was having the white skin on your back as a badge of privilege and freedom, even if poor whites had little significant advantage in status over the black slave or native. **3**



The removal of Seminoles, although wealthy planters disproportionately benefited from the appropriation of their lands, was a concept held by white Floridians of all classes. Poor whites felt that natives were unlawful occupants of land that rightfully belonged to them. A Frenchman traveler noted of poor whites in the backwoods of Middle Florida: “The type of men I am speaking of are brought up from childhood with the idea that the Indians are the usurpers of a land that belongs to them, and even in times of peace they are always ready to go hunting savages rather than deer hunting.” 4. Contrary to this image, George Gilbert Keen, a poor white settler who migrated with his family to Columbia County in 1830, recalled cordial relations with the local Seminoles: “They did not molest our stock and was on the most friendly terms with the whites and everything ran as smooth as pond water for the space of five years.” 5 Keen claims that this state of harmony lasted until the Second Seminole War broke out five years later. When these local Seminoles assaulted his town, he angrily reflected: “I have as much sympathy for a pond alligator as I have for a Seminole Indian.” 6 Threatened by immediate black and Seminole violence, poor whites played integral roles in the militias during the Second and Third Seminole wars.

Poor white Floridian resentment for Seminoles, black maroons, and slaves wasn't merely prejudice against skin color or intolerance for cultural differences, nor simply a desire to steal native lands and capture fugitive slaves to sell on the market. The Florida gentry had considerable control and influence in shaping the attitudes and feelings of poor whites towards others who sat at the bottom of the social order. One Northern reporter commented that the social conditions and sentiments of poor white Floridians were actually little more than the “production of an oligarchy.” 7 That being said, the Southern social order as a whole engendered poor whites with feelings of racial superiority. While owning only a small portion of the overall slave population, they too felt that they had a stake in slavery. Some poor white yeomen managed to purchase one or two slaves, but most had none. Although Southern slavery provided few opportunities of social mobility for poor whites, many desired to acquire slaves and climb to the upper orders of white society. Because poor whites were employed as patrollers, overseers, and slave-hunters, wealthy planters and slaves both conceived poor whites as more brutal and rigid taskmasters, more prejudicial against people of color, and more exacting of their slaves. Many slaves chided lower class whites as primitive and inferior to their privileged owners, fearing the brutal violence of cracker patrols, overseers, slave-hunters, and lower class slavers. Owners would often check insubordinate slaves by threatening to sell them off to a poor master. Acie Thomas, an ex-slave from Tallahassee, recalled that it was like “damning a nigger's soul, if Marse Tom or Marse Bryant threatened to sell him to some

po' white trash” and that it “allus brung good results better than tearing the hide off'n him woulda done.” **8** An ex-slave recalled how most black slaves felt about poor whites:

“There are many things I remember just like it was yesterday—the general punishment was with straps—some of the slaves suffered terribly on the plantations; if the master was poor and had few slaves he was mean—the more wealthy or more slaves he had, the better he was. In some cases it was the general law that made some of the masters as they were; as, the law required them to have an overseer or foreman (he was called "boss man") by the 'niggers' and usually came from the lower or poorer classes of whites; he didn't like 'niggers' usually, and took authority to do as he pleased with them at times.” **9**

To the contrary, some blacks felt that wealthy masters were worse than poor ones. Patience Cambell, an ex-slave from Jackson County, recalled that her mother's petty slaveholder was kinder than her father's wealthy master:

“Her mother Tempy, belonged to Bullock, while her father Arnold Merritt, belonged to Edward Merritt, a large plantation owner. According to Patience, her mother's owner was very kind, her father's very cruel. Bullock had very few slaves, but Merritt had a great many of them, not a few of whom he sold at the slave markets.” **10**

Mary Minus Biddle recalled that her master Lancaster Jamison was a “man of mediocre means” but also “very kind” and “never mistreated his slaves.” **118** Lucius Douglass, an ex-slave from Madison County, recalled that some of the poor whites were more disposed to teach their small handful of slaves how to read. He had also heard “dat de overseers on de small plantations was alright but some ob de ones on de big plantations was mean.” **12**

To keep a rigid social boundary between poor whites and slaves, wealthy planters instilled distrust, fear, and hatred for “po' white trash” in their slaves. That this worked effectively is confirmed by Acie Thomas' account of the generally fearful slave response at the idea of being sold off to “po' white trash.” Sometimes a master would play mediator between his slaves and the overseer, pretending as if he was protecting his slaves from mistreatment. Louis Napoleon, an ex-slave from Tallahassee, recalled:

“His master and mistress were very kind to the slaves and would never whip them, nor would he allow the "driver" who was a white man named Barton to do so. Barton lived in a home especially built for him on the plantation. If the "driver" whipped any of them, all that was necessary for the slave who had been whipped was to report it to the master and the "driver" was dismissed, as he was a salaried man.” **13**

An instance like this was recalled by Florida slave Charles Coates. His master Hall “always pretended that he didn’t want his slaves beaten unmercifully.” But because Charles was always close to Hall during his work hours, he “had opportunity to see and hear much about what much about what was going on at the plantation. And he believes that Mr. Hall knew just how the overseer dealt with the slaves.” **14**

Planter tales of poor white slave-stealers kidnapping fugitive slaves in the woods effectively deterred slaves from running away. Emma Knight, an ex-slave from Monroe County, recalled: “Mistress always told us dat if we run away somebody would catch us and kill us.” **15** In all of these circumstances, indoctrinating slaves with stereotypes of “po’ white trash” worked to benefit the wealthy planter. Differentiating reality from fiction in these narratives is difficult, but no doubt many slaves did have to fear being kidnapped and sold by poor white slave-stealers. Florida Clayton recalled as a youth under slavery the “nigger hunters” and “nigger stealers” that specialized in kidnapping fugitive slaves with their trained bloodhounds. Clayton recalled her parents warning her and her siblings to “go in someone’s yard whenever they saw these men with their dogs lest the ferocious animals tear them to pieces.” There used to be a wagon that would come to Tallahassee at regular intervals and camp in some secluded spot. The slave children, attracted by the old wagon, would go near it out of curiosity. But the parents always warned their children that the “Dry Head and Bloody Bones,” a ghost that didn’t like children, was in that wagon. Clayton learned years later that the driver of the wagon was actually a slave-stealer and would regularly kidnap slave children to sell them on the Georgia slave market. **16**

The Antebellum social order was developed to ensure uncontested planter rule. While blacks, natives, and poor whites quarreled at the bottom, the strength and political power of the planter class was hegemonized, only threatened at the occasional outbreak of slave insurrection or poor white electoral aspirations. If a poor white wasn’t a squatter, the Southern plantation economy provided little opportunity for employment. Even skilled labor positions were taken up by slaves hired out or purchased. The few social and economic roles that poor whites could hold within the planter economy as overseers,

patrollers, slave-catchers, and tenants required and developed an intense hatred and distrust for black slaves. Planters bred separation and animosity to prevent potential unification. But while the planter-run economy developed a mutual dislike between the two groups, their relations weren't always so clear-cut. In some instances, poor whites assisted fugitive slaves and sometimes conspired with slaves to revolt. When events like this occurred, the stance of the poor white towards the Southern social hierarchy became ambiguous. In fact, the planter class had no greater fear than a unified insurrection of poor whites and slaves. In 1835, the discovery in Mississippi of a conspiracy of white slave stealers, led by a man named John A. Murrell, to organize a general slave insurrection throughout the South generated fear in all quarters, including Florida. While the conspiracy eventually proved a hoax, the term "Murrellite" became a general code word for a slave insurrection led by poor or unscrupulous whites – the greatest fear of white Floridians and most Southerners. Sixteen of the 456 supposed Murrellite conspirators were listed in Florida. In the fall of 1835, two "imposters" were detained and questioned in Jackson County and St. Augustine. Both suspected Murrellites were expelled from their respective communities. The vigilante hysteria stirred up by the Murrellite scare resulted in numerous lynchings throughout the South. One of the victims Dr. Cotton of Madison County, Florida, the ringleader of a suspected slave rebellion, and a black accomplice, were both lynched by the "Livingston Committee." **17**

Samuel Simon Andrews, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, recalled that his master would not harshly punish him for running away as a youth as "he was apprehensive that he might run away again and be stolen by poorer whites and thus cause trouble." Andrews also noted that "the richer whites...were afraid of the poorer whites; if the latter were made angry they would round up the owners' sheep and turn them loose into their cotton fields and the sheep would eat the cotton, row by row." **18**

The poor white man's concept of his own privilege, developed by the elite construction of the white race as a classless group with a unified interest, was the strongest barrier between white-slave unity. Yet the relationship between slaves and poor whites was far more complex than outright hatred. If their mutual animosity at times reinforced the strict racial divide in Florida, their feelings of camaraderie and companionship could be said to have blurred racial distinctions. It was when the racial divide was forgotten, slaves and poor whites acknowledging that they both shared in common a subordinate status, that cooperation, friendship, and mutual respect developed between the two groups. Until very recently, the variety of ways that slaves and poor whites interacted have been largely forgotten by Southern historians who wished to depict nothing more than their shared hostility and resentment. Even the mutual racial

animosity that poor whites and slaves supposedly shared did not prevent social contact. That poor whites and slaves socialized, assembled, traded, ran off, plotted crimes and revolts, and even had intimate relationships seems to compromise the notion of a South split across a strict racial divide. **19**

Interracial association often took place on a criminal level. It was a common practice for slaves to steal goods or cotton from their masters and sell or barter them to local poor whites at below market prices. Blacks also benefited from associating with poor white criminals and bandits. Fugitive slaves often forged alliances with gangs of white bandits, scouring the countryside for plunder. Runaways were less likely to be questioned or harassed by slave patrols in the company of whites. If any were literate, the whites could write out a pass for them. Poor white outlawry provided an outlet of freedom for slaves in the Florida swamps. In the 1840's, two runaway slaves named Sam and John joined the white Holloman gang in robbing mail coaches along the roads leading out of Tallahassee. **20** John B. Harden and a fugitive slave named Jack both committed a string of murders and bank robberies stretching from Jacksonville to Alabama. In 1851, they were arrested in Shelby County, Alabama for a murder in Washington County. A delegate was sent from Milton, Florida to bring them back to Florida for execution. On May 20<sup>th</sup>, they were both hung without trial. **21** Amidst the Second Seminole War, five white men and three blacks, "dressed in Indian costume and painted," were apprehended outside of Newnansville. These men was probably under Stephen Yeomans, whose band of interracial outlaws emerged during the war, disguising themselves as Seminoles and committing numerous depredations on the inhabitants of Jefferson and Leon Counties. **22** In August 1855, near the Okefenokee Swamp on the Florida-Georgia border, a "Band of Regulators" attacked and routed "band of scoundrels who have regularly organized themselves for the purpose of stealing negroes and passing counterfeit money." An impressive amount of money, jewelry, and other valuables were recovered. Runaway slaves had also participated in the gang's activities. **23**

It was an irking question on planters' minds whether poor white gangs stole fugitive slaves or aided and abetted them in escaping. For instance, an 1840 *Floridian* ad entitled "Runaway or Stolen," offered a reward for a fugitive slave named Dennis who was supposedly "enticed away by some white man." In 1834, a slave named Harry ran away from Myles Everitt's plantation in Washington County. Apparently Harry had been the subject of harsh punishment as Myles made certain to note that his most distinguishable characteristic was a "branded O" on his face. It was alleged that he had joined up with some white thieves in the area named William Stapleton and James Owens. **24** A black slave named Jesse absconded from the Quincy plantation of William

McCall, supposedly enticed away by a white blacksmith named William Sitzar. McCall put up three times the amount of reward for the arrest of Sitzar than for the return of Jesse. **25** A Leon County slaveholder John Jones also suspected that his slave Randal, who had coordinated his escape with his wife and son from a nearby plantation, was “harbored by some white man,” offering an extra one hundred dollar reward if such could be proven. **26**

While fugitive slaves at times found refuge in joining up poor white criminal gangs, others that gave poor whites the benefit of the doubt were not so lucky. There was a much better chance that a poor white criminal would prove a slave stealer than an actual ally. Frontier white outlaws would often win the trust of slaves and entice them to run away, only to steal and sell them off at a given opportunity. The experience of a slave named Dan, who ran away with a poor white criminal named George Cushman from South Carolina to Middle Florida, explained why slaves could not place too much trust in poor whites. When they reached Florida, Cushman sold Dan and abandoned him there. **27**

Yet in day-to-day encounters, many poor whites and slaves were willing to let down their racial preconceptions and distrusts when they saw it in their own interests. Their complex social interaction reflected the seeming contradiction of the Antebellum South’s racial and class divisions. Their racial difference invoked fighting and distrust while their shared class status offered a world of social interaction outside the surveillance of planters. Yet planters were certainly aware that slaves and poor whites were likely to fight each other one day and then gamble and drank together the next. That Southern legislatures formed strict laws to prevent social contact between slaves and poor whites suggests the threatening nature that a unified slave-poor white class posed to the Southern social order. Although poor whites rarely directly challenged the Southern hierarchy, this doesn’t mean that planters didn’t fear or recognize the potential threat that they could pose to their rule. Nor did this mean that the actions of poor whites at times ran contrary to the Southern racial order. **28**

Poor white yeomen were not directly exploited by the plantation system. As long as government officials, slaveholders, merchants, and land speculators left poor white squatters alone to subsist in the distant backwoods, class conflict was virtually non-existent on the Florida frontier. In fact, yeomen revered their white class superiors and simply wished they would treat them like equals. Ellen Call Long noted of poor whites: “They have great respect or reverence, for men of mark, without sycophancy; they want nothing – no favors – but they like to take them by the hand.” **29** As one Northern observer put it, “Love conquers caste between Florida crackers and aristocrats.” **30** As poor whites looked up to the Florida aristocracy with reverence and as social equals,

wealthy planters often looked down at them as simply “white barbarians” and “savages with white skin.” Rather than feeling sympathy for their impoverished situation, their “idle and drunken habits” were commonly blamed for their destitution. **31** A French traveler in Middle Florida echoed the sentiments of the Florida oligarchy:

“Accustomed to living alone in the woods, they have adopted the habits of the savages with whom they are in constant contact; at every moment their conversation is interrupted by war cries. They leap about and howl and make no effort to restrain their passions. Most of the young men have the strange habit, when they are excited, of slapping their sides imitating the triumphant cry of a cock.

Like the Indians they scalp their dead enemies, and in war time their arrival at plantations is almost as much to be feared as that of the enemy they are pursuing. Not being checked by human laws, that cannot reach them in the midst of the woods, nor by religious principles that are totally unknown to most of them, these men know no other power than physical force, and no other pleasure than carrying out their brutal passions.” **32**

On the other hand, squatters resisted speculators who came to evict them with violence. Yeomen tended to settle on the first plot of good land they could find “without being concerned about the name of the owner, who, if he comes to assert his authority, does not receive more response than a bullet from a rifle.” **33** An instance in early Jackson County confirmed this. In late September 1826, the dead body of a wealthy speculator was found in the swamps of Jackson County. The *Pensacola Gazette* reported: “The body of a man partly buried in the mud was accidentally discovered, in the Chipola swamp, near Webbville on Sunday evening the 24 Sept.” The newspaper added: “He did not appear to be a laboring man.” After a week, he was identified as Leroy Morris, “A stranger who had been in the country but a few weeks, and who, it was supposed, had brought money with him for the purpose of purchasing land.” **34**

Poor white men believed their manhood was vindicated by establishing themselves without dependency or help, without having to sell their labor to a planter or employer. Setting up homesteads in Florida’s largely unpopulated public domain was the only alternative outside of wage labor for the planter class. Ellen Call Long recalled one poor white migrant from coastal South Carolina:



Illustration of a Florida cracker going to church, 1887. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

“He was once an agent, or super-overseer in South Carolina, having charge of several plantations. Local distinctions are marked in that State. Planters and professional men are the aristocrats; few others stand a better chance than a negro, so a man emigrates to some other State as soon as he can set up something for himself.”

**35**

George Gillet Keen, a yeoman migrant to the Florida territory, offered some first-hand insight to the fears, excitement, and everyday experiences of poor white settlers newly arriving to Florida:

“On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of October, 1830, poured me out with rest of the children down at the root of a pine tree seven miles North of Lake City. That was the first night of my life that I slept with the earth for my bedding and the sky for my covering. I enjoyed lying down and looking up at the stars. Next morning father said “children, you are





Illustration of a cracker family on their way to a ball, 1887. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

now in the Florida territory.” During the day he built a camp, covering it with pine tops which was quite an improvement from the preceding day.

Game was plentiful so he killed one deer and two turkies, then went in search of corn, obtained the corn, hauled it home and commenced building a dwelling house. The material used was green pine sapling poles with the bark on them; the clap board was five feet long and held in place with weight poles; the flooring was dirt, but quite an improvement on the camp.

We are now in the middle of wild Indian territory with at least fifty Indians to one white man, and we without Law or Gospel, that is what I call living in the dark ages.



Cracker Cabin, Polk County, FL, ca. 1882. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

As to provisions that was no scarsety. We had all the corn and potatoes we wanted. So far as meat was concerned we got that from the forest. We had beef, pork, venison, turkey and fish all that we needed, and it was summer one eternal day. We had a perfect union of society, one man was considered just as good as an other if not a little better, it was just so with women.” **36**

Planters saw the extreme poverty of “crackers” as evidence of their “shiftlessness” and “indolence.” Having to work the land with one’s own hands was a marker of white social distinction. Because poor whites didn’t have the money to acquire slaves to do the labor for them, they supposedly lacked the “ingenuity” and “industriousness” of their superiors. Yet many yeoman homesteaders labored intensively to improve the plots of land that they squatted on. The back-breaking labor that was expended to create somebody’s livelihood literally from the ground-up was something that few planters ever experienced. Wealthy Florida planter Archille Murat recalled meeting families of migrant squatters while travelling through the backwoods of Middle Florida: “More than once when on horseback in the woods, in search of my horses or strayed oxen, I have met in the very midst of the forest, a cart loaded with household

furniture and children, and one or two men escorting about thirty cows and hogs.” The migrants were searching for unoccupied land sites where they could set a foothold: “the head of the family has asked me some details relative to the country, and requested me to direct him to the creek, or the nearest spring.” Although Murat believed poor whites to be “not very industrious,” he arrived back to the destination only a week later to find the family already established: “A week after I have been astonished to see a good hut there, a field of cattle, and some poultry; the wife spinning cotton, the husband destroying trees by making a circular incision in them, called a girdle, —in short, settling their household goods without making any inquiry as to whom the land belonged.” **37**

The government auction sales for public lands became the arena through which the vast amount of fertile territory could be distributed in favor of a handful of planters. These speculators, “strengthened by the aids of usurers and banks,” would

“club together their funds; flock to the country like vultures, at ‘death’s prophetic knell,’ traverse all the roads made by honest settlers; survey the whole district; take notes of every well-improved place; ascertain whether there is a spot endeared to a planter, on account of it containing the bones of a wife, child, or friend.” **38**

After the sale had begun, “the planters are informed privately that, unless they pay so much to this ‘holy alliance,’ their farms and houses will be taken from them” and auctioneered off to wealthier bidders “for a few dollars more than the means of the honest settler.” **39** Wealthy planters used their privileged positions and political ties to appropriate lands from poor white farmers. Acie Thomas, an ex-slave from Jefferson County, recalled hearing

“vague rumors of the cruelties of some slave owners, but it was unknown among the Folsoms. He thinks this was due to the fact that certain “po white trash” in the vicinity of their plantation owned slaves. It was the habit of the Folsoms to buy out these people whenever they could do so by fair means or foul, according to his statements. And by and by there were no poor whites living near them.” **40**

Poor white resentment of this process was always just under the surface. George Gilbert Keen, a poor white man from Columbia County, rambled on against the use of taxes to pay for moving the territorial capital from Tallahassee to Jacksonville – taxes collected from the default land sales that dispossessed many small farmers of their land:

“Tax-payer land is sold from its taxes and never has been redeemed by their owners for they were not able to do it, but others was able, and redeemed it and the proper owners lost it.” **41** Archille Murat vividly recounted the first sale of public lands in Florida, when land speculators feasted on the territory’s virgin lands to the detriment of poor white squatters:

“At last the great day arrives. The crowd increases; while the speculator and agitator are seen in movement and consultation. The farmer who wishes to establish himself is perfectly calm; he has already made his selection, and fixed his price. The hour approaches — the poor squatter hastens to the town. He has worked hard throughout the year, in order that he may be enabled to purchase the little spot of land on which his house is built. Perhaps for the want of a dollar or two it will be taken from him, at the hands of some greedy speculator. Anxiety and trouble are depicted in his honest and ruddy countenance. An agitator approaches, sympathizes with him, and offers to withhold his pretensions for the sum of three dollars: the poor ignorant man gives it, without suspecting that the barterer has not the means of outbidding him. This is called hush-money. The crier offers the lands by eighths, commencing with a section and town in regular order. The prices are different, but the bidding always begins with a dollar and a quarter the acre, that being the lowest price at which the States' lands are sold. An old Indian village, a situation for a mill — the plantation of a squatter — a locality on a road or river, where a town or depot is likely to be established — are all fortuitous circumstances which augment the value of lands tenfold or more. All these sales are moreover made according to the real or imaginary lines, in which it not un-frequently happens that the field or the house of some unfortunate squatter has to be divided.

The sale, and all the excitement accompanying it, lasts until all the lands enumerated in the proclamation have been put up. Those lands which remain in the hands of the United States may be entered at 100 dollars the eighth. Hence they who are good judges of fertile lands, and are aware they are the only ones, will do better to wait till this period; for finding themselves without competitors, they obtain them at a low price.

The sale is now over. Speculators, with title-deeds in their pockets, have returned home to make the necessary arrangements for departure to their new habitations. The planter is off to fetch his family and negroes. The poor squatter! — he too is gone home with a heavy heart, in consequence of his prospects and hopes not having been

realized, and is compelled to go once more in search of a new spot whereon to settle, and begin the world again — if such poor efforts may be so called; or perhaps he will engage himself, as a manager, to the planter who purchased his house and grounds.”

**42**

The Federal and state government had little power to consistently regulate the Florida frontier, giving yeomen settlements considerable autonomy in decision-making. Although never directly challenging state authority, they formed their own courts and judicial system, settling matters among themselves on their own terms. It wasn't until the Civil War, when conscript parties came looking for them to drag them into the Confederate service through force, that poor whites would organize to violently resist government force. Their sporadic resistance against land speculators and the electoral revolt of 1839 paled in comparison to the guerilla war that poor whites carried out against the Confederate Florida government. Poor white conscript evaders and army deserters formed tiny armies and armed bands to destroy the planter-run Confederate Florida from within. These bands would even organize with fugitive slaves to liberate slaves from the plantations bordering Taylor and Lafayette Counties. Along with runaway slaves, poor whites formed the nucleus of an insurgency that wore away at Florida's Confederate regime. **43** Susan B. Eppes noted the poor white deserters and conscript evaders who resided in the backwoods counties of Taylor and Lafayette during the Civil War:

“These men, who were so treacherous and disloyal, belonged to peculiar class; they were, for the most parts, descendents of criminals, who had taken refuge in the bays and swamps of the Florida coast. Their hand against everybody and everybody's hand against them. All laws, statutory or Devine, were defied by them...Hidden away in the coastal forests, secure from the hand of the law, they led lives which, in many instances, would have shamed the very beasts, who shared with them this wide wilderness. Born criminals, they had no sense of honor.” **44**

Living on the isolated frontier made yeomen far more concerned with the destitution of their family back home during the Civil War, causing many to desert the army or avoid conscription altogether. **45** They professed far more allegiance to their families and small farms than to abstract “patriotism,” considering they held little respect for government authority in the first place. **46**

And it wasn't until the Florida government was forced to carry the weight of debt for the privileged few, externalizing the costs of failed speculation to the poor white majority, did the yeoman enter electoral politics, openly voice frustration against the planter class, and challenge elite authority. When it was discovered and made public that the big banks were to hold the poor white majority responsible for "faith bonds" issued out to a few wealthy planters and bondholders, widespread outrage ensued. While the bottom white class of Florida had professed allegiance and reverence to the oligarchy, something changed in the late 1830's, causing a widespread rise in class-conscious among them and a desire for white equality. Poor whites organized under the populist banner of "Jeffersonian" democracy and anti-aristocratic, anti-monopolistic Republicanism. The countrymen of Florida desired universal white male democracy through a two-party system whereby the power of the planter could be checked. Yet at the same time, most were unflinching supporters of slavery and believed it to be a Southern right granted by Jeffersonian ideals of freedom, an apparent contradiction. In fact, Democrats for the most part ridiculously associated the abolitionists with the "equally insidious and dangerous faction of corporation Oligarchists." **47**

Poor whites employed grassroots methods and organized under the Democratic Party attempting to topple one-class political rule in Florida. Until the 1838 voter movement, planters had monopolized political power in the territorial government regardless of elections or party politics. The dominant slaveholding class had ensured that the yeoman had little chance for political aspiration. When yeomen began asserting their right to political involvement and protesting the legitimacy of the Florida debt, the planters expressed shock at internal white conflict and thus lashed out at the Democrats as trouble-makers and agitators. Unable to believe that the barbarous and uneducated poor white man was capable of independent thought, they assumed class strife was being instigated from the top-down. An article in the Tallahassee *Watchman* fired at the yeoman editor, John Slocum, of the *Floridian*: "I dislike wolves in sheep's clothing, who are sowing the seed of party strife and discord in a quiet community, who are arraying themselves against the constituted authorities of this country; who are perpetually whining about oppression; and who, when they are foiled by intellectual superiority, cry 'down with the aristocracy.'" **48**

But public outrage, anti-bank backlash, and class antagonisms did not come from the top-down or at the instigation and agitation of Democratic Party leaders. It was actually the translation of anti-bank rhetoric into long-held class resentments that rallied yeomen to the party in the first place. Furthermore, much of the Democratic Party platform was composed from grassroots political rallies that involved the yeoman

constituency of the party. That electoral politics would finally provide an opportunity for a real change in Florida's class structure is what made the Democratic Party such a formidable political force in the 1839 election.

The mass grassroots support that rallied behind the Democratic Party revealed a resentment that had lied dormant within the yeomen population over the years, occasionally voiced but normally unspoken. In 1834, an article in the *Floridian*, entitled "Jackson County," expressed spite towards the "Tallahassee Gentry" and "the Nucleus" for overtaxing the territory to pay for their comfortable political seats and electoral campaigns. <sup>49</sup> In 1833, the editor of the *Floridian* called out General Richard Keith Call, soon to be territorial governor, for his seeming disposition to restrict suffrage to propertied whites. "General Call was of course opposed to any poor man voting who had not property," charged the newspaper, "this is an aristocratical notion and is part of the system of 'ruling imperiously.'" The editor concluded that if General Call still held to this principle "it may get him votes in Massachusetts, but not among the freemen of Florida." <sup>50</sup>

In the early 1830s, the planter elite sought large amounts of capital with the desire to profit from the expanding market in frontier cotton land. The Union Bank of Tallahassee issued "faith bonds" to Florida's planters backed by the credit of Florida's government. Governor William Duval introduced the Union Bank as a "planter bank" in his 1833 address to Florida's Legislative Council: "If an institution can be established on suitable terms and under such ample security as to induce the investment of foreign capital in it, this permanent object will not exist. But to meet my approval it must be in fact as well as in name the planter's bank. I recommend this subject to the consideration of the Legislative Council." <sup>51</sup> Commercial banks couldn't fulfill the capital requirements of market expansion in the South, requiring the need for large territorial banks to fulfill the capital requirements of rising production in the 1830's. Planter aristocrats and land speculators borrowed more than four million dollars worth of "faith bonds" to develop their capital and increase their holdings. <sup>52</sup> The bank loans considerably augmented the power of the planter class and strengthened the slave system.

Although the general territorial public wealth was to be held responsible for the banking debt, it only benefited a handful of wealthy planters purchasing land, slaves, horses, and capital equipment through the "faith bonds." As a result, Middle Florida's plantation economy was rocked by high debts. Debt had piled upon debt until the whole system collapsed. The Middle Florida planters had established a financial house of cards. The "faith bonds" were meant to further the planter's relentless appetite for increasing their capital and power, but economic expansion grew too big for its bridges. The

collapse of the international economy in 1837 had extended to the Southern frontier. Cotton prices and land prices plummeted from overproduction, only further deepening the crisis. As the planters defaulted on their payments, the costs were to be externalized to Florida's poor majority. It was estimated that the territorial debt for bonds issued would cost 140 dollars for each man, woman, and child. **53**

Popular sentiment in the Florida territory quickly turned against the banks. In 1838, the *Florida Watchman* editorialized:

“The public found that an ill-regulated and extravagant credit system, whilst it had made the few rich, had consigned to loss, ruin and poverty, the many – that it had created and fed the spirit of wild speculation at the expense of the public good.” **54**

The rapid growth in anti-bank opinion was a revolt against planter hegemony. Throughout 1838, every region of the Florida territory elected and supported local politicians and other officials based on their stance on the banking issue. For instance, anti-bank sentiment was so strong in Key West that no pro-bank candidates bothered to run for the Constitutional Convention or for local offices. The 1838 election for mayor in the city saw Mayor Whitehead turned out of office by Tamasco Sachetti, “a low illiterate character, the keeper of a sailor grogshop.” Jefferson Browne wrote that “The low element, elated at the prospect of one of their ilk being mayor of the city, rallied to Sachetti's standard, and as he also had the moral support of a few of the prominent citizens, no self-respecting man could be induced to run against him.” Mayor Whitehead spoke of Sachetti's ally, Charles Walker, as “a lawyer from New York, a loco-foco, an agrarian, a disorganizer, etc.” The growth in anti-banking sentiment among the lower classes of Key West, along with a handful few of the upper-middle class urban professionals, transformed the city into a Democratic stronghold, with overwhelming support for Sachetti and other “loco-foco” politicians. Lower class Key Westerners voted overwhelmingly Democratic for the Constitutional Convention and for the mayor election. **55** Such was the case in most areas all over Florida. The significant erosion of planter political hegemony in Florida began with the lower classes of local cities and towns, and then funneled upwards to state politics.

After developing its strength on the grassroots level, the radical anti-bank faction first raised its fist in statewide politics at the winter 1838 Constitutional Convention held at the port city of St. Joseph's. Three weeks into the convention, section fourteen of the constitution was proposed for regulating banks and corporations: “The General Assembly



shall, at its first session, have power to regulate, restrain and control, all associations claiming to exercise corporate privileges in the State, so as to guard, protect and secure the interests of the people of the State, not violating vested rights or impairing the obligation of contracts.” **56** A witness described this junction of the Convention: “A severe contest raging between the aristocracy and the people-between the money power and the democracy, each contending for the mastery, each resolved to do or die. Fierce and angry discussions, stormy and turbulent debates arose.” The pro-bank section of the convention was composed of “bank attorneys, directors, and stockholders, many of them maintaining bank prerogatives to the fullest extent.” **57** The escalating feelings of the pro-bankers rose to the point where they made a proposition to adjourn the caucus and return home, but this was defeated. **58** Eventually the anti-bank faction leader Robert Reid calmed the heated situation and the Constitution was successfully instituted with section fourteen included. **59**

The radical anti-bank “loco-focos” began to make significant gains during the interlude between the Florida Constitution Convention and the territorial election in late 1839. For the first time in Florida’s two decades as a US territory, the “plain folk” flexed their political muscle and intruded upon the aristocratic monopoly of the public arena. Opposition to the power of banks was at times anti-capitalist as well. The *Florida Herald* pronounced its opposition to the

“spirit of monopoly...the great enemy of Democracy...The passing events of the day show how immense a power is exercised by corporations. They are weapons in the hand of the Money Power, capable of being wielded with dreadful effect, in its warfare with the Producing Power.” **60**

An early Florida historian described the yeoman backlash to the Union Bank as a “backwoods revolution against the conditions which capitalism had imposed.” **61** The anti-Democrat *St. Augustine News* claimed that the Democrats were in favor of division, “but it is the division of the loaves and the fishes.” The *St. Joseph Times* decried them as “The San Culotte Party...alias the Florida Jeffersonian Democratic Republican anti-bank, agrarian Party.” **62** Capitalist expansion had wrecked havoc on the largely underdeveloped Florida. Years later, Ellen Call Long recalled an encounter with a yeoman who angrily summarized how the process of bond distribution had devastated the territory:

“This is the way it was. You could mortgage your lands to the bank, draw-out two-thirds of its value in money; consequently, negro traders flocked here with hundreds of negroes; hence commenced a devastation of forests. Dead timbers covered the land; belted trees, stripped of foliage, stood like the masts of ships, and before many withered, credit stopped; so there they lay rotting, mingling their poisonous exhalations with the ruin begot by the bank institution.” **63**

Anti-bank politicians, largely composed of the middle to upper-middle class urban professionals and merchants, became forced to adhere to their principles if they wanted the yeoman vote. Numerous times the yeoman political rallies resolved that no politician would receive their vote without the expressed intention of opposing banking policies. As long as the yeomen did not waver in their resolution to destroy the banks, neither could their elected local or state political representatives. In the summer of 1839, a Democrat meeting was held in Centreville, Leon County, a yeomen stronghold, where the mass participant of yeomen farmers concluded they would support no Democratic candidate who failed to explicitly reject the current banking system. Centreville was later declared “foremost in the battle of Democracy” and the “stamping ground of true Jeffersonian Democracy in Florida.” **64** Another Democratic meeting was convened in Tallahassee a month later to show solidarity with the citizens of Centreville and other portions of the county. It also pledged that no candidate would receive support unless they showed an outright disposition to oppose the banking system. The meeting described the political situation of the ordinary Floridian as a “degrading and humiliating state of colonial vassalage and political disenfranchisement” that should be overturned as quickly as possible. **65**

On August 24, another meeting of Democrats at Quincy, Jackson County resolved that the bonds could have been useful for “some purpose common to all, either to promote a system of education, some work of public improvement, or to vest in a bank the common property of the public – and not for the benefit of individuals.” **66** Equivocally, it was resolved that electoral candidates had to pledge themselves to obey the public will. **67** The *Floridian* declared that the Democratic voters had the most to fear from the politicians “who profess to abhor monopolies, corporations of exclusive character, and rag money, but whose acts and votes belie their professions.” **68** The influence of the countrymen on Florida politics was stronger than ever before. A Democratic editorialist wrote that he would prefer the “opinions of a plain Democratic farmer” on political matters over an assortment of educated, pro-bank attorneys. **69**

Another wrote of the “few large capitalists and speculators” who were indebted for purchasing “merchandise, negroes, and horses” while the “great majority of the territory-who owe no such debts” were “punished by the bank at its will and pleasure for what the bank chooses to consider the crimes of the few guilty.” **70**

As a result of poor white grassroots organization, protest, and rallying, the anti-bank Democrats were overwhelmingly victorious in the 1839 elections. The Democrats won control of the territorial house and appointed radical anti-bank leader Robert Reid the territorial Governor. This was the most pivotal election in Florida territorial history up to this point. It was the first instance of mass electoral involvement on the part of the majority yeoman population of the Florida territory. Yeoman Floridians had asserted their right to political involvement to the detriment of the planter aristocracy that had ruled the territory unchallenged and unelected for two decades. Ellen Call Long recalled the scene of proud countrymen voters who felt that their “manhood” would at last be vindicated in the political arena:

“It is not only an opportunity to favor a candidate that stimulates to activity, but there seems such a proud consciousness of the dignity and privilege awarded to manhood, that I must confess that I had never before recognized the individual power of man in the suffrage of the land, as when I saw these countrymen rallying to the polls.” **71**

Afterwards, the jubilant voters held celebrations reflecting their new-found sense of dignity and self-empowerment. One observer wrote: “There were uproarious harangues of what American citizens can’t and won’t submit to.” **72** On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1840, the Democrats held a political barbeque at the yeoman center of Centreville to signify allegiance to their countrymen supporters. John M. Hill described the aristocracy as “the bane of our political institutions” and hoped that it would “always and forever be banished from the democratic citizens of Centreville.” M. Hock warned the territorial bond holders: “The Lord help them for we fear in a month, the Banks cannot.” **73**

The yeoman felt his economic stability, independence, and manhood compromised under the weight of state debt. An editor wrote: “The fact is the people are completely in the power of the Banks. The banks are their masters. They live but by their sufferance. They have them so enthralled by debt to themselves and to each other, that they have but to say the word and ruin and desolation follows.” **74** Democrats announced that it was now time for them to “shake off the fetters which designing men have thrown upon us, and assert our claim to the birth-right of Americans – we mean freedom from

the most galling and humiliating bondage.” 75 There would have been a continuance of the unscrupulous banking operations “if the people had not taken alarm.” The Democrats prophesied the end of the banks as the people “see and feel how things are and have been and distrust the future.” 76 The yeoman now felt his own assertiveness and strength had broken the chains of bondage under the banks. The precarious economic conditions resulting from the banks required “at the hands of every freeman, that vigilance which is emphatically said to be the price of liberty.” 77

The newly elected Democratic legislature now made efforts to create judicial equality between the white men of Florida. The poor white had not only been economically marginalized and politically downsized, but was the target of outright judicial discrimination as well. Governor Reid sought to abolish the “barbarous punishments of whipping, branding, and pillory” that were normally applied to poor white criminals. While planters were given leniency for dueling, similar acts of violence attributed to poor whites were sentenced to the fullest extent. Although poor white men were definitely violent and there is little use romanticizing their forms of justice, wealthy planters would murder each other in duels settling their disputes – with little or no repercussions. Their form of violence was not considered “barbaric” or “primitive” but a common aspect of higher society. The pro-bankers supported whippings and other harsh punishments for the lower classes that placed them close to the judicial level as slaves, while the rich got off scot free for murder. As the Territorial House debated a bill that gave lenient punishment for dueling, a pro-bank delegate “took a nice distinction between ‘gentlemen’ and other sorts of people; argued this law was for ‘gentlemen,’ and the common vulgar crimes act for ‘loafers and blackguards.’” In response, General Read “ridiculed this attempt to ‘legislate for such particular classes.’” 78 An editorial in the Tallahassee *Floridian*, entitled “Patriotism to be Produced by the Cowskin,” lambasted Florida legislator Formy Duval for attempting to justify his support for the use of lashing in disciplining the poor white militiamen and volunteers. “We must object...to introducing Mr. Duval’s cowskin into the ranks of the militia or volunteers,” fired the editorial, “when they risk their lives against the ruthless savage, their backs ought not to be exposed to the lash of the cowskin, at the will of any sergeant or corporal.” 79

For the first time in Florida’s territorial history, there was active discussion of class equality before the law. The *Floridian* associated Democratic Republicanism with support for “laws operating equally on the rich and the poor, making no distinctions in favor of either, and more especially in favor of the rich.” 80 But conservative aristocrats despised the idea that they would have to now consult with their social “inferiors.” Whig elites supposed that poor whites were not mentally capable of making political decisions:

“We are to have a Social Democracy! . . . Men of education, throw open your doors and your hearts to the illiterate, boorish and savage. Men of taste and refinement consort indiscriminately with the vulgarmen of morals with profane; men of sense with the Block heads.” **81**

John Gamble, the Union Bank President, told his “Centreville brethren” that the capital stock of the bank would not increase until the shareholders would decide otherwise. While attempting to ensure the yeomen that their protests were groundless, he acknowledged that the bank shareholders would not incur any further debt as a result of public backlash and legal difficulties. **82** Gamble, aware of the continuous pattern of pro-elite administrations in Florida politics, smugly declared: “I am aware that certain High Priests of party, have declared that the future state of Florida will not be bound by contracts entered into while under Territorial government. But I have no fears that such a principle will be asserted by any legislature.” **83** As some of the more prominent “loco-focos” focused strictly on the banks, “faith bonds,” and pro-bank politicians, others branched out and recognized the greater and more far-reaching problem of reoccurring elite power over the years. The *Floridian* denounced the attempt of pro-bankers to scapegoat a single legislator for “all the frauds and impunities in the legislation of the last ten years, perpetuated by the Florida law-makers, Executive and Legislative.” **84**

As the Florida elite experienced increasing pressure on their powers and privileges, violence finally broke out in response to the incendiary language of anti-bank meetings. The political polarization among Floridian white men now verged on violence, hardly unexpected in the untamed Florida frontier. One yeoman noted: “The state of feeling here is terrible; every man goes armed, and is in quite as much danger of shooting himself as anyone else.” **85** A late July meeting of Democrats at the Ocklocuee precinct of Leon County associated the pro-bank Whigs of Florida with Northern Whig abolitionists. **86** The charge was even more ridiculous considering most Floridian Whigs were wealthy planters who borrowed the bank-issued “faith bonds” to augment their own power and strengthen the slave system in the territory. Floridian Whigs were incensed that the “loco-focos” now slandered their party as abolitionist. On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, some Whigs assembled in the streets of Tallahassee and threatened to tear down the office of the Tallahassee *Floridian* for publishing the resolutions of the Democratic meeting. The mob quickly escalated into a riot. To restore order, Governor Reid stationed forty volunteer militiamen throughout the city and outside of his home. **87**

Despite the backlash of the conservative pro-bank Whigs to their loss of power and privilege, the Union Bank's reliance on the public credit to shoulder the burden of its debt was now at an end. Perhaps more importantly, the entire face of Florida's class hierarchy was transformed and altered as poor white men exercised authority over their social "betters." In 1841, the Democrats successfully won the legislature once again and proceeded to institute rigid "loco foco" measures. The 1842 Democratic legislature officially repudiated the faith bonds and the obligation of the public to finance the overwhelming debt incurred by the territorial banks. **88** Although the planters were never fully dispossessed from power, they now lacked the ability to exercise authority over the majority white population. But the social movement that developed and supported the Democratic Party and challenged planter hegemony was far from revolutionary and failed to significantly overturn Florida's social class hierarchy. Their monopoly of power was shaken, but not uprooted. Yet when the Civil War would break out years later, class conflict broke out into violence on the Florida frontier as poor white men refused to sacrifice themselves and their families for the benefit of a privileged elite. Mass desertion, conscript evasion, and defection to the Union would severely undermine the strength of the Confederate government. This time poor whites would not shy from using organized violence to resist planter authority.

### **The Billy Bowlegs War: The Final Cleansing**

The Second Seminole War was an absolute failure in all aspects. While most of the Seminoles and blacks were successfully removed or killed, a handful of steadfast rebels continued to inhabit the impenetrable Everglades. The black Seminoles and slave rebels had achieved their liberation against the slave-hunting US army, although the official policy was that there would no peace while "a living slave belonging to a white man" was harbored by the Seminoles. The handful of rebels in the Everglades were led by Billy Bowlegs, the prominent Seminole chief who came to power through the latter half of the war, and the fiery Miccosukee chief Arpeika, or Sam Jones. The Florida War came to a halt from protracted expenses, popular backlash, lack of profitable land in South Florida, and that Federal officials no longer considered removing the defiant small parties of blacks and Seminoles in the Everglades to be worth the costs in money and white lives. But this does not mean the push for Seminole removal ended. Of the estimated 360 Seminoles and Miccosukees who remained, only about 120 were capable

of bearing arms. In 1845, General Worth reported that the Seminoles had remained faithful to the terms of the 1842 treaty during the period of peace following the war:

“Since the pacification of August 14th, 1842, these people have observed perfect good faith, and strictly fulfilled their engagements; not an instance of rudeness to the whites has yet occurred. They plant and hunt diligently, and bring their game and skins to the trading establishment or Fort Brooke, procure the necessaries they desire, and return quietly to their grounds.” **89**

For the next seven years, everything was eerily quiet on the Florida frontier. The Seminoles were impoverished, passive, and restricted, rarely even venturing outside of their villages to speak with a white man. Nevertheless, efforts for “Indian Removal” simply grew more pragmatic. Other indigenous populations had been weakened and destroyed through invasions of white settlers who grabbed up their lands and displaced them. The mass movements and land grabs of white settlers had proven more successful than the US military in convincing native populations to evacuate the Southeast. The peace following the Seminole War renewed these strategies to persuade the Seminoles to emigrate. The reservation was to tame the resilient bloc of Seminoles and blacks for their eventual removal. Ethnically cleansing the Seminoles from Florida had remained on the agenda of expansionist politicians and military officials, but at a slower, more realistic pace. Captain John T. Sprague detailed this alternative approach:

“It is the policy of the general government to remove these remnants of bands to Arkansas by the only means which can eventually accomplish it. First, to locate them where they can be found and numbered: let them enjoy the comforts of peace, which will subdue the instinctive love for blood and plunder, when they can be approached through kindness and regard to their wants, which in time tames their habits and suspicions and induces them to consider the government and its agents as friends, interested in their welfare and happiness. Then emigration can be successfully urged, and enforced by quiet and conciliatory measures.” **90**

The Armed Occupation Act opened up the land for an influx of yeomen from Florida and across the Southern states. During its one year period, 1,184 permits were issued for 189,440 acres from Gainesville all the way south to the Peace River. White yeomen settlers would serve as a front to counter and expel the Seminole remnants in the

South Florida reservation. **91** For US expansionists, the yeoman farmer was a testament to the “entrepreneurial individualism” of the “American spirit” that exemplified the “virtues” of “private property.” But few politicians cared to mention that “rugged American individualism” depended on Federal intervention to forcefully wrest indigenous lands. “Private property” on the one hand was white hegemony over stolen indigenous land to build the base of wealth for the general white population. On the other it was the division of plots of land to every white man so that the laboring class didn’t have to depend on employers or creditors. Such was the contradiction of the Florida frontier population: egalitarianism for whites and extermination or slavery for people of color. The 1842 Armed Occupation Act for Florida set the precedent for the Homestead Act of 1862 that similarly built white assets through force and dispossession of native populations. These populist agrarian bills intended to give the small white farmer his portion of the expansionist pie.

Senator Thomas Hart Benton, an ardent expansionist, was the most avid proponent of the Armed Occupation Act. **92** General Jesup, Major Hitchcock, and numerous others had also openly voiced their support for an influx of white settlers to persuade the Seminoles to emigrate rather than military conquest. The thick settlements of frontiersmen were also to prevent runaway slaves from escaping down into the Everglades. **93** Nonetheless, big planters, although severely weakened by the Panic of 1837, bought up most of the land grants offered from the act. The prospects for sugar cane in southern Florida appeared promising with declining cotton prices. **94** With large plantations moving farther south, increasing numbers of slaves began moving in closer proximity to the Seminoles who continued to provide refuge for fugitives.

Prospects for development and economic growth in South Florida grew over the years leading up to the Third Seminole War. The Swamp Lands Act of 1850 placed the vast Everglades territory under the jurisdiction of the Florida state government. But cattlemen couldn’t expand their cattle ranges to the south due to the Seminole presence. Some Floridians also recognized that the cattle ranchers were intending to provoke the Seminoles to war in order to make a profit selling beef to US troops. A Northern traveler recounted:

“Capt. Finegan lives near the line and is always having trouble with the Indians-he says they steal his cattle, & he shoots all that he comes across-he's very cunning and understands the Indians very well, and they both fear & hate him, so that he has to be on the look out all the time for fear they'll murder him-The "Floridians" do not like him very well, for they think he is trying to have another Indian War, for his benefit,



as his business is raising cattle, and if there should be a war, he would find a market for his cattle, as he could furnish the soldiers.” **95**

With the Swamp Lands Act, planters hoped to exploit the Everglades for cultivating sugarcane and speculators also set their eyes on the prospects of draining the Everglades for land development. **96** While a handful of blacks still existed among the Seminole remnants, they no longer posed a significant threat to Southern slavery. Yet Florida planters were irritated that the tribe continued its long-standing tradition of providing sanctuary to fugitive slaves, refusing to return them to the whites or aiding them to safety. While the handful of Seminoles would never be able to muster any sort of successful insurrection, as they had at the beginning of the Second Seminole War, their successful defiance was intolerable for whites. The “insolent” Seminoles were a model for native resistance, providing other tribes with an example of successful militant resistance against white imposition. Although Indian Removal was largely successful, the Seminole rebels deterred its consummation. As long as the small bands of Seminoles held steadfast in the Everglade swamps, the Southeast was still not fully cleansed of its native inhabitants. Prior to the outbreak of the war, a South Floridian recalled a town congregation of Tampa Bay and wrote down their consensus for Seminole removal:

“After discussing the various rights of man...they wanted to do them a great favor by sending them beyond the Mississippi, away from their homes where they could have the benefits of cold weather and missionary preaching. This, they considered, the brutes ought to be satisfied with and feel thankful for but instead of that the ungrateful wretches persist in their resistance, and now, we are justified in forcing them to go or send them, by the aid of the gun powder to their long home. In short, exterminate them if they will not peacefully avail themselves of our kind offers.” **97**

Seminole possession of the Everglades itself was a large barrier between the Florida territory and the British West Indies. The southern coast of Florida had no maritime protection to prevent runaway slaves from escaping to the Bahamas. In 1843, the Mayor and Council of St. Augustine petitioned the Secretary of Treasury to form a maritime force in Key West to prevent runaway slaves from escaping to the Bahamas, after fourteen slaves had absconded and fled the country on a schooner. It was presumed that “the abduction of slaves” was executed “both by the Indians and evil disposed white persons in connection with them.” **98** The Seminole presence proved a threat to the

illegal slave trade in South Florida. Slave ships would occasionally enter Charlotte Harbor up the Caloosahatchee River and march their slave gangs into Middle Florida to sell to planters. The Seminoles and blacks frequently made attacks on these excursions and freed the slaves. The Florida planters were outraged at this threat to their illegal supply line. **99**

The “Billy Bowlegs War,” or the Third Seminole War, earned its name from the resolute, anti-removal chief who took the head of the Seminole Nation during the latter half of the second war. Chief Holatter Micco, or Billy Bowlegs, was a descendant of Cowkeeper, Payne, and Micanopy, heads of the so-called dynastic “royal family” of the Seminoles. He first became famous as the leader of the surprise attack on Colonel Harney’s camp on the Caloosahatchee River that killed eighteen US soldiers. His band was a conglomerate of blacks, Seminoles, Miccosukees, and some “Spanish Indians” suspected to be remnants of the Calusa who once dominated the southern half of Florida. But white officials falsely considered Billy Bowlegs as the most influential chief of the Seminole Nation on account of his royal blood, and for the fact he was more negotiable to the whites than Sam Jones or any of the other lesser known chiefs.

Yet Miccosukee leader Sam Jones, or Arpeika, contained more power in the Seminole Nation due to his religious influence and bitter hatred for the white settlers, which appealed to the majority sentiment. Such a balance of power had played out in the summer of 1837 when the tribal majority elected Sam Jones head chief over the wavering Micanopy, who had hesitated to leave the camp at Tampa Bay from where they were to be shipped west. It was he and the “hardliners” who wielded true power in the Seminole remnants. Although some of the Seminole bands desired to negotiate with the whites, they still feared the revenge of Sam Jones if they compromised. **100** After the Second Seminole War, Capt. Sprague ridiculed Sam Jones for his declining influence: “Arpeika, or Sam Jones, is a sub-chief. This dignity is accorded to him in consideration of his age, more than for his opinions or assistance. He has become childish, and so feeble that he is dependent upon the young men and women for subsistence and care.” **101** Yet even most accounts in Sprague’s book depict a very different picture of Arpeika’s influence in the tribe, especially regarding how he treated captive black Seminole interpreters assisting the US government.

In the Second Seminole War, Bowlegs had often used his influence to spare the captive black interpreters and continued the Seminole tradition of revering blacks as intellectually and politically superior to the red man. Sam Jones, on the other hand, cared more about remaining on his homeland than skin color. His “lawless” band of Miccosukees had been notable for being fierce, resolute, and determined to stay on their



Seminole head chief Billy Bowlegs, 1852. Source: Florida Photographic Collection.

homelands at all costs. Not only did he absolutely refuse to leave Florida on any condition, but had no mercy for any who attempted to convince them otherwise, whether they were white, black, or red. This was apparently a matter of conflict between Arpeika and Bowlegs. Sampson, the black interpreter infamous for assisting Bowlegs' band in the Caloosahatchee massacre, recounted how both were able to override the other when it came to sparing the black captives:

“When it had become, quiet, I saw Holatter Micco or Billy Bowlegs approaching with Sergeant Simmons, whose life through his influence had been spared, and whom he protected three months; when, by a decree of the council, Sam Jones and the Prophet, he was put to death in the most cruel manner. The carpenter, and the negro interpreter, Sandy, were allowed to live four days... As we were returning to the swamp, it was proposed to burn me in the same manner they had Sandy; but through the interposition of Holatter Micco or Billy Bowlegs, my life was spared.”

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“The active war-chiefs in the Big Cypress Swamp, were Holatter Micco or Billy Bowlegs, Parsacke, Shonock Hadjo, and Chitto Tustenuggee,” Sampson recalled, “They, together with the young sub-chiefs, headed the scouts, and executed with fidelity the mandates of the council, or the wishes of Sam Jones or the Prophet.” Following the Second Seminole War, there were still accounts suggesting that Sam Jones held more extensive power in the Seminole Nation than Billy Bowlegs. When Indian Agent John C. Casey provided an assortment of gifts for some Seminoles he encountered, they refused to accept it under fear of retribution from Sam Jones. **103** While Bowlegs gained celebrity status and media publicity from the war, nobody seemed to mention the brave and determined resistance of Arpeika who had refused to negotiate, accept a bribe, or waver on his anti-emigration resolution on any terms.

In 1849, the fragile peace on the Florida frontier was abruptly broken. Floridian settlers were preparing for any sort of pretext to renew calls for Seminole removal. A band of five Seminole outlaws left the reservation and attacked two isolated settlements. On July 12, they attacked a small settlement just north of Fort Pierce on the east coast and traveled across the peninsula to attack the trading post at Paynes Creek on the Peace River. A total of three white settlers were murdered in the two raids. The five perpetrators were supposedly declared outlaws by the general tribe. But more than a few Seminoles were probably outraged at the recent act that allowed no Seminoles to leave the

reservation perimeter. This act additionally instituted a \$100-500 fine for anybody caught selling liquor to the Seminoles.

South Florida turned into an armed camp as whites crowded into the forts, armed themselves defensively, and urgently requested assistance from the state and Federal governments. The goal of the Armed Occupation Act proved to be a failure as South Florida homesteaders grew overly fearful at the news of isolated attacks by a handful of rogue Seminoles. On July 17, Col. John M. Marshall wrote to Brevet Col. C.F. Smith about the Indian River killing and requested troops. Smith replied that he doubted the Seminoles were truly renewing hostilities and only offered to furnish some weapons while adding: “the best reliance of the inhabitants ought to be their own efforts.” **104** Such was the thinking behind the Armed Occupation Act, which never really held up to its expectations. South Floridians had neither the resources nor the strength to repel even the most minor of Seminole assaults, proving that half of Florida was still under the control of around three hundred Seminoles even after a full, prolonged war with the US military for seven years and the subsequent invasion of white settlers. Finally in September, after numerous petitions from frightened inhabitants, the Secretary of War commissioned Major General David E. Twiggs to quell what was falsely reported to be an “Indian uprising” occurring in South Florida. The Secretary of War gave orders for Twiggs to use the chiefs from the western territory and bribes to persuade the Seminoles to emigrate. If negotiations failed with the Seminoles, then Twiggs was authorized to begin their “forcible removal from Florida, or what may be more disagreeable their partial or entire extermination.” **105** Events would have probably escalated had it not been for the intervention of Indian Agent John C. Casey, who had established friendly relations with Billy Bowlegs.

After the attacks, Casey visited the reservation territory and made it known that he was sincere in wishing to have friendly talks with the Seminoles. Soon afterwards, the Seminoles attempted to arrange a parley in order to avoid an outbreak of war. They fastened a peace flag to the door of the Sarasota home of Felipe Bermudez, a guide to Casey, signaling their intent for peace. In turn, Bermudez left a sign that their request would be granted on the full moon. Hearing the news, Casey arrived from Tampa the day before the full moon and encountered some emissaries from Bowlegs who reiterated the Seminole intention to make peace. They told Casey that the tribal council deeply regretted the murder of the whites, while assuring him that the crimes were committed by five Seminole rogue outlaws who had been cast out of the tribe. A council was arranged between the Seminole chiefs, Casey, and Twiggs for September 18<sup>th</sup>.

On the assigned date, Bowlegs and a handful of his warriors and sub-chiefs met Twiggs and Casey aboard a steamer at Charlotte Harbor. They once again emphasized the fact that the murders were perpetrated by a small group of outlaws and promised to make amends by handing the murderers over to them a month later. On October 18, Bowlegs and twenty warriors handed over three of the murderers and the severed hand of one of them as proof that he was appropriately dealt with. They expressed regret that the fifth had escaped and that they were unable to catch him. Through these negotiations they were able to divert the potential conflict. Bowlegs promised that if another attack like this occurred then the Seminoles would willingly move west, pleading with the government officials to let his people stay in Florida:

"To see the terrible consequences of breaking our peace laws. I brought them here that they might see their comrades delivered up to be killed. . . . I now pledge you my word that, if you will cease this talk of leaving the country, no other outrage shall ever be committed by my people; or, if ever hereafter the worst among my people shall cross the boundary and do any mischief to your people, you need not look for runners or appoint councils to talk. I will make up my pack and shoulder it, and my people will do the same. We will all walk down to the seashore, and we will ask but one question: Where is the boat to carry us to Arkansas?" **106**

Twiggs replied to Bowlegs that there would be no peace for the Seminoles as long as they remained. In October, Twiggs began planning for a possible campaign to drive the Seminoles out. This included a line of forts stretching 200 miles in between the Manatee and Indian Rivers. Each of the posts was ten miles apart and garrisoned two companies of soldiers. In addition, it was proposed that thirteen companies were to be garrisoned in depots along the rivers along with a mounted force of three hundred men. Twiggs suggested that a total force of 4,150 regular soldiers was needed to combat the small force of three hundred Seminoles. Patrols were increased to ensure effective communication between the forts and that the Seminoles were aware of the military presence in close vicinity to their settlements.

On January 21, 1850, Twiggs and Casey offered a bribe of \$500 for each warrior, \$100 for each woman and child, and an additional sum for the chiefs. Some 74 eventually agreed to emigrate under these terms, embarking to the western territory with the three Seminoles charged for murder. When Bowlegs refused and returned to the Everglades, Casey looked pessimistically at his chances to induce emigration. Upset at the failure of

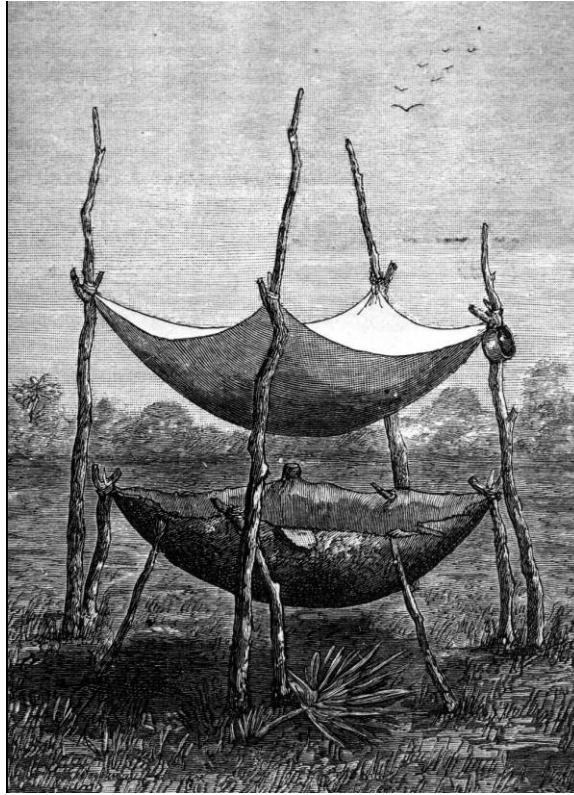


“Billy Bowlegs and his retinue,” with black Seminole leader Abraham in the back, 1852. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

this policy, he reported to Twiggs that there was “no hope of inducing these people to go west in a body by any pecuniary temptation.” **107** Twiggs agreed with Casey and relinquished his command in Florida as troop numbers declined and the forts were decommissioned. **108**

In 1852, the new Indian Agent Luther Blake arranged for Billy Bowlegs, accompanied by his good friends black Seminole leader Abraham and head chief John Jumper, to visit New York and Washington in hopes that government officials could possibly convince him to emigrate. But instead, Bowlegs pleaded his case to a commission in Washington: “He loved his home very much; yes, if it were only a little place with a pine stump upon it, he would wish to stay there. He would do anything at all so as to stay.” **109** Almost immediately after he returned, Bowlegs once again disappeared into the Everglades. **110**

In 1854, the US renewed aggressive means to remove the Seminoles. A ban on trade with the reservation was instituted, which had serious implications for the



Koonti Strainer, 1884. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

desperately impoverished population. This was not only intended so that the white population couldn't sell them necessary arms and ammunition, but to starve out the population so that they would consent to emigration. The government also commissioned surveys into the territory and established military posts on the border of the reservation. Settlers were also encouraged to move within close proximity of Seminoles grounds. **111** Fortunately, the Seminoles were able to subsist by a good supply of coonti-root and from carrying on "contraband trade" with Havana traders at Key Biscayne Bay, to which Capt. Bennett Hill was ordered to direct his command near Fort Dallas on the Miami River to keep the Seminoles constrained in their limits. Fort Dallas would serve as the main base to prevent Seminole access to the abundant coontie-harvesting areas along the Florida southeast coast, effectively starving them out. **112** The Adjutant General ordered Capt. John Munroe to establish new posts



“into the Indian country south of the Caloosahatchee in the direction of the towns and homes of the Seminoles. The object of these arrangements is to circumscribe the Indians in their limits as much as possible, to cut off their supplies and to force upon them, if possible, a conviction of emigrating. In carrying out these arrangements you are advised to confer freely with Capt. Casey.” **113**

In the fall of 1855, an assembly of Seminole chiefs and distinguished warriors was called together in order to determine future tribal policy. The meeting generally agreed on an offensive policy, resolving to strike government surveys whenever the opportunity presented itself. This was reminiscent of a previous general assembly in 1841 when the Seminoles decreed death to any messenger that came to their grounds preaching emigration. **114** After attempts to compensate the Seminoles who agreed to emigrate, starve them out through a trade embargo, and display a show of military strength by surrounding their territory with forts and troops, the inevitable conflict broke out.

In December of 1855, the Seminoles were provoked to war when a government survey came onto a field owned by Billy Bowlegs. For no reason other than to instigate a response, the survey burned down Bowlegs' prized banana grove. When Bowlegs came to the scene a short while later, he demanded redress for the action. The leader of the survey, Lieutenant Hartsuff, kicked Bowlegs to the ground and arrogantly refused his demands. On December 20, Bowlegs and about thirty warriors from his band ambushed Hartsuff's survey with rifle fire in retaliation, killing four and wounding four. **115**

Approximately twenty years after the previous Seminole War had begun, the US government policy to forcefully remove the Seminoles was renewed. This time the Seminoles were outnumbered fifteen to one. By March of 1856, the US military and Florida militias had managed to station 1,460 troops in South Florida, while only an estimated one hundred Seminole warriors were capable of fighting. **116** The skirmishes and bush warfare that characterized this final war shared similar aspects with the US military incursions down into the Everglades between 1840 and 1842. As one officer who entered into the war in the fall of 1856 put it, “The old play of the Florida War was to be repeated that winter.” **117** Seminole numbers had all but diminished during that time period and stagnated over the thirteen years following the close of the war. But as Seminole numbers dwindled their strength and ability to evade the US military consequently increased. There were only several minor skirmishes and few casualties on either side throughout the renewed conflict. Fighting was almost humorously small-scale.

A volunteer soldier wrote to his wife with pride for destroying some abandoned settlements and shooting at a fleeing captive:

“We left this place for the indians, we trampt almoste day and night in serch of them, we burnt houses and corn and rice. Enough to last us 5 years or more, after travling 4 or 5 day up to our hips in mud and water, thro the big cypress, as we reached the Everglades and fresh trail, we caught one by shooting him The moste of the boys i believe think that i did the execution, so we gained all the information we could from him, and on we went to the place where we thought we could get a fight, so on the morning of the 15th we was fired on by the spie (centry) and he made his flight, across a large open praray, we chaced him a long ways thro the sawgrass and mud some of us fired at him some number of times, he reached the other side, but badly wounded, blood was throwed on the grass but he made safe his excape, i wish you could have benn there Sarah ann to be ner you would have been pleased to have sen the act of menn on such an occasion, To see the bravery of some of our Boys lit up with love for fame it is strange for me to say to you.” **118**

Captain Abner Doubleday speculated “if the statistics of the money spent in Florida were made out it could easily be shown that it cost more than \$100,000 to capture or kill one Indian.” **119** Companies of soldiers found themselves chasing Seminole tracks for days without success. Troops burned down abandoned settlements and the crops that were left behind. Scouting parties searched endlessly in the ocean of saw grass and tiny enclaves for any sign of their enemy. Many soldiers never saw a single Seminole throughout their two years of service in the Florida swamps. Doubleday recalled a common occurrence in tracking down a party of Seminoles:

“They knew that they could outrun us & easily escape pursuit & they therefore were not at all afraid of us. One day one of them actually came to the edge of a thicket & was seen by some camp women looking on at evening parades. The women screamed the occurence was reported the long roll was beaten & I put out with my Co after that Indian. I deployed my men in open order and went into a hammock were the Indian had taken refuge. I soon found myself in difficulty. Some of the men went forward in open spaces and made rapid progress others were detained by obstacles while several including myself were tied up in the wild vines and had great difficulty in moving at all. The indians under such circumstances lay down & worm themselves like snakes through the thickets for they have no impediments or

haversacks or canteens or cartridge boxes to bother them. I saw that my Co was rapidly becoming dispersed and at last gave up the attempt in despair to catch this particular indian. The bugles were blown a long time before I could reassemble the men.” **120**

Although the black allies were relatively minimal in their numbers among the Florida Seminoles, they once again assumed a central role in the renewed conflict. In 1858, *Harper's Weekly* stated: “The negroes were the master spirits, as well as the immediate occasion, of the Florida war.” **121** When Indian Agent John C. Casey made his first trip into the Seminole reservation he never had a chance to meet Bowlegs due to his black messenger Simon who deliberately failed to notify the chief until too late. **122** Bowlegs' band was described as “a treacherous, troublesome set of Seminoles and escaped negro slaves.” **123** Howard Sharp reported: “Negroes were accepted into the [Billy Bowlegs] tribe. One of Billy Bowlegs' wives was a Negress. . . . Most of his followers were of negro blood.” **124** General Rufus Saxton observed that the blacks were the most resolute and fearless warriors once again:

“In Saxton's case it came from his participation in the war between the United States troops and the Florida Seminoles, when he had observed, having both blacks and Indians to fight against, that the negroes would often stand fire when the Indians would run away.” **125**

Regardless of their diminished numbers, black warriors in the Everglades were a force to be reckoned with. As Capt. Sprague had once noted: “Ten resolute negroes, with a knowledge of the country, are sufficient to desolate the frontier, from one extent to the other.” **126** Joshua R. Giddings, in his classic 1858 work *Exiles of Florida*, was under the impression that the Third Seminole War occurring at the time he wrote his book was once again for the purpose of enslaving the black Seminoles: “At the moment of writing these incidents, our army is actively employed in carrying on the contest which arose, and for more than a third of a century has been almost constantly maintained, for the recapture and return of these people.” **127** The influence of the black Seminoles was felt even though their presence was substantially diminished. Like his predecessor Micanopy, Bowles was strongly influenced by his black advisor Ben. *Harper's Weekly* elaborated:



Ben Bruno, black Seminole interpreter and advisor to Billy Bowlegs, 1858 engraving. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

“Ben Bruno, the interpreter, adviser, confidant, and special favorite of King Billy, is a fine, intelligent looking negro. Unlike his master, he shows a decided predilection for civilized life, and an early visit to a ready-made clothing establishment speedily transformed him into a very creditable imitation of a "white man's nigger." He has more brains than Billy and all his tribe, and exercises almost unbounded influence over his master. The negro slaves are, in fact, the masters of their red owners, who seem fully conscious of their own mental inferiority. If a Seminole wishes to convey a high idea of his own cunning, he will say, "Ah, you no cheat me. I got real nigger wit." The negroes were the master spirits, as well as the immediate occasion, of the Florida war. They openly refused to follow their masters if they removed to Arkansas; and it was not till they capitulated that the Seminoles thought of

emigrating. The friendship of a man who has a hundred thousand dollars in cash, and two marriageable daughters, is worth cultivating. I would advise any one who wishes to get into the good graces of Billy Bowlegs to pay special attention to Ben Bruno.”

## 128

Seminole victory could be attributed to climate, terrain, and diseases on one hand and their determined resolution to die rather than be removed from their home on the other. The Seminoles would once again use their superior knowledge of the terrain, numerous hiding spots, and traditional guerilla warfare tactics to tear away at the fragile morale of US military regiments. Most of the war’s casualties emanated from Seminole raids on small frontier outposts and white settlements, as well as soldier deaths from disease, rather than battles or skirmishes. **129** The impenetrable swamps, the devastating epidemics, the bad food and water, and the unbearable climate would do more to undermine the US military than Seminole attacks. Nor did the military expect to conquer the Seminole in a victorious battle, but to make them so thoroughly destitute and exhausted that emigration would appear to be a great alternative to continued warfare. The Everglades was a vast circle of uncharted territory that contained countless impenetrable spots, was ripe with disease, and extremely difficult to transverse. The Seminoles were so thoroughly knowledgeable of the area, accustomed to its climate, and superior in mobility that they practically ran circles around US companies.

The true enemy of the US soldier in the Florida Everglades was the hardship of military life. As combat only occurred on rare occasions, the war was truly characterized by a fight against disease, monotony, starvation, and tedious military labor. Lieutenant Orlando Bolivar Willcox had a long military career but found his eight months in Florida from the fall of 1856 to 1857 the most trying service he ever faced. The Florida campaign was a perfect illustration of “just how monotonous a soldier’s life could become.” The “malaria-infested swamps of Florida” would “try the patience of officers and enlisted men alike.” After the war, most of the participants were “disillusioned and disgusted with the army” and would “resign their commissions when it was over.” **130**

Soon after entering the service, Wilcox reported the terrible conditions upon arriving at a military fort near the Caloosahatchee River: “They had long been reduced by fever & diarrhea, scarcely a corporal’s guard fit for duty.” Disgusted at the camp of rag-tag palmetto huts, he dryly remarked: “If this is a specimen of the Florida “forts” and their garrisons, how I envy Billy Bowlegs in the Everglades.” **131** Only a week after finding quarter for his command, Willcox already documented a list of complaints:

“The thermometer ranges up towards 80, the water is bad, & the men are being attacked by diarrhea & other diseases, mostly bilious... Yet I have kept back the greatest ill of all our fortunes-the fleas... The soil of the Seminoles has avenged the owners by its fleas. They breed in the sand so fast that one would think Florida a great maggoty cheese.” **132**

Two weeks later, he reported sixteen men in his company sick with malaria. **133** At the beginning of December, Sergeant Wilson’s baby died from a lack of available medicine. **134** By this point, 32 men had already come down with malaria in Willcox’s company. Sickness was quickly spreading across the company every day of their encampment. Within less than a month of service, Willcox was already denouncing the “infernal country.” **135** Winter passed by monotonously and his company was already “feeling tired of everything, tired of wading in the water for game and tired of each other, nearly to the point of fighting.” **136** By spring Willcox’s company faced its first confrontation with the enemy near the mouth of the Kissimmee:

“We soon heard that the enemy was nearby, only a few hundred yards distant. Most of the command was put ashore and deployed. The men dashed ahead fearlessly enough, but terribly encumbered by the thick, tall saw grass and palmetto roots, which soon broke up the line somewhat, and put every man of us to his trumps. For my part, trying to lead as best I could, sinking to my waist and deeper, I slashed away with my sabre for a path and sometimes threw myself back-forwards to lead my men. But the fleetier enemy had skedaddled out of sight. It seems that two of them were fishing from a canoe, when discovered by Bagley and the guide, whose boat party gave chase, firing as they went. The Indians made for the shore for dear life. One of them was hit and seen to fall just as their canoe struck bottom, but he scrambled to land and the two ran through the woods yelling like fiends. The only trophy from our pursuit was the captured canoe, containing turtle and fish enough for a considerable camp.” **137**

Rather than draw out the war any long, the government used bribery and persuasive measures to convince Bowlegs and his followers to emigrate out west. The US government recalled the vast expenses and loss of life it had endured chasing a handful of Seminoles around the countless Everglades enclaves only fifteen years beforehand. On the other hand, Orlando Willcox attributed the success of the campaign to General

Harney's command of Florida frontiersmen, volunteers, and "crackers" who had "killed or captured so many small parties of the guerilla bands" that nearly the entire remainder of the Seminoles was shipped off to the Arkansas territory by 1858. **138** Bowlegs himself had asserted that while Scott and Taylor were "great men, and fought him mighty hard," Harney had made him "run like hell." **139**

However, it's also probable that the black Seminoles had once again played the most important role in closing the war. In 1856, the US government officially recognized the independence of the Seminole Nation from the Creek Federation. The Seminoles out west in Oklahoma were granted a tract of land independent of the Creek territory and were no longer subjected to the laws and jurisdiction of the larger federation. Once word of this reached the handful of black Seminoles in Florida, they were probably more willing to concede to emigration. **140** This concession severely weakened the threat from the Creeks out west who were still attempting to re-enslave the black Seminoles. Willcox alluded to this by claiming that only one "black slave" of the Florida Seminoles was still alive by 1901, implying that the 1858 emigration party of Seminoles was accompanied by their remaining black allies in Florida. **141**

On March 15, 1858, Billy Bowlegs and a number of chief delegates agreed to emigrate in the final peace negotiations. The US government bribed Bowlegs with \$6,500 for himself, \$1000 for each of his four sub-chiefs, \$500 for every warrior, and \$100 for every woman and child. There was little other option for the half-naked, starved, and destitute people who had been harassed by numerous military invasions over the span of almost fifty years. By May 4, Bowlegs and his band of 165 followers, 39 warriors and 126 women and children, left from Tampa Bay for Oklahoma to join thousands of their Seminole and black comrades. On May 8, all hostilities were declared over. **142** It had once again proven impossible to completely remove all of the Seminoles. An estimated one hundred still remained deep in South Florida with their scattered parties. Chipco's band was hidden somewhere north of Lake Okeechobee. Sam Jones and his band of Miccosukees held steadfast deep within the enclaves of the Everglades. When news reached Arpeika of Bowlegs' surrender, he reportedly declared "he would not emigrate for two wagon-loads of money; that his women followed King Billy's men, jeering them for selling themselves to the pale-faces." **143** But these small remnants were given the right to remain in peace.

Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, and numerous other military officials had boosted their popularity and climbed to the highest levels of government by earning a reputation of "Indian-fighting" in Florida. After months of dreadful, monotonous service

in the Florida swamps, Willcox recounted his total experience of the war through a satire of the US military and its history in Florida:

“Thus, to carry the election in Florida, a vigorous campaign is ordered there against the Indians that for twenty years have served this political pretext, & a vigorous general is ordered to the spot. The election carried, the campaign is over, the vigorous general is ordered to another field where political expediency requires the display of energy, & from there on to the end of the chapter. Thus it turns out that military men become the best politicians by governmental influences, & aspire to the presidency in due course of time.” **144**



## **Chapter 9**

### **The Discontent:**

# **General Slave Resistance in Antebellum Florida (1821-1860)**

#### **Overview of Slave Resistance in Antebellum Florida**

The US acquisition of Florida meant the institutionalization of chattel slavery in the territory with the vast influx of white Anglo planters. There were a very limited number of slaves under Spanish rule and no rigid racial hierarchy existed that meant perpetual bondage for blacks. The liberal laws of Spain allowed for many black slaves to achieve manumission based on their own personal merits. There were multiple ways in which slaves resisted their lifetime of servitude. Running away was the most attractive option considering the sparsely populated white settlements and vast Florida wilderness. The existence of free black maroon communities next to the Seminoles allowed them a safe refuge from slave raiders. From there they could adapt into the black Seminole social structure and even attain high positions of command.

As was persistently covered in the previous chapters, Florida was an attractive refuge for slaves who sought freedom under the Spanish government and the Seminoles. In the final years of Spanish rule, the establishment of the black community at the Suwannee, the “Negro Fort,” and the Angola settlement in Sarasota ensured that blacks could find protection from pursuing slavers. Some still felt uncomfortable being in that close of proximity to the white settlements and opted to retreat even further south, eventually boarding ships to the West Indies. US encroachment onto the Florida territory meant increasingly limited space for runaway slaves to hide-out from their white pursuers. The devastating assaults on the “Negro Fort” and the Suwannee settlement were the most obvious indicators of this. Andrew Jackson became Provisional Governor of the territory once Spanish cession was finally complete and commissioned a party of friendly Creeks to obliterate the black settlement of Angola. The Coweta Creek raid broke up black and native settlements from Middle Florida down to Charlotte Harbor, making the movement of blacks chaotic in the territory. Most of the refugees escaped to the Bahamas, others taking refuge under Spanish protection at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River.

The Anglo planters that entered Florida after US acquisition typically brought their slaves along with them due to the limited number that they could actually purchase in the territory. A major problem with initial settlement was the fear that the territory was an easy harbor for fugitive slaves. In 1824, the *East Florida Herald* claimed: “It is said that many decline settling in the Territory because they are liable to the loss of their negroes by elopement.” While this could be attributed to its sparse settlement, it was also because “negroes are harboured among the Indians with impunity,” claimed the newspaper. <sup>1</sup> Their slaves continued to seek refuge in the Seminole reservation, angering the heightened feelings of Florida planters who persistently agitated the Seminole chiefs for their return and commissioned slave raids into Seminole territory. If the Seminoles could be forced to pack themselves into the limited territory of the reservation, they could undoubtedly be removed. But the false claimants and speculators wished to obtain the slaves among them first before ridding themselves of the native “agitators.” The accumulation of hostile feelings reached their climax at the end of 1835, when the Seminoles, black maroons, and plantation slaves coordinated a three-pronged assault on the white settlements of Florida.

At the outbreak of revolt, over four hundred slaves on the St. John’s sugar plantation complex rose up against their masters, alongside the Seminoles and free blacks, and decimated the sugar plantations of East Florida. The black slaves of Florida achieved notoriety by invoking the largest slave revolt in US history. The rebellion left the entire country in destitution. Over the following two years, most of the rebel slaves were captured and returned to their owners. The few who remained among the Seminoles held honorable positions as military commanders and leaders. In March 1838, General Jesup offered freedom to all the blacks who existed among the Seminoles and removed them to the western territory, a victory for the black Seminoles and fugitive slaves who revolted. The white and Creek slave raiders further attempted to seize their claimed blacks once they reached the ports of New Orleans. They mostly failed in these endeavors. The blacks who chose to remain with their respective Seminole bands were continuously pursued by these slavers as well. At the close of the war, some blacks continued to reside among the small bands that inhabited the Everglades. Over this time period, slaves persisted on seeking freedom among the Seminoles to the outrage of their masters.

The Bahamas had been an outlet for fugitive slaves and black Seminoles notably since the Angola settlement was destroyed in 1821. During the Second Seminole War, Jesup wrote a letter to a Gadsden County planter Joseph McBride regarding his slaves: “[They] were taken away several years ago in English vessels to the Bahamas, where, if

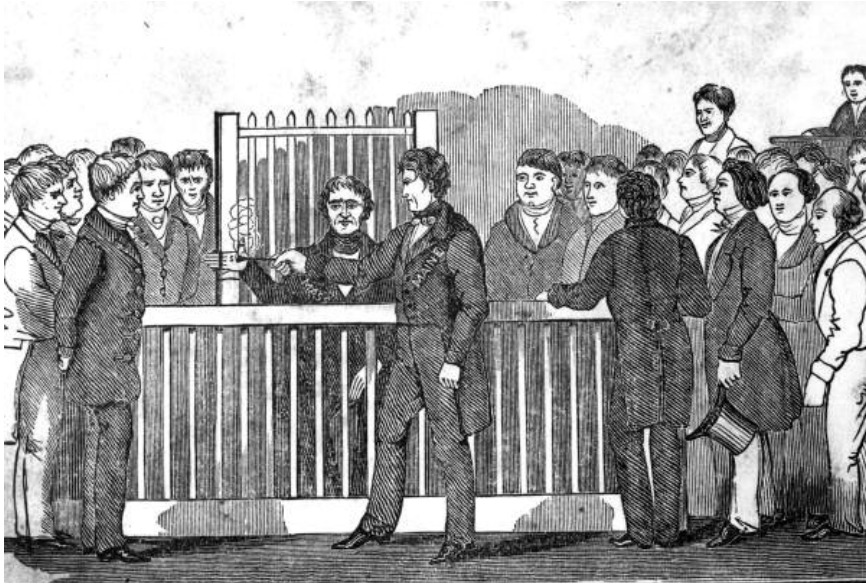
living, they probably are now...many of the negroes who have run away from their masters within the few years past, as well as the Indian negroes claimed by the white people, have gone to those islands. I think it probable all the negroes in the nation who can find the means of escape will follow.” <sup>2</sup> With the Seminole remnants still occupying the Everglades, slaves practically had a free passage to the Keys and out to the islands. After fourteen runaway slaves from St. Augustine boarded a British ship in Key West and escaped to the Bahamas, some East Florida slaveholders grew notably belligerent. In 1843, the Mayor and Council of St. Augustine petitioned the Secretary of Treasury to provide them a maritime force to “form a check on our slaves along the Sea board; and on those whom it is believed keep up a communication with them, in order to withdraw them from their owners; and who may incite them to still more pernicious acts against the latter.”

St. Augustine planters assumed that these fugitives were given sanctuary by Seminoles and white abolitionists before making their way to the Keys and disappearing from the territory: “the abduction of slaves...both by the Indians and evil disposed white persons in connection with them,” along with British agents, “A Power whose possessions are in our immediate neighbourhood, afford her Agent and Emissaries opportunities of tampering with our slaves and abducting them from their owners.” Since the blacks of Angola had boarded British wreckers to the Bahamas shortly after Florida’s annexation, Floridian planters had sought to bully the islands into turning over their runaways. Slaveholders assumed that there existed “in some quarter, a probably in the Bahamas Islands, a regularly organized system for the abduction of our slaves – or for aiding and abetting them in escaping from their owners.” <sup>3</sup>

Seven runaway slaves had attempted to escape to the Bahamas aboard the boat of Jonathan Walker, a Northern abolitionist who sought to assist runaway slaves in Florida. On June 22, 1844, Walker left Pensacola with seven of the runaways aboard. But before they could reach Cape Florida, they were apprehended by two vessels and returned to Pensacola to receive trial. The anti-abolitionist suspicions of Florida slaveholders were confirmed with the imprisonment of Walker. All seven of the slaves were returned to their owners and Walker was found guilty of aiding and abetting runaways. As punishment, he was made to stand in the pillory for one hour, then brought into the court and branded in his right hand with the letters SS, imprisoned for fifteen days, and fined \$150. His abolitionist friends paid his fine and he was released after serving his sentence.

**4**

Shack Thomas, an ex-slave from Tallahassee, recalled that some of his neighbors were white abolitionists who harbored fugitive slaves until they were ran off by the



“United States Marshal branding the author,” lithograph depicting abolitionist Jonathan Walker’s punishment for aiding fugitive slaves in Florida, from *The Branded Hand: Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker*, Jonathan Walker, 1848.



“The author confined in the pillory,” lithograph depicting abolitionist Jonathan Walker’s punishment for aiding fugitive slaves in Florida, from *The Branded Hand: Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker*, Jonathan Walker, 1848.

locals: "These, he says would take in runaway slaves and "either work 'em or hide 'em until they could try to get North." When they'd get caught at it, though, they'd "take 'em to town and beat 'em like they would us, then take their places and run 'em out." 5 Abolitionist sentiments in Florida were surely more common than history would have us believe. Philemon Bliss, while traveling across Florida in a stage with a "northern gentleman" and a "southern lady," observed a dispute between the two over the general treatment of slaves. When the "northern gentleman" contended that slaves were treated well in the state, the "southern lady" replied: "O, no! You can know nothing of the treatment they receive on the plantations. People here do whip the poor negroes most cruelly, and many half starve them. You have neither of you had opportunity to know scarcely anything of the cruelties that are practiced in this country." Bliss recalled: "I met with several others, besides this lady, who appeared to feel for the sins of the land, but they are few and scattered, and not usually of sufficiently stern mould to withstand the popular wave." 6

Jonathan Walker recounted the five to six years he lived in Pensacola and the reception he was given for his abolitionist tendencies:

"Twice, while living there, I was called upon by different persons,—the chief executive officers or mayors for the time being,—in consequence of the reports in circulation that I was on good terms with the colored people; and it was intimated that there was danger in regard to my peace and safety, for should the people be excited in consequence of my discountenance of some of their rules and customs respecting the association of white with colored men, it would be out of their power to shield me from *violence*." 7

When it came to resisting or acculturating into their lifetime of bondage, Floridian slaves typically fell into three standardized categories: 1) The privileged "house negro" 2) The average slave who did not seek the complete overthrow of slavery but resisted their bondage in mundane fashion 3) The rebel slave who sought the complete destruction of perpetual bondage. The privileged house slave was typically a mulatto and was therefore perceived as unfit to handle the physically-draining, exhaustive work loads of field labor. The Antebellum Florida plantation sought to produce a color-coded hierarchy with the lighter blacks serving as a buffer between the white owners and the darker blacks who worked on the fields. Their quarters were separated from the general slave quarters, in close proximity to, or within, the "Big House" where the master resided.

They were assigned tasks as butlers, maids, stablemen, gardeners, cooks, and personal attendants to their owner. This house slave was not only unquestionably obedient to their master, but actually became an accessory to their oppression. They were not only content with their superior positions, but perceived their interests as intertwined with their master's. Archille Murat, an aristocratic Florida slaveholder, recounted that this class of obedient slaves,

“residing in the Great House, as the proprietor's or manager's residence is called, are treated in the same manner as the domestic servants in Europe. Generally they are born and bred up in the family, of which they consider themselves a part, and to which they become much attached, and are very faithful.” **8**

The narrative of a Florida plantation slave Sambo, who went out of his way to procure the favor of his master, best exemplifies the acculturated mindset of the house slave. Charles Coates, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, recalled his story:

“The neighboring slaves screamed so loudly while being whipped that Sambo told his master that he knew how to make a contraption which, if a slave was put into while being whipped would prevent him from making a noise. The device was made of two blocks of wood cut to fit the head and could be fastened around the neck tightly. When the head was put in, the upper and lower parts were clamped together around the neck so that the slave could not scream. The same effect as choking. The stomach of the victim was placed over a barrel which allowed freedom of movement. When the lash was administered and the slave wiggled, the barrel moved. Now it so happened that Sambo was the first to be put into his own invention for a whipping. The overseer applied the lash rather heavily, and Sambo was compelled to wiggle his body to relieve his feelings. In wiggling the barrel under his stomach rolled a bit straining Sambo's neck and breaking it.” **9**

Sambo helped his master devise an instrument to more effectively punish and torture the slave population, only to become a victim of his own device. The only reaction that his owner gave to his death was to discontinue the use of Sambo's device, “as he saw the loss of property in the death of slaves.” House slaves could often not see through their master's paternalistic indoctrination and perceive that their master whom they thought endeared them considered them nothing more than mere economic property.

After carefully examining the narrative of a Willis Williams, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, it appears that he fell into this category of house slaves. Willis enjoyed all the benefits that came with the house slave position. His father was a skilled laborer and his mother was a cook. He lived near the master's house with a handful of other servants who labored on the garden. Although he wasn't allowed to sit at the table with the master's family, he enjoyed the same food that they did. Williams, compared to the field slaves,

“fared well during the first nine years of his life which were spent in slavery...it was the same as freedom for he was not a victim of any unpleasant experiences as related by some other ex-slaves. He played base ball and looked after his younger brothers and sister while his mother was in the kitchen. He was never flogged but received chastisement once from the father of Mr. Heyward. That, he related, was light and not nearly so severe as many parents give their children today.” **10**

Daphne Williams, an ex-slave from Tallahassee, also appears to fit into the house slave category based on her own narrative. Williams claimed: “I used to live in the big house, I's nuss for the white chillen. I didn' stay round with cullud folks a-tall.” The clothing she wore was also superior to that worn by most of the slaves: “They give me pretty clothes to wear and make me keep clean and expectable.” Daphne was so alienated from the general slave population that she was unable to recall “how many niggers missus have on the plantation” and remembered that she “was never 'lowed to play with the cullud children.” She used to look after the white children and take them to church, caring for the mistress's baby “as if it were her own.” **11**

The average slave resisted slavery through simpler methods of quiet subversion against their lot but was not necessarily intent on completely overthrowing slavery as a system. There were a variety of ways that slaves resisted the brutal and inhumane conditions of perpetual servitude. It was a pre-capitalist form of class struggle between the slaves and their owners. The slaves endeavored to achieve more personal autonomy and work the least amount possible, while the owners wished to squeeze the most productivity they could out of their slave force. This resistance on the part of the average slave was easily the most common and mundane. The average slave didn't threaten the system of bondage, but sought to achieve a more acceptable degree of autonomy and dignity under the master-slave relationship. While the average slave didn't apparently resist his or her bondage, that they attempted to maintain a measure of dignity in their

day-to-day life was an act of resistance against the dehumanizing nature of slavery in itself.

The resistance of the average slave was usually characterized by poor work performance, refusing their assigned tasks, occasionally running away, feigning illness to avoid work, amputating limbs, fighting patrollers, disobeying ordinances, becoming literate, and a host of other acts in which slaves subtly or overtly expressed their disapproval of their conditions. Even though outbreaks of disease and illness were common among slave quarters, overseers were obviously aware that their slaves were inclined to magnify their ailments. This most often occurred during the harvest season when the cotton quotas were overbearing. Yet sometimes slaves were inclined to magnify long-term injuries to avoid for work for years. On the Chemonie plantation in Leon County, a slave woman dropped her crutches on news of her Emancipation, “much to the disgust of Jones, who had been saving her from real work for seven years.” **12** Slaves most often ran away during the time of the year that the cotton quota increased, when the driver’s lash was more active. D.N. Moxley, the overseer on the El Destino plantation of Leon County, reported that “Boy Jack and di has runaway” because he “maid prince given them both about 30 [lashes] appeas” for only “picking from 85 to 95.” **13**

The Florida territorial government legislated patrols to enforce rigid slave codes in 1825 and 1831. Patrols were to visit every plantation in a neighborhood at least once every two weeks. They could question all slaves found outside the master’s grounds, search the slave quarters for firearms, and disperse all gatherings of seven or more slaves. **14** But because the patrols were composed strictly of volunteers, the law did not ensure that they would always remain active. Whites often put their guard down and patrols eventually ceased to regularly function. Slaves, violating strict prohibitions of trading and drinking on Sundays, would often use the Sabbath Day as an opportunity for economic exchange and leisure instead of religious services. The Gadsden County grand jury lamented the custom of trading on Sundays, considering it “highly demoralizing, and tends to corrupt and derange the habits of our slave population, and render the Sabbath a day of amusement, dissipation, and debauchery. The negroes . . . make use of that opportunity to pilfer from their masters and others, those articles which are readily exchanged for spirituous liquors.” **15** In 1846, the Benton County grand jury called for stricter reinforcement of the patrol law, “as we are of the opinion that that important law is much neglected.” It also noted the lax enforcement of other slave codes, complaining that slaves “have too much privilege in carrying arms, and more particularly violating the Sabbath day.” **16** The *East Floridian* complained that slaves could too easily obtain



illegal rum and called for increased surveillance. **17** In 1835, Leon County found it necessary to form vigilance committees to supplement the slave patrols. **18**

Petty theft from slaves was an everyday occurrence in Florida. It was common for slaves to steal property from their owners and barter it at below market prices, providing cash to slaves for manumission and necessities or desired goods. William Sherman, an ex-slave from Chaseville, recalled how a local white plantation owner “encouraged slaves to steal from their masters and bring the stolen goods to him; he would purchase the goods for much less than their value.” **19** The Tallahassee *Floridian* noted how stores were only kept open to ten o’clock on Sunday “to avoid the greater evil of allowing negroes to come to town at night to purchase their small articles of coffee, sugar, etc. which most of them have the means of doing. It has entirely supposed those disreputable establishments which formerly subsisted by trading with negroes under the cover of darkness for stolen property at half its value.” **20** The Florida legislature penalized masters fifty dollars for allowing their slaves to trade as “free men.” It was assumed that a slave found with articles without written permission from their master was stealing. **21**

Philemon Bliss, an Ohio correspondent in Florida, reported an instance of slave theft he observed on a Florida plantation:

“One of them had asked for meat, saying that he could not work without it. He was refused the meat, and with a lew of others killed and secreted a hog of his master's. They had nearly finished the pork, when it was found, and being charged with stealing it, they did not deny it, but one of them remarked with unusual firmness, that he must have meat, he could not work on [corn] bread. (His master owns from eighty to one hundred hogs.)”

The punishment the outspoken one received was to be “tied to a tree, hands and feet, and receive three hundred and five blows with the paddle, [a piece of oak timber three and a half feet long, flat and wide at one' end,] on the fleshy parts of the body.” The others “received the same kind of punishment at the time,” Bliss recalled, “though I did not count the blows. One received two hundred and thirty lashes.” **22**

In 1837, a seaman named Curry was killed by a slave of Col. Gamble as they left from St. Marks in a wagon. Curry was found dead and his body mutilated in a pond about seven miles from St. Marks. It was assumed that the black wagoner intended on robbing the deceased, “who was supposed to have a considerable amount of money about his

person.” **23** Jim Davis, a runaway slave belonging to Col. Gamble, hijacked a mule from the Jefferson County railroads. **24** In March 1837, a runaway slave broke into a small house on the west side of the St. Sebastian River and stole a blanket and some provisions. Capt. Hanson, leading a detachment of his mounted company, scoured the area for miles following the fugitive’s traces and found nothing. A detachment of Capt. Weedon’s company went south as far as Matanzas in search of the slave. **25** This was in East Florida only a year following the massive slave revolt there. Interestingly enough, some of Capt. Hanson’s slaves were arrested in 1840 for providing ammunition and information to the Seminoles. **26** In July that year, two fugitive slaves murdered Capt. Gilliland for the provisions he was carrying, expecting to escape into Seminole territory afterwards. They were subsequently tried, found guilty, and executed. **27**

Failing to defer to other overseers or patrollers was common. But to attack a patroller was violence against whites, considered unacceptable and punished with death. Tom, a slave of Col. N., obtained permission from his overseer on a Sunday to go off the plantation to visit his son on a neighboring plantation, but neglected to take a “pass.” When the overseer on the other plantation demanded he provide the pass, Tom replied that he was given permission to come and that his having a mule was sufficient evidence. Tom suggested that if the overseer didn’t believe him, he should take him up and return him to his plantation. Phenemon Bliss recalled what followed:

“The overseer replied that he would not take him up; giving him at the same time a blow on the arm with a stick he held in his hand, sufficient to lame it for some time. The negro collared him, and threw him; and on the overseer’s commanding him to submit to be tied and whipped, he said he would not be whipped by *him* but would leave it to massa J. They came to massa J’s. I was there. After the overseer had related the case as above, he was blamed for not shooting or stabbing him at once. After dinner the negro was tied, and the whip given to the overseer, and he used it with a severity that was shocking. I know not how many lashes were given, but from his shoulders to his heels there was not a spot unridged! And at almost every stroke the blood flowed. He could not have received less than 300, *well laid on*. But his offense was great, almost the greatest known, laying hands on a *white* man!” **28**

The third form of resistance came from the overtly insubordinate slave. While the average slave ran away on special circumstances, the rebel slave made it his object to escape – sometimes resorting to violence as a means of resistance. These militant slaves sometimes committed acts of arson, killed their masters and overseers, plotted and

organized revolts, and were generally disobedient. **29** In late 1834, the *Pensacola Gazette* reported one act of arson committed by a runaway slave: “The Van Buren and her entire cargo of 470 bales of cotton...was destroyed by fire the night of Dec. 5, 1834, while tied up at Martin’s landing on the Chattahoochie River. The fire was set by a runaway negro who had been recaptured.” **30** It seems that Ambrose Douglass of Brooksville fell into this category of absolutely defiant slaves:

"I was a young man and didn't see why I should be anybody's slave. I'd run away every chance I got. Sometimes they near killed me, but mostly they just sold me. I guess I was pretty husky, at that. They never did get their money's worth out of me, though. I worked as long as they stood over me, then I ran around with the gals or sneaked off to the woods. Sometimes they used to put dogs on me to get me back.”

**31**

The Florida legislature recognized: “Many times, slaves runaway and lie out hid, and lurking in swamps, woods and other obscure places, killing hogs and committing other injuries to the inhabitants of the territory.” **32** In 1834, the Tallahassee *Floridian* wrote: “There are few things which have been subjects of greater complaint for the last two or three years than runaway negroes, who are permitted to go at large, and plunder the public.” **33** In July 1838, a slave named Alek, owned by William Burney, burned and robbed the Jefferson County home of John Slaughter. Governor Call issued a four hundred dollar reward for Alek after he broke out of the county jail. **34** Samuel Andrews, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, recounted how his uncles were runaway slaves who undermined cotton production, stole and killed livestock, fought against slave patrols, and remained hidden in the woods until after emancipation:

“My mother's brother, "Uncle Dick" and "Uncle July" swore they would not work longer for masters; so they ran away and lived in the woods. In winter they would put cotton seed in the fields to rot for fertilizer and lay in it for warmth. They would kill hogs and slip the meat to some slave to cook for food. When their owners looked for them, "Bob Amos" who raised "nigger hounds" (hounds raised solely to track Negro slaves) was summoned and the dogs located them and surrounded them in their hide-out; one went one way and one the other and escaped in the swamps; they would run until they came to a fence—each kept some "graveyard dust and a few lightwood splinters" with which they smoked their feet and jumped the fence and the dogs

turned back and could track no further. Thus, they stayed in the woods until freedom, when they came out and worked for pay.” **35**

The only reported act of a massive organized slave revolt in Florida was at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War with the destruction of the St. John’s River sugar plantations. There were some minor slave uprisings in Antebellum Florida outside of the East Florida slave revolt. Interestingly enough, they were all concentrated in Florida’s northeast region. In March 1820, a Federal detachment put down a slave uprising along Talbot Island off the coast of Jacksonville. **36** In the autumn of 1856 there was an “insurrectionary movement in the Slave States” that extended to Jacksonville “though the papers there denied the fact.” **37** Perhaps this foreshadowed the slave insurrection that was to break out in East Florida less than a year into the Civil War. There was a clear presence of slave violence in Antebellum Florida, even though it more often occurred individually in response to overly harsh treatment rather than full-scale uprisings. Over the course of Antebellum Florida, twenty-six male slaves were executed for either murder or attempted murder of their master or overseer. In the two years before Florida’s succession from the Union, at least six masters and overseers were killed by their slaves.

**38**

Douglas Dorsey recalled preparing to kill his master’s wife with rat poison for brutally mistreating his mother: “He intended to put strychnine that was used to kill rats into her coffee that he usually served her. Fortunately freedom came and saved him of this act which would have resulted in his death.” **39** Irene Coates, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, narrated a case of extreme violence that resulted from prolonged abuse by the overseer. The overseer on her plantation was noted for being particularly brutal and would commonly whip the slaves to spur them on to work. One day, some slave women were plowing the field when the overseer came along and struck one across the back with his whip. Irene recalled:

“The one nearest her spoke and said that if he ever struck her like that, it would be the day he or she would die. The overseer heard the remark and the first opportunity he got, he rode by the woman and struck her with the whip and started to ride on. The woman was hoeing at the time, she whirled around, struck the overseer on his head with the hoe, knocking him from his horse, she then pounced upon him and chopped his head off. She went mad for a few seconds and proceeded to chop and mutilate his body; that done to her satisfaction, she then killed his horse.” **40**

Afterwards, the woman seemed to recover from the overwhelming surge of rage that was induced by the overseer and immediately went to the master:

“saying "I've done killed de overseer," the master replied—"Do you mean to say you've killed the overseer?" she answered yes, and that she had killed the horse also. Without hesitating, the master pointing to one of his small cabins on the plantation said—"You see that house over there?" she answered yes—at the same time looking—"Well" said he, "take all your belongings and move into that house and you are free from this day and if the mistress wants you to do anything for her, do it if you want to."

Such an act of resistance undoubtedly struck fear in the heart of the master and Irene warmly recalled how it resulted in better treatment for the entire slave force. Whites, while often fearing and exaggerating the possibility of slave revolt, sometimes had a false sense of security about the loyalties of slaves. This could easily play to the advantage of fugitive slaves. An ex-slave from South Carolina recalled the story of a fugitive slave named Isaac Wigfall who abandoned the plantation and set out for Florida:

“Isaac Wigfall run ‘way an’ went to Florida an’ meet a white man on a horse with a gun. He ax de man for a piece o’ tobacco. The man give him de gun to hole while he git the tobacco for him. Isaac take the gun an’ point it at the man an’ ax ‘im, “you know wha’ in dis gun?” De man got frighten’ an’ he tell de man “you better be gone or I’ll empty it in you.” **41**

Isaac’s story also has implications of how fugitive slaves would combat the slave-catchers and the hounds that pursued them:

“The man gone an’ come back wood a group o’ men an’ houndogs. He’d jus’ make it to de river ‘fore the dogs catch him. He had a piece o’ lightwood knot an’ ebery time a dog git near he hit um on de neck an’ kill all o’ them. The man went back to git more help an’ dogs but w’en dey git back Isaac was gone.”

While organized slave insurrection was rare, spontaneous acts of slave violence like that recalled by Irene Coates were common in Antebellum Florida. In October 1827,

a field slave named Ben on Dr. Mitchell's Leon County cotton plantation had murdered the overseer Irvin Kent. During the cotton season, the slaves were given an overbearing amount of tasks to complete and Ben had refused to finish them. Kent had threatened to punish Ben in the morning for failing to do so. In the middle of the night, Ben entered into the overseer's home and beat him to death. **42** On the El Destino plantation of Leon County, four women ran away to Tallahassee and sought refuge at the home of Lawyer Davis, whose servant was married to one of the women. This resulted from a prior agreement among them to escape if the overseer whipped them again for coming up short on the cotton quota. The women were arrested and put into jail until the overseer Moxley secured their release and returned them to the plantation. When Moxley would administer further punishment on these women, Aberdeen, the brother of one, attempted to attack Moxley with an axe but one of the slave drivers intervened to stop him. **43**

In Madison County, William Pearce was murdered by his slave after threatening to whip him for a misdemeanor. The slave initially submitted to the punishment and obeyed, but drew an axe that he had concealed as soon as Pearce got within striking distance and "split in twain the head of his master, scattering the brains in every direction." The slave instantly fled. **44** In Ocala, Dr. W.J. Keitt, a Florida State Senator and brother of famous South Carolina Senator Lawrence M. Keitt, was found dead in his bedroom "body bathed in blood, and throat cut from ear to ear." Four of the slaves were convicted for participation in the murder. One of the slaves was hung after making a full confession, another was exiled from the state, and the two others were sentenced to twenty-five to fifty lashes a day for ten consecutive days. **45** In Madison County, an overseer M.D. Griffin was brutally murdered by a group of slaves. Eleven of the slaves were originally suspected. Six were convicted, three of whom were hung and the other three pardoned. One historian depicts the murder: "Griffin was struck down from behind with an ax. His body was placed in a wheelbarrow, tied in a sheet, attached to an anvil, and then sunk in twenty feet of water." **46**

## **White Violence and Slave Defiance**

Alex Thomson described his master Judge Henry of West Florida: "He gave us all we wanted to eat, but he cowhided us. He had a cowhide and used to take us in a little room to whip us. Did you ever know of a master not to cowhide a nigger?" **47** Lucius Douglass of Madison County recalled: "'De overseer wuld git you if you didn't eat `nuf. You was working for him and he meant for you to be healthy. . . . Dey all had a little hell



Antebellum Tallahassee Street Scene showing a number of slaves at work, lithograph drawn by French traveler Francis Castelneau, from his 1838 visit to Florida, *Vues et Souvenirs de L'Amerique du Nord*, Francis Castelneau, Paris, 1842. Source: *Florida State Archives*.

in `em.” **48** The large Middle Florida planter was “generous and hospitable but accustomed to exercise absolute power over his slaves, he cannot endure any opposition to his wishes,” according to a Northern traveler. **49** The traveler’s account of Middle Florida frankly depicted the typical brutality inflicted onto its slave population:

“The slaves, and in this category are included all colored people of the territory, are generally treated with the greatest severity. A whip is the only language used with them... Twenty-five lashes with the whip for women, and fifty for men, are the ordinary punishment for the smallest offenses, and in serious cases this number is

sometimes increased to three hundred. Moreover, their high price is their only protection in a country in which they can not expect any from the law.” **50**

Tallahassee planter George Noble Jones echoed this sentiment: “On large plantations where more than a hundred negroes are together, it seems necessary to observe a stricter discipline than with a smaller number might be sufficient.” **51** John Evans, the overseer of the Chermonie plantation in Leon County, considered his punishments moderate in contrast to the overseer D.N. Moxley’s “Large Flogings” of the slaves at El Destino: “if it is a Large [crime] I give him a genteel Flogging with a strop, about 75 lashes I think is a good Whipping. When picking Cotton I never put on more than 20 stripes and Verry frequently no more than 10 or 15.” **52** Whippings on Florida plantations commonly involved fifty to eighty lashes. **53** But slave treatment varied from plantation to plantation. If a master treated his slaves “kindly” it was for one of two reasons: either the slaves were of high value on the market and any sort of “mistreatment” would significantly reduce their value or the particular master believed that kindness would make his slaves more productive, the former being the more common. This was a major paradox with the slave market: a slave’s value was based on their productivity but whippings and harsh punishments were largely considered necessary to increase productivity. Nor is it easy to say that “their high price is their only protection” for increasing market value almost guaranteed that a slave was more likely to be sold away and separated from their family. That being said, some masters restrained from severe whippings or hiring an overseer for fear of losing their investment. An ex-slave narrated how his Master Snellings would always say, “a slave is of no use to me beaten to death.” **54** Slave-owner Jim Parish “seldom punished his slaves, and never did he permit his overseer to do so. If the slaves failed to do their work, they were reported to him. He would warn them and show his black whip which was usually sufficient. He had seen overseers beat slaves to death, and he did not want to risk losing the money he had invested in his.” **55**

Many travelers from Europe or the North found none of the harsh aspects of slavery they expected to encounter from hearing Northern abolitionist “propaganda.” Some historians still derive perspectives from these narratives, diaries, and encounters, believing that chattel slavery in the South may not have been as horrible as so many have made it out to be. But Philemon Bliss, an Ohio correspondent in Florida, explained why so many Northerners and Europeans had misconceived Southern slavery in their observations of the South:



“Gentlemen *travelling* in the South can know nothing of it. They must make the South their residence; they must live on plantations before they can have any opportunity of judging of the condition of the slave. I resided in Augustine five months, and had I not made *particular* inquiries, which most northern visitors very seldom or never do, I should have left there with the impression that the slaves were generally very *well* treated, and were a happy people. Such is the report of many northern travellers who have no more opportunity of knowing their real condition than if they had remained at home.” **56**

Narratives of travelers or news correspondents reporting in the South could have easily mistaken the conditions of black slaves. “I was conversing the other day with a neighboring planter, upon the brutal treatment of the slaves which I had witnessed,” reported the Ohio correspondent in Florida, “he remarked, that had I been with him I should not have seen this.” The planter told him: “When I whip niggers, I take them out of sight and hearing of the house, and no one in *my* family knows it. I would not on any consideration harden and brutalize the minds of my children by suffering them to witness a negro whipping.” Bliss concluded: “Such being the difficulties in the way of a stranger's ascertaining the treatment of the slaves, it is not to be wondered at, that gentlemen of undoubted veracity, should give directly false statements relative to it.” **57**

Despite their intrinsic property value, slaves were valued above all for their productivity and a loose application of the whip was generally perceived as necessary for a master to get a profitable return on his investment. For this reason, cruelty was built into the system. An English traveler John Benwell noted that the two hundred slaves on Archille Murat's large Florida plantation “were described as being humanely treated by him.” Yet Benwell found the truth to be very different:

“all slave-owners profess to do the same, though the poor wretches over whom by law they impiously assume God's heritage, in ninety cases out of every hundred, are scantily clothed, worse fed than horses or mules, and worked to the utmost extent of human endurance, the humanity being, in most cases, left to the tender mercies of a brutal overseer, who exacts all he can. If the poor, tattered, squalid-looking beings I saw in Tallahassee be a fair specimen of the "humane treatment" I have referred to, heaven help them.” **58**

Wealthy Florida planter Archille Murat was noted to have avidly supported whippings and downplayed the harshness of punishments: “Let one of my negroes do the same [rob me]; he is whipped and mends his manners. Corporeal pain over, he feels no other bad consequences, and his innocent children are not punished for the fault of the father; but whatever may be said, cruel punishments are not practiced.” **59** If a slave claimed that they mostly received kind treatment from their master, this should also be examined skeptically. Slaves sometimes believed that their owner was generous or kind simply because he wasn’t the one directly inflicting or punishing them. But almost all the slave narratives depict disgust and hatred for the harsh mistreatment and punishments they received at the hands of cracker overseers and patrol gangs. Thus slaves differentiated the owner from the very overseers and foremen they hired. At times the master even served as a medium that slaves could turn to if they felt they were unjustly punished by the overseer. Louis Napoleon recalled:

“His master and mistress were very kind to the slaves and would never whip them, nor would he allow the "driver" who was a white man named Barton to do so. Barton lived in a home especially built for him on the plantation. If the "driver" whipped any of them, all that was necessary for the slave who had been whipped was to report it to the master and the "driver" was dismissed, as he was a salaried man.” **60**

But Charles Coates, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, also recalled his master pretended that he was not responsible for the violent punishment inflicted on his own slaves in order to procure their loyalty and direct their animosity towards the overseer: “He was always pretend that he did not want his slaves beaten unmercifully.” Since Charles was always close to master Hall during work hours, he “had opportunity to see and hear much about what much about what was going on at the plantation. And he believes that Mr. Hall knew just how the overseer dealt with the slaves.” **61**

The cruelest overseer in Leon County, probably alluding to the El Destino overseer D.N. Moxley, was so brutal that “negroes almost tremble at his name.” “Yet he gets a high salary,” reported Philemon Bliss, “for he makes the largest crop of any other man is the neighborhood.” **62** While owners often remained at a considerable distance from their plantations, overseer wages “depended principally upon the amount of labor which they can extract from the slave. The term ‘good overseer,’ signifies one who can make the greatest amount of staple, cotton for instance, from a given number of hands, besides raising sufficient provisions for their consumption. He has no interest in the life

of the slave. Hence the fact, so notorious in the south, that negroes are driven harder and fare worse under overseers than under their owners.” 63 William, Ladd, formerly a slaveholder in Florida, wrote accordingly: “The compensation of the overseer was a certain portion of the crop.” 64

Archille Murat recalled plantation regulations in Middle Florida: “On the larger plantations, where some hundreds of negroes are collected together, a discipline and police regulations more or less severe are necessary, without which all would soon be destroyed or stolen.” 65 Floridian slaveholders even had a reputation for brutality in other parts of the South. William Sherman, an ex-slave from South Carolina who eventually migrated down to Florida after the Civil War, recalled: “Florida had the reputation of having very cruel masters. He says that when slaves got very unruly, they were told that they were going to be sent to Florida so they could be handled.” 66 But cruelty was an understatement. The nature of slave torture and punishment in Antebellum Florida is most accurately summarized by the recollections, rumors, and observations recorded by a Northern correspondent in the state:

“I had heard of females stripped and exposed to the insulting gaze and cruel lash of the driver. I have seen a woman, a mother, compelled in the presence of her master and mistress, to *hold up her clothes*, and endure the whip of the driver on the naked body for more than twenty minutes, and while her cries would have rent the heart of any one, who had not hardened himself to human suffering. Her master and mistress were conversing with apparent indifference. What was her crime? She had a task given her of sewing which she *must finish* that day. Late at night she finished it; but the stitches were too long, and she must be whipped. The same was repeated three or four nights for the same offence. I had heard of the whippingpost, and the extent of its use. I have seen a man tied to a tree, hands and feet, and receive three hundred and five blows with the paddle, [a piece of oak timber three and a half feet long, flat and wide at one' end,] on the fleshy parts of the body. Two others received the same kind of punishment at the time, though I did not count the blows. One received two hundred and thirty lashes. Their crime was stealing. One of them had asked for meat, saying that he could not work without it. He was refused the meat, and with a few others killed and secreted a hog of his master's. They had nearly finished the pork, when it was found, and being charged with stealing it, they did not deny it, but one of them remarked with unusual firmness, that he must have meat, he could not work on [corn] bread. (His master owns from eighty to one hundred hogs.) I have frequently heard the shrieks of the slaves, male and female, accompanied by the strokes of the

paddle or whip, when I have not gone near the scene of horror. I knew not their crimes, excepting of one woman, which was stealing our *potatoes* to eat with her bread! So much have I seen on one plantation. Of the *general* treatment of the slaves, I can judge only from a few facts which I accidentally learn. Masters are not forward to publish their "domestic regulations," and as neighbors are usually several miles apart, one's observation must be limited. Hence the few instances of cruelty which break out can be but a fraction of what is practised." **67**

William Ladd, a former slaveholder in Florida turned abolitionist, testified of similar horrors:

"While in Florida I knew a slaveholder whose name was Hutchinson, he had been a preacher and a member of the Senate of Georgia. He told me that he dared not keep a gun in his house, because he was so passionate; and that he had *been the death of three or four men*. I understood him to mean *slaves*. One of his slaves, a girl, once came to my house. She had run away from him at Indian river. The cords of one of her hands were so much contracted that her hand was useless. It was said that he had thrust her hand into the fire while he was in a fit of passion, and held it there, and this was the effect. My wife had hid the girl, when Hutchinson came for her. Out of compassion for the poor slave, I offered him more than what she was worth, which he refused. We afterward let the girl escape, and I do not know what became of her, but I believe he never got her again. It was currently reported of Hutchinson, that he once knocked down a *new* negro (one recently from Africa) who was clearing up land, and who complained of the cold, as it was mid-winter. Hutchinson, supposing he had the 'sulks,' applied fire to the side of the slave until it was so roasted that he said the slave was not worth curing, and ordered the other slaves to pile on brush, and he was consumed." **68**

The testimonies of Floridian ex-slaves chillingly confirm this horror. Sarah Ross, an ex-slave from Live Oak, recalled:

"Frequently the thighs of the male slaves were gashed with a saw and salt put in the wound as a means of punishment for some misdemeanor. The female slaves often had their hair cut off, especially those who had long beautiful hair. If a female slave was pregnant and had to be punished, she was whipped about the shoulders, not so much in pity as for the protection of the unborn child." **69**

Although it varied by degree depending on the social standing of the slave, very few Floridian ex-slaves could say that they were never physically tortured or subjected to cruel and unusual punishment by their master during the Antebellum years. Even the domestic servants were subjected to the cowhide administered by planter ladies. Slaves were punished and tortured for infraction, for “lax” labor or low productivity, to set an example for the others, sometimes in a “fit of passion,” and other times arbitrarily so the overseer could display his power. Punishments were most commonly administered for not finishing tasks. Overseer D.N. Moxley harshly punished the slaves at the El Destino plantation as example for the slaves on the nearby Chermonie plantation: “if they was Just Let do just as they pleased pretty Much and nore cared for, why it would have a tendency to make Eldesteno hands trobelsome. the negroes all no that they belogin the same Marster and they keep up a regular correspondence with each other.” **70** “As there had been...instances of insubordination among my people during the summer,” reported Tallahassee planter George Noble Jones, “I concluded to forbid all intercourse with Tallahassee until a better state of discipline had been established.” **71** Supposedly this was so word of harsh mistreatment wouldn’t spread.

Torture ranged from the most unimaginable forms of physical mutilation to verbal threats and psychological manipulation. A slave named Tom on the El Destino plantation was suspected to have advised his daughter to leave the plantation, “although there was no proof that he did,” so George Noble Jones “forbade Tom visiting his family” for months on end. **72** Acie Thomas recalled that his owner threatened to sell slaves to the cruel “po’ white trash,” which was enough to bring any slave in line. **73** Margrett Nickerson recalled her master constantly threatening to sell her off: “I never saw a nigger sold, but dey carried dem from our house and I never seen `em no mo’. . . . Master Carr . . . wuz always tellin’ me he wuz gonna sell me . . . he sold my pa’s fust wife.” **74**

Whippings could be used to divide and create animosity between slaves. “As soon as one slave was whipped, he was given the whip to whip his brother slaves,” Douglass Dorsey remembered, “Very often the lashes would bring blood very soon from the already lacerated skin, but this did not stop the lashing until one received their due number of lashes.” **75** The process of regular whippings could still be recalled vividly in the minds of former slaves years later. “The whipping was done with sticks and a whip called the “cat o’ nine tails,” meaning every lick meant nine,” Charles Coates recalled, “the “cat o’ nine tails” was a whip of nine straps attached to a stick; the straps were perforated so that everywhere the hole in the strap fell on the flesh a blister was left.”

Often when slaves were lashed, they were hung by their thumbs until their toes were barely touching the floor as they were whipped on their bare backs with the “cat o’ nine tails.” Coates depicted the device used for this purpose:

“On the Hall plantation there was a contraption, similar to a gallows, where the slaves were suspended and whipped. At the top of this device were blocks of wood with chains run through holes and high enough that a slave when tied to the chains by his fingers would barely touch the ground with his toes. This was done so that the slave could not shout or twist his body while being whipped. The whipping was prolonged until the body of the slave covered with welts and blood trickled down his naked body. Women were treated in the same manner, and a pregnant woman received no more leniency than did a man. Very often after a severe flogging a slave's body was treated to a bath of water containing salt and pepper so that the pain would be more lasting and aggravated.” **76**

Mama Duck, an aged ex-slave from Tampa, depicted a similar process for harshly punishing insubordinate or fugitive slaves:

“But dey be some niggahs he whip good an' hard. If dey sass back, er try t' run away, he mek 'em cross dey han's lak dis; den he pull 'em up, so dey toes jes' tetch de ground'; den he smack 'em crost de back an' rump wid a big wood paddle, fixed full o' holes. Know what dem holes be for? Ev'y hole mek a blister. Den he mek 'em lay down on de groun', whilst he bus' all dem blisters wid a rawhide whip.” **77**

Another source of torture was the slave master's children. A sense of superiority was instilled in privileged white youth from the moment they were born, especially if they were to inherit their parent's estates one day. They viewed the blacks as simple playthings and toys for their amusement, to be abused and discarded as they saw fit. Slave runaways had more to fear than just slave patrols. The slave-owner's sons would go “nigger hunting” around the plantations, “and nothing, not even murder was too horrible for them to do to slaves caught without passes,” according to one former slave, “They justified their fiendish acts by saying the ‘nigger tried to run away when told to stop.’” **78**

Starvation was an acceptable punishment for various forms of insubordination. Some slaves who didn't complete their tasks were locked in a room for several days at a

time without food or water. If a slave left the plantation without a written pass of approval they were whipped with a “raw hide” and starved. But this was the least of the slave’s worries if they were caught illegally moving outside the plantation. The slaves feared most the patrol bands in search of runaway slaves or slaves without a pass. The patrollers were infamous for handing out severe whippings, killing many captive slaves. “Sometimes the young men on the plantation would slip away to visit a girl on another plantation,” Douglas Dorsey recalled, “If they were caught by the "Patrols" while on these visits they would be lashed on the bare backs as a penalty for this offense.” **79**

Louis Napoleon also recalled that if slaves were caught “going off without a permit from the master,” patrols would whip them with a “raw hide.” **80** Shack Thomas recalled that the patrols during the Civil War “gave him a lot of trouble every time he didn’t have a pass to leave.” **81** Florida Clayton recalled as a youth under slavery the “nigger hunters” and “nigger stealers” that specialized in snatching up fugitive slaves with their trained bloodhounds. Clayton recalled her parents warning her and her siblings to “go in someone’s yard whenever they saw these men with their dogs lest the ferocious animals tear them to pieces.” There used to be a wagon that would come to Tallahassee at regular intervals and camp in some secluded spot. The slave children, attracted by the old wagon, would go near it out of curiosity. But the parents always warned the children that the “Dry Head and Bloody Bones,” a ghost that didn’t like children, was in that wagon. Clayton learned years later that the driver of the wagon was actually a slave-stealer and would regularly kidnap slave children to sell them on the Georgia slave market. **82**

Most of the time slave-catcher gangs were comprised of poor crackers hired to hunt down slaves for a reward. But sometimes owners trained their own dogs to go after fugitives. Henry Maxwell narrated how his master trained hounds to “discipline” his slaves:

“He had a Negro youth hide in a tree some distance away, and then he turned the pack loose to follow him. One day he released the bloodhounds too soon, and they soon overtook the boy and tore him to pieces. When the youth's mother heard of the atrocity, she burst into tears which were only silenced by the threats of her owner to set the dogs on her.” **83**

D.N. Moxley, the overseer of the El Destino plantation in Leon County, justified his “Large Flogings” because “the Mill hands don’t get to work before an hour be sun [after sun rise] some mornings, and negroes in this disposition, if they negroes around

them Ideling why they want to doe so two.” **84** Margrett Nickerson recalled a fellow slave beaten for being late to work at sunrise:

“Well the horn would blow every morning for you to git up and go right to work; when the sun ris' if you were not in the field working, you would be whipped with whips and leather straps. I 'member Aunt Beaty was beat until she could hardly get along but I can' 'member what for but do know she had to work along till she got better.” **85**

Administering punishment on slaves became a creative practice in itself. In Florida, a brand of punishment called “buck and gag” was devised to punish fugitive slaves, consisting of a captured fugitive slave being gagged and tied in a squatting position to be left out in the afternoon sun for hours on end. **86** Philemon Bliss detailed the nature of a punishment called “the stocks” he observed while traveling in Tallahassee:

“A planter, a professor of religion, in conversation upon the universality of whipping, remarked that "a planter in G—, who had whipped a great deal, at length got tired of it, and invented the following *excellent* method of punishment, which I saw practised while I was paying him a visit. The negro was placed in a sitting position, with his hands made fast above his head, and feet in the stocks, so that he could not move any part of the body. The master retired, intending to leave him till morning, but we were awakened in the night by the groans of the negro, which were so doleful that we feared he was dying. We went to him, and found him covered with a cold sweat, and almost gone. He could not have lived an hour longer. Mr. — found the 'stocks' such an effective punishment, that it almost superseded the whip.” **87**

If a large group of slaves escaped together, masters would attach an interlinked chain to the escapees for months on end accompanied by heavy iron-spiked collars around their necks. An English traveler in Tallahassee recalled:

“At Tallahassee I saw in the streets, in charge of a ruffianly-looking fellow, two negroes, with heavy iron collars round their necks. These were captured run-aways; the collars, which must have weighed seven or ten pounds, had spikes projecting on



either side. One of the poor creatures had hold of the spikes as he walked along to ease the load that pressed painfully on his shoulders.” **88**

Margrett Nickerson’s recollection was similar:

“Some would be cot and when dey ketched em dey put bells on em; fust dey would put a iron ban' 'round dey neck and anuder one 'round de waist and rivet um tegether down de back; de bell would hang on de ban' round de neck so dat it would ring when de slave walked and den dey wouldn' git 'way. Some uv dem wore dese bells three and four mont'n and when dey time wuz up dey would take em off 'em.” **89**

Becoming literate, a common form of slave resistance, would often generate severe reprisal. Literate slaves could forge passes and learn of current events by reading newspapers. They were generally more disposed to run away than their fellow illiterate slaves. Nickerson recalled the severe beatings that a fellow slave on her plantation received after the whites found out he was literate:

“Dere wuz Uncle George Bull, he could read and write and, chile, de white folks didn't lak no nigger whut could read and write. Carr's wife Miss Jane useter teach us Sunday School but she did not 'low us to tech a book wid us hands. So dey useter jes take uncle George Bull and beat him fur nothin; dey would beat him and take him to de lake and put him on a log and shev him in de lake, but he always swimmid out. When dey didn' do dat dey would beat him tel de blood run outen him and den trow him in de ditch in de field and kivver him up wid dirt, head and years and den stick a stick up at his haid. I wuz a water toter and had stood and seen um do him dat way more'n once and I stood and looked at um tel dey went 'way to de other rows and den I grabbed de dirt ofen him and he'd bresh de dirt off and say 'tank yo', git his hoe and go on back to work. Dey beat him lak dat and he didn' do a thin' to git dat sort uf treatment.” **90**

Owner’s children were sometimes taught a brutal lesson about the inferior status of slave children. Douglas Dorsey recalled the brutal punishment his mistress administered after discovering her son had taught him to read and write:

“Young Douglas had the task each morning of carrying the Matair children's books to school. Willie, a boy of eight would teach Douglas what he learned in school, finally Douglas learned the alphabet and numbers. In some way Mrs. Matair learned that Douglas was learning to read and write. One morning after breakfast she called her son Willie to the dining room where she was seated and then sent for Douglas to come there too. She then took a quill pen the kind used at that time, and began writing the alphabet and numerals as far as ten. Holding the paper up to Douglas, she asked him if he knew what they were; he proudly answered in the affirmative, not suspecting anything. She then asked him to name the letters and numerals, which he did, she then asked him to write them, which he did. When he reached the number ten, very proud of his learning, she struck him a heavy blow across the face, saying to him "If I ever catch you making another figure anywhere I'll cut off your right arm." Naturally Douglas and also her son Willie were much surprised as each thought what had been done was quite an achievement. She then called Mariah, the cook to bring a rope and tying the two of them to the old colonial post on the front porch, she took a chair and sat between the two, whipping them on their naked backs for such a time, that for two weeks their clothes stuck to their backs on the lacerated flesh.” **91**

Although brutal treatment varied between owners, Rev. Squires Jackson, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, noted how institutional slavery did not simply depend on the kindness of the owner, for “even the best masters in slavery couldn't be as good as the worst person in freedom.” **92** It seems that slaves had great insight to the difference between individual actions and institutions. The problem did not solely reside in the master's behavior, but in the exploitative, oppressive system of human bondage. Colonel Thomas Higginson recorded similar feelings among the runaway slaves from Florida in his Civil War army camp:

“I never heard one speak of the masters except as natural enemies. Yet they were perfectly discriminating as to individuals; many of them claimed to have had kind owners, and some expressed great gratitude to them for particular favors received. It was not the individuals, but the ownership, of which they complained. That they saw to be a wrong which no special kindnesses could right.” **93**

## Religion

Religion served as a common battleground between white oversight and slave autonomy. Charlotte Mitchell Martin, a slave on Judge Wilkerson's plantation in Madison County, recalled that "Wilkerson was very cruel and held them in constant fear of him." Deprived of any religious meetings or any other kind of meetings, Charlotte recalled that the slaves on the plantation "frequently met in secret to conduct religious services." When they were caught, Wilkerson had the "instigators" severely whipped. Charlotte sadly recollected how her older brother was whipped to death for participating in one of these secret ceremonies, noting "this cruel act halted the secret religious services." Unsupervised religious assemblies compromised the master's control of his chattel. White-controlled religious sermons were often little more than exhortations for slaves to obey their masters. Margrett Nickerson recalled: "We had church wid de white preachers and dey tole us to mind our masters and missus and we would be saved; if not, dey said we wouldn'. Dey never tole us nothin' 'bout Jesus." Suggesting a general lack of enthusiasm with the master's religion, Nickerson added: "On Sunday after workin' hard all de week dey would lay down to sleep and be so tired; soon ez yo' git sleep, de overseer would come an' wake you up an' make you go to church." **94**

On a similar note, Douglas Dorsey, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, recollected that the primary lesson of white churches was to have no other god than his master or mistresses. The minister often preached: "we cannot see the other God, but you can see your master and mistress." But after the services, Dorsey recalled: "the driver's wife who could read and write a little would tell them that what the minister said 'was all lies.'" Literacy provided slaves with the ability to dissect the white preacher's claims and withstand the master's brand of false Christianity. Suggesting this, Bolden Hall recalled that his Jefferson County master Thomas Lenton would "see that they received no educational training, but did not interfere with their religious quest." Hall recalled that slaves would normally attend church services with their master to hear the white preacher. But occasionally, a black preacher was called in to address the slaves, "instructing them to obey their masters and mistresses at all times." **95**

Most slaves were not even granted the luxury of a black preacher. Charles Coates recalled only hearing the minister preaching from outside the church and being forced to guard the master's wagon in the surrounding churchyard while the whites held their religious services inside. When he and some others slaves requested that the master let them hold church services:

“A white Preacher was called in and he would preach to them not to steal, lie or run away and "be sure and git all dem weeds outen dat corn in de field and your master will think a heap of you." Charles does not remember anything else the preacher told them about God. They learned more about God when they sat outside the church waiting to drive their masters and family back home.” **96**

While Christianity was used to pacify and instill docility in the slave force, Floridian slaves held to the egalitarian notion that all Christians were equal before God. Mary Minus Biddle recalled attending the “white folk’s church” every Sunday, where they were seated in the rear. The white minister would rise and exhort the slaves to “mind your masters, you owe them your respect.” Biddle recalled: “An old Christian slave who perceived things differently could sometimes be heard to mumble, ‘Yeah, wese jest as good as deys is only deys white and we's black, huh.’ She dare not let the whites hear this.” In response to these farcical services, “meetin's were held in a slave cabin where some ‘inspired’ slave led the services.” **97** Groups of slaves under the close vigilance of whites simply had to cope with individual petitions and supplications to God for freedom. As Squires Jackson, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, said: “nothing could stop those silent songs of labor and prayers for freedom.” **98**

Outside of the master’s supervision, these secret religious services were of an entirely different mold than the white church. Union General Oliver Otis Howard recalled an account from a military official in Florida of a secret religious service held among a group of slaves:

“One of our generals in this city told me the other day that many years ago in Florida he had been outside of many of the cabins of the negroes and heard them night after night sending up petitions to God for their freedom. He said he believed then that those prayers were registered in heaven, and that sooner or later these people would be free. Now, certainly, taking into consideration what I have seen and what I have heard, I believe there will be a great body of negroes in heaven; and in spite of it, I want to go there, and if we can carry out the principle of love to one another, we may all go there. If we cannot carry it out, those men whose bosoms are not big enough, or broad enough, to take in that principle will never be likely to go there!” **99**

Carrying on unauthorized prayer meetings or services compromised planter authority and was met with harsh reprisal. East Floridian planter James M. Dancy

recalled his father's reaction after discovering their Northern white teacher leading the slaves in a prayer meeting one night:

“One night my father was awakened by loud singing and by the voice of some one leading in prayer out at the servant's quarters. He went out and found our teacher, Mr. Benjamin W. Thompson, having a prayer meeting with the servants. This was more than my father's hot Southern blood could stand. He broke up the meeting. Next morning at breakfast he informed the young man that he could pack up his belongings and leave.” **100**

Few slaves believed that institutional slavery was necessary to impose or maintain Christian religious teachings or values. To the contrary, many slaves actually saw slavery as an impediment to true Christian practice. Fredrika Bremer, a European traveler, recalled a compelling conversation with an Afro-Cuban overseer on one East Florida plantation arguing against the conventional planter wisdom that slavery was necessary to spread Christianity to “uncivilized” Africans:

“I addressed him, saying, "You have come hither from Africa?" He replied, “Yes; that he had been smuggled hither from Cuba many years ago. He was now overseer on a plantation, and was very well off. He was a Christian, and seemed pleased to be so. He spoke very sensibly and cheerfully, and had a good, open countenance. "You do not wish to return to Africa?" said I. "Oh yes, Missis; oh yes, that I do!" replied he, “there I should be still better off." "But people often kill one another there," remonstrated I. "Oh, but nobody troubles themselves about that. And there are a great many good people who live there at peace." "But look here, my friend," said Colonel Mac I., who is a strong Calvinist, "if you had remained in Africa, you would not have become a Christian as you now are, and then the devil, in the end, would have had you!" The negro laughed, looked down, shook his head, and twisted round his cap which he had in his hand, and at length exclaimed, again looking up with an expression of humor and inventive acuteness, "Now, Massa, look'ee here! The Gospel is now being preached over the whole of Africa, and if I had remained there, what was to hinder me from being one who heard it as well there as here?" To this there was no reply to be made, and the sensible, good-tempered negro had the last word.” **101**

While Margrett Nickerson and many others abhorred church attendance on Sunday after a long week's work, others found Sundays to be advantageous. Louis Napoleon recalled that Sundays were the exception to needing a pass when traveling outside the plantation: "On Sundays the religious slaves were allowed to visit other plantations where religious services were being held without having to go through the matter of having a permit." **102**

Black ministers varied on their level of deference to whites. An ex-slave recalled how the black preacher was simply forced to act as the "peacemaker and mouthpiece for the master, so they were told to be subservient to their masters in order to enter the Kingdom of God." In response to this obvious façade: "the slaves held secret meetings and had praying grounds where they met a few at a time to pray for better things." **103** Black preachers were often of a different mold than their flock. Louis Napoleon remembered that a literate, free black itinerant preacher named Father James Page would travel to the plantation once a month to read the Bible and to preach and sing. Page was an exception though, given that fears of free black-slave interaction were high and free black or abolitionist ministers were often looked at with considerable suspicion. **104**

Amanda McCray, an ex-slave from Madison County, recalled that slaves on her plantation received services from a black minister who traveled to various plantations in the neighborhood: "He was not obliged to do hard menial labors and went about the plantation 'all dressed up' in a frock coat and store-bought shoes." But contrary to Napoleon, McCray recalled that liberation was the main lesson of his sermons: "It was from this minister that they first heard of the Civil War. He held whispered prayers for the success of the Union soldiers, not because freedom was so desirable to them but for other slaves who were treated so cruelly. There was a praying ground where 'the grass never had a chancet ter grow fer the troubled knees that kept it crushed down.'" **105**

Religion sometimes served as an outlet for slave organization and insubordination. Although James Page had gained the trust of Leon County slaveholders, he eventually became a scapegoat for slave unrest. In 1854, D.N. Moxley, overseer of George N. Jones' Tallahassee plantation, complained to Jones that Page's sermons had made the slaves unruly. When several of the slaves ran away or refused to work, Moxley concluded: "I have heard since I came to town that Jim Page and his crew bin the cass of all the fuss." Jones banned Page from preaching on his plantations. **106**

Slave-owners selected their preachers carefully, worried about Northern ministers with abolitionist sympathies preaching to their slaves. Rev. Simon Peter Richardson, a white Methodist preacher of the Florida Conference from 1845 to 1865, found that when he reached Key West "the council and citizens generally had decided

that I should not preach to the negroes, and to so inform me. They had some trouble with the negroes and abolition preachers from the North who came to the island for their health.” **107**

Famous Florida planter Zephaniah Kingsley found that at one point his slaves had come to completely disregard his authority under the leadership of a black preacher:

“But my object in this long digression is to show the danger and hurtful tendency of superstition (by some called religion) among negroes, whose ignorance and want of rationality rendered them fit subjects to work upon. I afterwards purchased more new negroes. A man, calling himself a minister, got among them. It was now sinful to dance, work their corn, or catch fish, on a Sunday; or to eat cat fish, because they had no scales; and if they did, they were to go to a place where they would be tormented with fire and brimstone to all eternity! They became poor, ragged, hungry, and disconsolate: to steal from me was only to do justice—to take what belonged to them because I kept them in unjust bondage; that all pastime or pleasure in this iniquitous world was sinful; that this was only a place of sorrow and repentance, and the sooner they were out of it the better; that they would then go to a good country, where they would experience no want of any thing, and have no work nor cruel taskmaster, for that God was merciful, and would pardon any sin they committed; only it was necessary to pray and ask forgiveness, and have prayer meetings, and contribute what they could to the church, &c.

They accordingly formed private societies under church regulations, where all were brothers and sisters... They had private nightly meetings, once or twice a week, with abundance of preaching and praying, (for they all exhorted, men as well as women) with an ample entertainment from my hogs, it was no sin to steal for the church, the elders of which held it right to break open my corn house, and provide amply for the meeting; so that, finally, myself and the overseer became completely divested of all authority over the negroes. The latter even went so far as to consult the head men of the church whether or not, according to religion, my orders ought to be obeyed! Severity had no effect; it only made it worse; and I really believe that, in several instances, sick children were allowed to die, because the parents thought conscientiously that it was meritorious to transfer their offspring from a miserable and wicked world to a happy country, where they were in hopes of soon joining them!” **108**

Slaves held a far more egalitarian conception of Christianity. When masters would not allow the Bible to be read aloud, they had in mind the books like Exodus that spoke of liberation for oppressed slaves. However, they made a certain exception to read the Pauline epistles that justified slavery. Howard Thurman's grandmother had been born a slave on a plantation in Marion County, Florida up until emancipation. Since she was illiterate, Howard always read the Bible aloud to her, but she never allowed him to read the Pauline epistles. Later into his life, he inquired his grandmother on why this was. On that fateful day, the rest of Thurman's activist life would be determined on what his grandmother said. Thurman said, "What she told me I shall never forget":

"During the days of slavery, the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: "Slaves be obedient to them that are your masters...as unto Christ." Then he would go onto show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible." **109**

### **Not Quite Slaves, Not Quite Citizens: Free Blacks in Florida**

Sandy Cornish was a free black man in Antebellum Florida. There are no holidays for Sandy. There are no streets named after him in his honor, brass monuments to testify of his importance, or stamps with his face on it. Yet Sandy was a representation of success when success was impossible. Of freedom when freedom was unattainable. Of respect when his people were mostly kept degraded and marginalized in his community. A Northern visitor in Key West described Sandy as "the strongest man on the island, the richest of the negroes, the best farmer here, and with a history as romantic as that of any Indian whom song and story have combined to make famous." **110** In a time when his people were mostly deprived of any form of property, Sandy cultivated the best farm in Key West. A white Key Westerner said that Sandy had "the best fruit grove and garden on the island." **111** Yet his achievements were not to be solely enjoyed as he strived to bring the rest of his community up with him. The same resident pointed this out, "To Sandy is due largely the establishment of the African Methodist church, where he



frequently preached, in a voice that could be heard for blocks.” **112** A visitor to Sandy’s home claimed that he advanced 1,500 dollars for the building of the church. **113**

The African Methodist Episcopal Church in Florida was a means of political organization and religious independence for blacks following the Civil War. The AME Church strongly encouraged its largely black membership to create homesteads for themselves and achieve success independent from their former masters. As former slaves in Florida were forced back into sharecropping out of necessity, they exhaustingly endeavored to take up their own lands in the terrible acres offered in the Homestead Act. Sandy’s example gave inspiration to others who endlessly endeavored to labor independent of whites. By all means, Sandy should have been enslaved for many years, freed following the Civil War, forced to labor on a plot of land under a sharecropping contract with his former master, and caught in an endless cycle of debt from which there was little escape. But his story is not meant to be a patronizing example offered by some pretentious white man with the underlying implication that most black nowadays are lazy for lacking prosperity while this black man achieved success against every single obstacle imaginable. Sandy was a rare example and his foremost fight was to achieve his freedom and independence from whites. The white supremacist system at that time cannot claim credit for Sandy’s prosperity anymore than the white supremacist system now could shirk the blame for mass black impoverishment. Plus Sandy’s strenuous efforts to build up his own land were based on the widely known fact among blacks at the time that they would never be free as long as they labored under whites.

There are two competing narratives regarding Sandy’s early history. Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase and Whitelaw Reid visited Sandy in their travels through the island and both gave a brief synopsis of his history. Chase claimed that Sandy had bought himself out of slavery at Tallahassee for three thousand dollars. After paying the money, he was sold nonetheless. Clearly aware that his mutilation and physical impairment would lessen his value on the slave market, Sandy proceeded to “cut himself desperately fingers, muscles above ankle, side,” and declared that he would slice open his abdomen if made a slave again. **114** It now appears that the whites conceded to free Sandy under the guardianship system that free blacks were legally forced to adopt at the time. The money that he earned was held by a Key West slaveholder John B. Baldwin, “with understanding that he was free and owner of his gettings.” **115** It can only be assumed that he became completely independent from any white guardian during the Civil War as Chase’s account failed to mention any sort of guardian still in place. Chase described Sandy and his plantation, “farm or orchard or garden of 19 acres...has all sorts of trees & fruits-is man of property.” **116**

Reid's far more detailed narrative of Sandy's early history has some contrasting aspects to Chase's account. Reid claimed that Sandy was a native of Maryland rather than Florida. He had purchased himself for precisely 3,200 dollars but had actually earned and paid over the required amount of money for manumission. After achieving his freedom, he emigrated down to Florida. He found employment on the railroad and began acquiring a decent amount of money until his freedom became compromised. His house burned down along with his freedom papers inside. Shortly thereafter, a group of white slave raiders made an attempt to seize him, sell him in the New Orleans market, and pocket the proceeds. Reid relays what happened next:

“He frustrated their attempt by whipping the whole party of six; then hearing that they were to be re-enforced and were to try it again, he deliberately proceeded to the public square, accompanied by his wife, cut the muscles of his ankle joint, plunged a knife into the hip joint on the other side, and then, sinking down on a wheel-barrow, finished the work by chopping off with a hatchet the fingers of his left hand! Meanwhile, an awe-struck crowd of white men gathered around, but made no attempt at interference. Finally, brandishing the bloody knife, Sandie shouted to the crowd that if they persisted in their effort to sell a free man into slavery after he had once, at an extortionate price, bought himself out of it, his right arm was yet strong, and he had one blow reserved, after which they were welcome to sell him for whatever he would bring.” **117**

Reid had called Sandy's farm the “main feature” of Key West. Nothing testified more to Sandy's ingenuity than the fact that most islanders had believed that it was impossible to cultivate the island's stony ground until he had come along and done so. Reid vividly described his plantation:

“Ripe sapidillos hung from the trees; and a particularly large "sour-sop" was pointed out as specially intended for our dinner. He had a little patch of tobacco; green cocoanuts rested at the tops of the palm-like stems, and tamarinds were abundant; the African cayenne pepper berry was hanging on little bushes, and one or two of the party, who had been promiscuously experimenting on Sandie's fruit, came to grief when they reached it, and were heard complaining that their "mouths were on fire." Plucking two or three berries of another kind, Sandie handed them to the Chief Justice. "Take dem home and plant 'em in your garden, and you'll hab you own coffee afta while." "But coffee won't grow, Sandie, where I live." "Don't know bout

dat, sah. Dat's just what dey told me heah; but you see it does. I didn't know no reason why it shouldn't, and so I try. Now, you just try, too!" **118**

Being a successful and independent free black man, Sandy Cornish practically became a tourist attraction to Key West travelers. In March 1864, another Federal official, John Milton Hay, private secretary and assistant to Abraham Lincoln, visited Key West during the war, making time to “go out to see a ‘popular nigger’ named Sandy.” Sandy talked to Hay “mostly about his influential friends. ‘Colonels and Captains and them things.’” Although Sandy had befriended powerful Federal officers, such as Reid and Chase, he still faced persistent harassment and threats from local whites. When Hay’s companion asked Sandy “if he were bothered,” Sandy recalled angrily: “No! No! not sence I broke dat feller's jaw in tree pieces. I b'lieve he was a rebel -- a passel of 'em, -- a dozen, sah, come to debbil me; dey tore down my fence panels, and I went out to see. I ain't feared o' nobody. But a man got to be lively when he's fighting a passel, it's a busy time ob de year den. I hit one ob 'em and he straightened out like a log; broke his jaw in tree pieces; and de rest, dey run. I nebber complains; de officers, dey got dere hands full; mustn't trouble bout every little tittle. I's a darkey sort ob person. I takes off hat to everybody; but dey got to luff me alone.” **119** Cornish essentially summarized the hopes, desires, and tactics of emancipated slaves following the war – to prosper, to live independent from whites, and for whites to leave them alone and let them enjoy their rights as free citizens, while using self-defense if they failed to do so.

In a brief synopsis, Sandy had earned the money to pay for manumission – a difficult task for any slave who was actually permitted to do so. After doing so, his freedom was compromised in one way or another – either from his former master or from a thieving band of slave raiders. In order to ensure the whites he would be worthless as their human property, he desperately mutilated himself and significantly decreased his monetary value to maintain his freedom. From there, he managed to accumulate a decent amount of money and build up his own plantation from mostly infertile soil with the barest means of doing so. He created the most successful farm on the island of Key West and completely achieved his freedom by asserting his independence from whites, while using self-defense against local whites who harassed him. Through the money he accumulated, he supported the establishment of an AME Church in 1865 as his newly freed counterparts began asserting their religious independence. Sandy’s example is one that can live on to this day as inspiration for blacks who are still struggling to achieve independence and freedom in a white dominated society. Although it’s doubtful that any

plaques will ever be awarded in commemoration of his legacy or parks named after him, at the very least anybody who reads this can now appreciate his legacy and implications of his extraordinary life.

Florida had a unique experience in the Antebellum South. Not only did the territory carry a baggage of tolerance for free blacks from the Spanish colonial period, but additionally held around a thousand black Seminole maroons until 1838. The percentage of blacks in Florida who were free, those who were either officially free or free in Seminole territory, probably outranked all of the other Southern states. Thus Florida slavers grew to be the some of the most paranoid Southerners regarding potential “agitators” who were allegedly “inciting” slave insurrection. Floridian slaves, having contacts and relations with both black Seminoles and free blacks, saw numerous examples of freedom around them and could easily contrast their own situation with that of liberated blacks. White Floridians, aware of this, sought to restrict or outlaw contact between free blacks and slaves by restricting their rights, numbers, and liberty. What was more difficult to prohibit or illegalize was the bond between free blacks and black Seminole maroons. In 1841, Governor Reid complained that the legal code for slaves and free blacks was inadequate because “it does not sufficiently provide for the punishment of those who may aid and consort with the Indian Enemy.” **120**

From an early time under Spanish rule, going back to the late seventeenth century, free blacks, natives, and fugitive slaves established ties and connections as allies and subjects of the Spanish Crown. St. Augustine and Pensacola organized them into marauding guerilla bands and regiments in the defense of Spanish Florida and to harass the British Carolinas. From the 1680’s to the end of the first Spanish colonial period in 1763, free blacks, fugitive slaves, and natives cooperated in liberating slaves, destroying Carolinian plantations, and defending St. Augustine. During the Muskogee State (1800-1803), free blacks fought against Spanish Florida with the Muskogee Army, which comprised of whites, natives, maroons, and fugitive slaves. During the Patriot invasion of 1812, the free black militias, Seminoles, black Seminoles, and newly freed slaves cooperatively defended St. Augustine and temporarily delayed the US annexation of Florida from Spain, all seeing it in their common interest to prevent the expansion of the Antebellum South into the province. Even following US acquisition and the beginning of the Antebellum era in Florida, Seminoles and their black allies frequently visited St. Augustine for trading purposes, where most free blacks continued to inhabit following US annexation. The black Seminoles remained knowledgeable of the city and maintained intimate connections with its free black inhabitants. **121** As hostilities broke out, the white residents of St. Augustine quickly found that almost all of the arms and

ammunition of the city had been looted by the Seminoles with the assistance of the free blacks and urban slaves. **122** The cooperation between the Seminoles, black Seminoles, free blacks, and plantation and urban slaves shows that this uprising was a general insurrection of people of color against the white settlers of Florida. While free blacks of St. Augustine had the most to lose from their involvement in the uprising, they still harbored feelings of solidarity for their similarly oppressed allies.

On January 23, 1837, the St. Augustine city council passed an ordinance to prevent the selling of ammunition to slaves and free blacks. **123** Two respected free blacks, Randal Irvin and Stephen Meritt, were indicted at the Superior Court “for treason against the United States, in supplying the Seminole Indians with provisions and ammunition.” They were arraigned and pleaded not guilty. Although they were never convicted of the charges, they were temporarily held into custody and banished from St. John’s County to protect them from the possible reprisal of its white residents. **124**

The free black population in Florida never numbered over 932, disregarding the black Seminoles. **125** Nearly all of them could attribute their freedom to the liberal laws of manumission under Spanish rule. Slaves looked nostalgically to the Spanish rule of the past when freedom was a real legal opportunity. “I do not believe there have been five slaves freed in Florida since its cession to the United States,” reported Philemon Bliss, an Ohio correspondent in Florida, “The Spanish laws favored emancipation, but as one old negro expressed it, ‘Nobody gets free since Spanish times.’” Bliss added: “I mentioned to one negro that I had heard of a man in East Florida who allowed his slaves wages, and when they amounted to his price and interest, the slaves were free; says he, ‘that man was no American, I reckon. He must have been a Yankee or a Spaniard.’” **126**

The demographics of free blacks and slaves in Antebellum Florida reflected the establishment of chattel slavery in Florida following its acquisition. Half-white blacks, the free mulattos under Spanish rule, constituted a strongly disproportionate majority of the free black population. By 1850, mulattoes comprised 72% of the free black population while only 8.5 percent of the slave population. **127** The Florida government strongly discouraged the presence and migration of free blacks in the territory. The Florida territorial legislature, which already feared the black Seminole threat to slavery on the Florida frontier, passed some of the toughest, most restrictive legislation against free blacks in the South. This resulted in a very minimal free black population outside of those who had thrived under Spanish rule. Their presence was virtual non-existent outside of the Spanish cities of Pensacola and St. Augustine. If a free black was accidentally seized as a slave, the burden was on them to prove their freedom, otherwise they would be sold back into slavery. This meant that extreme vigilance was required on

their part as they were only one little slip up away from being returned to slavery. The ease at which this could occur is exemplified by the narrative of Florida Clayton, who had grown up a free black in Tallahassee but had to constantly watch out for the “nigger hunters” and “nigger stealers” kidnapping black children. **128**

If a free black was indebted or unable to pay the inflated fines for a misdemeanor, they were sold into temporary servitude. In 1827, the legislative council made it illegal for any free black to emigrate on their own or be brought into the territory. Offenders were to be sold to the highest bidder for a year’s service if they couldn’t afford the five hundred dollar fine. **129** In 1828, the legislature declared: “riots, routs and unlawful assemblies, quarrels, lighting, trespasses and seditious speeches by free negroes and mulattoes, or slave or slaves,” were subject to a maximum twenty dollar fine or thirty-nine lashes. Repressive slave legislation targeted free blacks, poor whites, and abolitionists, who were the typical scapegoats for slave unrest. Free blacks were prohibited from religious gatherings unless they attended worship services held in white churches. Free blacks were forbidden to sell intoxicants to slaves and couldn’t trade with slaves at all on Sundays. **130**

Reflecting fears of abolitionists, the 1828 Florida legislature also prohibited whites from associating with slaves or free blacks: “That if any white person shall at any time be found in company with slaves, free negroes or mulattoes, at any unlawful meeting or assembly, participating with them in their unlawful acts,” they would be fined twenty dollars and receive thirty-nine lashes. **131** Edward Lycurgas narrated the treatment that his father received as a free black man prior to the Civil War: “They had not been allowed to associate with slaves for fear they might engender them in their desire to be free. The freedmen bore the brunt of the white man’s suspicion whenever there was a slave uprising. They were always accusing them of being instigators.” **132**

Free blacks often purchased and liberated slaves for sentimental reasons. Some even went so far as to serve for a temporary period of bondage in order to win the emancipation of their loved ones. Samuel Smalls, an ex-slave from Suwannee County, recalled his father Cato Smith, a free black who left from Connecticut and eventually found himself as an overseer on a Florida plantation. On a nearby plantation that Smith occasionally visited, he encountered a young woman whom he was greatly attracted to and wished to marry. As he was free and she was enslaved, he had to request her owner to let them marry. Her master agreed but only if Smith would “work out” the costs: “He was informed that this would amount to seven years of work on the plantation, naturally without pay.” He submitted to the terms of agreement and labored without pay for the entirety of seven years. However, he was able to accumulate enough money over the

period of his service to purchase a small farm afterwards. But adversity kicked in and he and his family eventually found themselves back in bondage. Fortunately for his family, Emancipation was only several years down the road. **133**

A free black man John Jenkins from Hamilton, Ontario purchased his daughter from Florida Governor Richard K. Call. It's assumed that Jenkins was a free black man who married one of Call's slaves. This explains his daughter's status as a slave because a child of a free black man and a woman slave would legally be Call's property. **134**

Edward Lycurgas narrated a story of his father, a free black man, who traveled to St. Augustine and witnessed the brutality of Florida's slave markets firsthand:

“Watched em barter off po niggers lake dey was hogs. Whole families sold together and some was split – mother gone to one marster and father and children gone to others. They'd bring a slave out on the flatforn and open his mouth, pound his chest, make him harden his muscles so the buyer could see what he was gittin'. Young men were called “bucks” and young women “wenches”. The person that offered the best price was de buyer. And dey shore did git rid uf some pretty gals. De always looked so shame and pitiful up on dat stand wid all dem man standing dere lookin' at em wid what dey had on dey minds shinin' in they eyes. One little gal walked up and left her mammy mourning so pitiful cause she had to be sold. Seems like dey all belong in a family where nobody ever was sold. My she was a pretty gal.” **135**

His father told his children that this was how he initially met their mother:

“And dats why your mamma's named Julia stead of Mary Jane or Hannah or somethin' else – She cost me 950.00 dollars and den my own freedom. But she was worth it – every bit of it.” **136**

The Florida legislature implemented numerous measures to subordinate and restrict the liberty of free blacks, precursors to the “black codes” legislated after the Civil War. In day-to-day encounters with free blacks, free blacks did not have the same luxury as white men to “use abusive and provoking language” or lift their hands in opposition to whites. Miscegenation and mixed marriage was completely prohibited under Florida law. A child of mixed parents was to be denied their right to inheritance. A white man who had relations with free blacks was to be fined up to \$1,000 and disqualified from holding political office in the territory, serving jury duty, or testifying in cases with other whites.

**137** All free black males over the age of fifteen were subject to a twenty-five cent head tax, raised to five dollars in 1832. **138** In 1850, a capitulation tax was levied on all free blacks who entered the territory after US acquisition of Florida. Failure to pay this tax was punished with temporary servitude. **139**

The Florida legislature attempted to limit manumission, prohibiting emancipation for a healthy and sane adult slave under the age of forty-five, which was a rare occurrence in itself. Additional legislation required the owner to pay a two hundred dollar forfeiture for every slave emancipated, making manumission even more undesirable for slaveholders. **140** Fearing an outbreak of insurrection, legislative restrictions on free blacks carrying firearms were given primacy. In 1828, the Florida legislature enacted numerous gun control restrictions for free blacks. In 1833, rights for weaponry were completely taken away from free blacks and slaves, with the only exception for defense against Seminole raids. **141**

There was no semblance of political or legal rights for free blacks. They were denied suffrage, jury duty, and the right to provide evidence or stand as witnesses in cases that involved whites. If a free black witness was found guilty of perjury, they were to have their ears nailed to a post, stand in a pillory for one hour, and receive thirty-nine lashes to their bare back. **142** The death penalty could be applied to free blacks if found guilty of numerous offenses: murder; conspiring to revolt; administering poison; manslaughter; arson; maiming a white person; raping a white woman or child. **143** In 1848, a free black convicted of a felony could be temporarily sold into servitude if they couldn't pay the court expenses. **144** Although free blacks were legally entitled to property ownership, there were many instances when whites denied this right based on race. In one of these instances, a letter from the Florida Land Office protested to the State Secretary of Treasury: "I know of no law of the U. States which prohibits a free negro from purchasing lands, unless there be some express law of the Territory by which they are excluded from purchasing, I perceive no reason why a patent should not be issued." **145**

Throughout the 1840's and 50's, Florida legislation against free blacks became so restrictive that maintaining freedom became almost impossible. Florida was no exception to the increasingly strict slave laws passed throughout the South as a result of growing fears of Northern abolitionism. In 1842, one of the most important legislative acts denying liberty to free blacks was instituted. The Florida legislature stipulated that guardians were to be placed over any free black who was not a free resident of the territory prior to US acquisition. White guardians were granted the full right of master with the fee of only one dollar per person under their certified ownership. An 1856 act



stipulated that a free black without a guardian was forced to pay a ten dollar fee. If any white was convicted of trading with a free black without a guardian they were fined \$100 to \$500. **146** In 1857, the free black community of Pensacola made an “exodus” to Tampico, Mexico to escape the guardianship laws enacted by the Florida legislature. The free black community of Pensacola was largely mulatto, half black and half Spanish. They were a legacy of Spanish Florida when many free blacks prospered, having established a well-respected property owning class over time. This was all wiped away with the guardian laws. The Pensacola *Gazette* reported: “It was a painful sight to see them parting from their friends and native country to seek homes in a foreign land.” **147**

In 1842, all free blacks who had been brought into the territory after February 1832 were ordered to leave the territory or be sold into slavery. **148** Any free black found guilty of vagrancy could be sold into temporary servitude to the highest bidder. **149** An 1858 act provided that free blacks over the age of fourteen could sell themselves into slavery to their choice of master. They were to submit their choice of owner to the county circuit court which, once they approved that the decision was reasonable, commissioned the free black as property of the said-master. **150** This targeted the free blacks who had not left the state according to the 1842 provision, essentially limiting their options to either leave the state or enslave themselves under a given master.

## Chapter 10

# “Renewing the Cry of Bread or Blood”: Class Conflict in Confederate Florida (1860-1865)

Out of the 69 delegates elected to represent the various counties and districts of Florida at the 1861 Tallahassee Secession Convention, 58 of the 62 who voted for secession were slaveholders. Of this large majority bloc, nineteen could be classified as petty-slaveholders, owning ten or less slaves, twenty could be considered the planter elite, owning ten to forty slaves, and nineteen could be classified as the “elite of the elite,” owning forty or more slaves. In contrast, only 5,152 out of 77,746 whites in Florida owned one or more slaves in 1860, a paltry six to seven percent of the population. But even out of the state’s slaveholder class, only twenty-one percent constituted the planter elite owning twenty or more slaves. The vast majority owned five or less. **1** Thus a little more than one percent of the Florida population was represented by fifty percent of the delegates at the state Secession Convention. The fate of Florida was again to be determined by a privileged and powerful minority. In the Convention, the concerns and statements of the delegates specifically addressed and echoed the sentiments of the aristocratic class they represented. John C. McGehee, a staunch secessionist, declared that “slavery is the element of all value, and a destruction of that destroys all that is property.” **2** He feared that the Northern abolitionists and Republicans would “inevitably destroy every vestige of right growing out of property in slaves.” **3** Slavery was acknowledged as the source of elite power.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, nationalist propaganda and excitement filled the air as Florida’s population rallied to fight for the “Confederate cause.” What was little understood at the time was that the greatly espoused “Confederate cause” was the security and prosperity of the aristocratic slaveholder interests that dominated the Florida state government and that the burden of this “cause” was to be shouldered by the poor white majority. Not only were poor whites to disproportionately fight and die for the interests of large slaveholders, but no violation of “property rights” or intrusion on elite profits would be accepted regardless how much it would benefit the general Confederacy. This war was a rich man’s war and Confederate governments were determined to keep it that way. As the war dragged on, the patriotic sentiment that was so widespread at the

start of the war soon began to fade and class conflict at home replaced it. Florida Governor John Milton reported the

“villainous traffic carried on by speculators who have “run the blockade” had excited, by high prices for cotton and the introduction of rum and gin (but no arms or munitions of war), a disposition to make cotton, etc., regardless, perhaps, of ‘the general welfare.’” **4**

Milton himself was firmly positioned amongst the dominant planter class of Florida and the rest of the South. His holdings had steadily expanded to over 7,000 acres of land and 52 slaves by the outbreak of the Civil War. **5** While he urged his fellow slaveholders to plant food crops instead of cotton, he refused to propose any legislation to regulate planting as he believed it would impose upon “rights of property”:

“But candor requires me to say that I am not convinced that in a government like ours the legislative power rightly exists to prescribe what shall or shall not lie planted. If it does exist it should be most discreetly exercised. If the General Assembly of a State has the power to enact a law prohibiting or restricting the planting of cotton in order to support the Army, etc., by raising cereals, why may not the same General Assembly enact a law to prohibit the plowing of horses because useful for cavalry, or mules because necessary for transportation, or oxen because necessary for beef? In a word, why may not they confiscate all rights of property in individuals for the benefit of the Confederate Government?” **6**

Milton urged his fellow statesmen to “studiously guard against the insidious influences of the occasional panics which excite the public mind and engender what is termed public sentiment.” **7** This meant that Milton advised the Florida legislators to ignore the calls of the general public who wished for large slaveholders to plant food crops to sustain the Florida population and army that were drastically verging on starvation. According to Milton, this would have been violation of “rights of property” while the conscription of the general population was seen as a “necessity,” even though most of the wealthy planters were exempted and permitted to purchase a replacement. **8** While the poor whites had been conscripted, overtaxed, robbed, and impoverished, the Confederate Florida government would not even pass legislation forcing the wealthy planters to contribute to a war fought in their own interests.

Although Milton repeatedly condemned the blockade-runners who ran necessities and goods out of Florida to be traded abroad, he never took the necessary measures that could have softened their impact. An editorial criticized Milton for failure to place price caps on basic necessities as other Confederate states had:

“While the Governors of other States are exerting and exercising themselves to secure a supply of Salt for the soldiers’ wives and destitute poor, what is Governor Milton doing in this respect? There is none in the city for retail, and few families are able to buy a bushel at a time at the present rates. This is an important inquiry, and I hope can be answered satisfactorily.” **9**

By March 1863, Florida was the only Confederate state not to have limited cotton acreage by law. Floridians constantly made appeals and petitions to the Governor to pass legislation that would force the planters to grow food crops. The *Florida Sentinel* noted that the continued planting of cotton would be more dangerous than a Federal invasion as “we can contend with bayonets, and even with pestilence, but we cannot contend against famine.” **10** It was difficult for Florida planters to resist the high profits to be made by running cotton and other commodities through the Federal blockade. The highly inflated Confederate currency also deterred planters from selling their crops on the domestic market. Thus they opted for the vastly more lucrative endeavor of blockade-running what were much needed commodities at home. In March 1862, Major General John C. Pemberton arrived to Tallahassee and observed a “disposition to plant cotton in the coming season.” **11** In January 1863, the Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel* observed a dangerous disposition among Florida planters

“to plant less corn and more cotton this year than last. Look at the present prices of meat and bread and only imagine what would be the condition of things if the crop of last year had been divided between corn and cotton. Obviously, the result would have been famine in the land. As it is, meat is almost denied to the poor and even the rich have none to spare. . . . Plant corn, raise provisions, make cloth and the fight will go on.” **12**

A Florida conscript fighting in Virginia wrote to his wife in despair:

“But from all parts of our country where the despoiling invader has never been, where the people know nothing or comparatively of the horrors & wretchedness of the war, come tidings of an overwhelming confidence in early peace and that the planters are going to plant largely of cotten and tobacco. Nothing is so disheartening to the soldier, to the poor man who has left a large & almost helpless family to risk life & lime in the cause of independence, to see those who are permitted to remain out of the army for the purpose of raising provisions, embark in the thoughtless, heartless and most unpatriotic enterprise of planting large cotten & tobacco crops when the country is almost on the verge of famine.” **13**

His warning proved that the wealthy planters had much to fear from their impoverished countrymen:

“Well does the poor soldier know that when a scarcity of provisions occurs, that his dear helpless ones will be the first to suffer, and when it comes to this, the army composed of poor men, can not be kept together and the horrors of the French Revolution, the cry of "Bread or Blood" will be renewed & reciracted with tenfold fury in our own country. A fearful weight of responsibility is resting upon the farmers of the Confederate States. With them rests the fate of our army. If we are not fed and if our soldier's family are not fed, we cannot fight and subjection and all its attendant horrors are ours. In short, the cotten and tobacco planters, if reports are true, are about to strike the most deadly blow that has yet been struck at our independence. May an overruling Providence shield us from the blow.” **14**

Florida's population at home began facing severe destitution. Popular sentiment quickly turned from fears of a Federal invasion to the more pressing concerns of starvation and poverty, contributing highly to a growing discontent with the war and the Confederate regime in power. In late 1862, a Florida citizen wrote a list of complaints to Confederate President Jefferson Davis:

“Here...things look bad enough. The most immediate enemy...is starvation, and unless there can be some changes in the administration of the military authority here the people must suffer. No one will bring wood for fear his boat will be seized; no one corn or meal. Corn meal is \$4.25 per bushel; wood \$15 per cord; and not to be had at that. These are some of our troubles.” **15**

On May 10, 1862, a Federal officer found the residents of Apalachicola in an “almost starving condition.” **16** Governor Milton insisted to a Confederate general that if he were to stop communication with the city of Apalachicola “it will expose to famine nearly 500 loyal citizens who are now suffering for bread.” Governor Milton wrote to the Confederate Secretary of War: “in south Florida families of soldiers in Virginia are threatened with starvation. The state has purchased supplies for them that we cannot get teams to haul. The speculators interested in the blockade are using these teams.” **18** Major C. C. Yonge, Chief Confederate Quartermaster for Florida, informed Governor Milton that food shortages in some areas were acute. He called for measures of relief to these indigent families who were “perilously close to starvation.” **19** In fact, Florida was in far great danger of “being overwhelmed by the want of food and viciated currency than by Lincoln’s Armies.” **20** Mass desertion ensued when poor white Floridian soldiers, who felt more allegiance to their families and farms than patriotic sentiment, received word of the adverse situation back home.

As a result of the dire situation, Floridians angrily lashed out against the wealthy merchants and planters who wished to profit at the expense of the general public. The *Florida Sentinel* harshly criticized the inflated prices that were charged for “all the necessities of life.” The blockade-running and speculation were “certainly responsible for these prices, but other elements must be taken into consideration. The merchant charges that the sin lies at the door of the planter, and the planter in turn lays the evil at the door of the merchant and manufacturer.” The paper warned that soon it “will be traced to its true source and origin and those who are responsible for it will be held to a fearful accountability.” **21** A particular editorial noted that the inflated prices were “legalized theft”:

“Speculation and extortion are the great enemies of the Confederate cause. The rage to run up prices is going to ruin us if anything does. It is impossible to overrate the degree of uncertainty, insecurity and alarm felt by the masses of the people from this cause alone. . . . The unholy thirst for money making seems to render men deaf alike to the voice of public opinion or the calls of patriotism. . . . If, as seems too probable, our people prefer heaping up gains in Treasury notes to their own self-preservation from a cruel, licentious, rapacious, and remorseless foe, the great God himself will and must say to such a people: "THY MONEY PERISH WITH THEE!" **22**

On March 17, 1863, a letter received from the Florida Brigade in Virginia expressed the widespread contempt many soldiers felt for wealthy planters and speculators back home:

“They are tired of war, and who is there that is not? Still they are content to remain to its close if it lasts five years longer, and brave all dangers and hardships; but this they will not do if their friends-friends did I say?-enemies, I mean, plant cotton and starve the army in the field and their families at home. Soldiers don’t like to fight for stay-at-home speculators and extortioners, and I never hear them complain only of the two differences between their sacrifices and sufferings and the ease and comforts of those who are permitted to stay behind and make fortunes.” **23**

On April 12, the Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel* published a fiery letter received from a soldier that harshly condemned the large planters for withholding food:

“I wish to call the attention of the public to some facts in regard to some of the blood-drinkers of Jackson Co., Florida. What I mean by blood-drinkers is this: when separate State action was sprung upon the people, we had a certain class among us who pledged themselves to drink all the blood that was spilt in a war with the North, and I assure you, in but few instances, they could drink all that they have seen, for much the larger portion of them is yet at home and are making close calculations on staying at home and I leave it to the soldiers’ wives and widows to say what they are doing at home. But I will call the attention of the public to an instance of one of these blood-drinkers who has control of an estate in this county. The party owning it is known to very wealthy, and the overseer on this place tells his neighbors that he has more money on hand belonging on said estate than he knows what to do with; and on this plantation is a quantity of corn for sale, and yet, by order of the executor, soldiers’ wives and widows with the ready cash, are turned off to go home and see their children starve while the husband and father either died on the battlefield or is still baring their breast against the storm. These women and children are told that this corn is locked up for better prices, when it is at this time selling for \$2.00 per bushel. Surely, if God does not visit such with a just retribution in due time, the people will. It is also the case of some non-residents who have instructed their overseers not to sell a bushel of corn until those starving women and children are forced to give the last that they have for a bushel of corn to sustain their life.” **24**

A report from Hernando County confirmed that this act of withholding necessary food items from the market was a widespread problem:

“At a meeting of the Board of Country Commissioners of this country on the 9th instant, for the purpose families of soldiers in this country, it was ascertained that the supply of corn within the limits of the county is nearly exhausted, and that there can be very little or no corn purchased anywhere between here and Gainesville; whether from actual scarcity or an indisposition to sell I don't know, but it is generally supposed it is from the latter cause.” **25**

On March 26, 1863, the Impressment Act authorized Confederate agents to appropriate food products and other forms of property that were deemed useful for the war effort at prices arbitrarily fixed by “boards” created by the Confederate War Department and State governments. These fixed prices were substantially less than market prices. **26** Elites were willing to seize the property of poor families if necessary, but would not pass legislation intruding on the “property rights” of wealthy planters. The result of these impressments was the growth of disaffection among Floridians towards the Confederacy. The fact that these agents and commissioners were wealthy men of conscript age produced further demoralization. Governor Milton noted that “if the rich will not fight for their property, the poor will not fight for them.” **27** It was officially recognized the poor were fighting a war for the rich. As a result, Milton urged

“that orders should be immediately issued to conscript and place in military service every impressing agent not in military service, and who if not connected with the Quartermaster or Commissary Department, would be subject to conscription; also that orders shall be issued forbidding interference with cows and calves, or stock not fit for beef, by the officers of the Confederate Government.” **28**

The widespread feeling of apprehension towards the Impressment Act can be seen through a letter from a Florida resident to Jefferson Davis: “...unless there can be some changes in the administration of the military authority here the people must suffer. No one will bring wood for fear his boat will be seized; no one corn or meal...” **29** Milton warned the Confederate Secretary of War that a large number of soldiers were deserting and that “the wave of indignation concerning impressments will drive even



greater numbers into the enemy camp if the evils of the system are not immediately corrected.” **30** He further reported:

“The effect of the impressments made in West Florida was the desertion of a large number of the troops in that part of the State, a portion of whom have joined the enemy. From one company, which was considered the best drilled and most reliable company in West Florida, fifty-two men deserted with their arms, some of whom were known to be brave men, who indignant at the heartless treatment of the rights of citizens, have joined the enemy...The citizens of Florida in many parts of the State are indignant at the necessary abuse of their rights; and I have reason to know that the lawless and wicked conduct of Government agents in this State have produced serious dissatisfaction among the troops from this State in Northwest Georgia and in Virginia, and unless the evils complained of shall be promptly remedied the worst results may reasonably be apprehended.” **31**

Rev. John R. Richards of West Florida desperately informed Milton about the starving conditions of West Floridians as a result of impressments on the part of Confederate agents:

“After my best respect to you as my friend and chief justice of the State of Florida, I avail myself of this opportunity of writing to you a few to ascertain if it is law for these "pressmen" to take the cows from the soldiers' families and leave them to starve. Colonel Coker has just my house with a drove for Marianna of about 200 or 300 head. Some of my neighbors went after him and begged him to give them their milch cows, which he, Mr. Coker, refused to do, and took them on...there are soldiers' families in my neighborhood that the last head of cattle have been taken from them and drove off, and unless this pressing of cows is stooped speedily there won't be a cow left in Calhoun Country. I know of several soldiers' families in this country that haven't had one grain of corn in the last three weeks, nor any likelihood of their getting any in the next three months; their few cows taken away and they left to starve; their husbands slain on the battlefield at Chattanooga.” **32**

Major P.W. White warned of the “deleterious effect upon the Army” if the families of Confederate soldiers continued to “suffer by impressments unnecessarily or illegally made.” **33** Due to these impressments, Richards indicated that opposition in

West Florida to the Confederate government was growing and called for an end to the seizures of necessary items:

“Now, if this is law I should be glad to know it, so I could how to act by the law, for I have had a different notion of the law; and as a sound man, I think this pressing of all the cattle will have a bad end, in my judgment, and I am not all that think so. I think if it could be stopped it would have a good effect on this part of the community.” **34**

A report from Hernando County confirmed this growing opposition:

“The cattle drivers under the orders of Captain McKay, commissary of this department, have stripped the country of every beef steer that they find, from two years old and upward, and are now taking the cows, many of which have been known to have calves, in less than fifteen miles' drive. This is cutting off the only supply of meat we had for soldiers' families, as the supply of pork from various causes-mainly for want of corn to fatten it-is unusually short-so much so that the most fortunate of us will be on less than half allowance. Whatever the exigencies of the case may be, I considered it an outrage upon a community having in their midst as many suffering families as we have to take the cows, the only dependence for milk and beef for the future. In many cases the cows of poor families of soldiers in the Army are taken, as I have been informed.” **35**

It concluded that famine was inevitable if the impressments of cattle continued:

“Does the order to these commissaries authorize them to take the milch cows from the people against their or consent? If so, the country is certainly ruined and a general famine will be the result. Already the soldiers' families are becoming clamorous for meat and are killing people's cows wherever they can get of them.” **36**

On April 16, 1862, the Confederate Conscription Act was signed as the first draft law in US history. One of the few conscript exemptions provided by this act included “one man as agent or overseer on a plantation of twenty negroes, and an additional man for every twenty negroes on two or more plantations within five miles of each other.” **37** The planter was permitted to hire an overseer to serve as a substitute. Governor Milton

noted that a substitute was normally hired for anywhere between five hundred and five thousand dollars. **38** Conscription quickly became the most unpopular act of the Confederate government in Richmond and the most blatant in its class bias. Its provision that allowed the wealthy to hire substitutes and remain at home was the basis from which many would denounce the war as a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.” John S. Preston, Superintendent of the Bureau of Conscription, acknowledged that “Wealthy farmers, enterprising manufacturers, and mechanics were the persons chiefly furnishing substitutes. . . . In Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. . . . from these States came all the complaints of the evils and failures of conscription.” **39**

What substitution told the lower classes of the Southern states was that their lives were not equivalent to the lives of the wealthy, that wealth superseded patriotism. The common propaganda slogans of “state’s rights” and “independence” could not hide the fact that the wealthy were to have all the rights and privileges while the poor were to receive nothing in return for fighting to protect their property. The *Florida Sentinel* declared the conscript law to be a “most arbitrary exercise of doubtful authority” and the exemption law for planters “partial, unjust, and oppressive.” Further stating its unpopularity in the Confederacy: “its repeal and essential modification was loudly called for from the banks of the Potomac to those of Alabama and Apalachicola.” **40** In 1864, a Jacksonville newspaper claimed that “nearly half the soldiers in the Confederate army . . . whose term of service will expire this spring, have not reenlisted, and will not do so. . . . They hold the measure to be unjust, and will suffer no chances of escape to pass unproved.” **41**

Governor Milton himself opposed conscription for more practical reasons as it led to a twenty-to-one proportion of slaves to able-bodied white men capable of bearing arms. He believed this could possibly result in slave insurrection without the much-needed overseers who were hired as substitutes for planters. **42** This was another way of viewing conscription. It left Florida without sufficient numbers of white men to prevent “the increasing disposition on the part of the slaves to go to the enemy.” As the vast majority of male citizens were absent from Florida and fighting the Union throughout the Confederacy, Governor Milton was concerned with the “exposed position of the State geographically” and the “large number of slaves in it.” **43** Milton informed a Confederate general that the conscript act and attempts to enforce it had produced much dissatisfaction among the troops and people of Florida. **44**

One reason for the popular backlash against the conscript act was the drafting of men who were not even physically capable of fighting. Conscription resulted in disaffection, “chiefly because of the order that requires invalids to be brought into the

camp of instruction for examination.” **45** The vast majority of those conscripted were unable to provide any sufficient service for the war effort due to their sickness or disability. They would have provided better service at home taking care of women and children: “The camp of instruction has more the appearance of a camp provided for those afflicted with lameness and disease than a military camp.” **46** This was primarily because a greater number of men who were able to fight could evade the enrolling officers and could resist if any force was used to bring them in. In Washington County, forty men had been enrolled but only three could actually be brought into the camp. **47**

Another reason for disaffection against conscription was that most conscripted soldiers in Florida were forced to serve their duty outside of the state, leaving few at home for protection of the women and children. In response to the Federal occupation of East Florida in early 1862, Governor Milton wrote a letter to Richmond complaining that the “troops had become demoralized and the faith of many citizens in the integrity and ability of the Government impaired” due to the withdrawal of necessary defenses prior to the invasion. **48** Milton also wrote a letter to Richmond, telling the Confederate Government that he had been unable to comply with General Robert E. Lee’s order to call “every available man in Florida into the field” because of food shortages for the soldiers: “Complaint is made to me frequently that the soldiers suffer from hunger.” **49**

The Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel* complained that conscripted Floridians were not allowed to enter regiments of their own state and of their own choice. Men who had been enlisted from Taylor, Madison, and Lafayette Counties were forced to join the Georgia Regulars. Instead of letting these conscripts proceed to the Camp of Instruction near Tallahassee, they were sent to Quincy. The newspaper decried: “If these things be true, it is an outrage upon the right of Floridians, not to be submitted to quietly, though it should be sanctioned by the highest military authority in the district.” **50** General Sam Jones doubted that even half of Florida’s infantry would leave the state if ordered to. **51** General Floyd at Apalachicola wrote to Milton that his companies would not re-enlist “until they have enjoyed the privilege of going home, which seems to have been accorded; and even though they should enlist before doing so, they will still consider a thirty-days' furlough as their right.” **52**

General Pemberton reported that a particular regiment at Apalachicola was in a state of mutiny and refused to leave the state until they received their due pay and were fully satisfied that a sufficient force was left in Florida to protect their families. **53** An officer from the 1<sup>st</sup> Florida Infantry reported: “My men have no shoes; their rations consist of Florida beef and corn. The beef is so poor the men cannot eat... The spirit is in the army in favor of peace. The men re-enlist only to get furloughs and never return.

Horses are generally in very bad condition and sent to the rear of recruit.” **54** General Joseph E. Johnston complained to the Confederate government at Richmond: “bad corn is furnished-much unfit for issue, weevil-eaten. Unless there is reform we will lose our artillery, horses, and field transportation.” **55** In West Florida, a resident examined why the number of deserters in the region was daily increasing: “Many of the infantry have not been paid or furnished with any clothing in some six and ten months; they are poor men, and their families are in great need of corn and the necessaries of life.” **56**

The letters written by the wives of soldiers complaining of destitution, starvation, and sickness at home provoked many desertions. A Florida conscript in Virginia wrote: “An instance has arisen in the army of a soldier's being shot for desertion, caused by an unfortunate letter full of complaints, received from his wife.” **57** A citizen from Lafayette County denied that the people of his county were disloyal to the Confederacy. The reason there were so many military deserters in the area was because the county mostly consisted of “very poor people, dependent on their daily labor for support,” who had been “called off from helpless and dependent families” for assistance. The Gainesville *Cotton States* reported the case of a Florida deserter who was shot and executed. He had been encouraged to desert by his wife who had “deceived” him on the severity of her hardship. The Florida newspaper warned the starving wives at home about writing complaints to their husband soldiers: “Soldiers’ wives cannot be too cautious in their letters to their husbands. They should not make them believe they are suffering when they really are not. Such letters caused more than half the desertions in the army.” **58** The wife of Winston Smith, the lieutenant of a Florida militia company, wrote to him a particularly subversive letter:

“When will all these scouts end? seems to me the war is no nearer the end now that it was months ago. seems to me we have as well live together under Lincoln's Government than to live separate most of the time under this Government, & are you now much more free than negroes, and the discipline becoming more & more strict. I suppose before long none of the soldiers will be allowed to go home at all. that will be great doings.” **59**

By August 1862, Governor Milton was claiming that there was not “a portion of the State free of skulking traitors, the majority of whom are of Northern birth and claiming to be citizens of Florida.” **60** In September 1862, the *Florida Quincy Dispatch* reported that in Calhoun County there were “some 50 or 60 men who need their necks

stretched with stout ropes.” It was referring to a group that was attempting to evade conscription and had “armed and organized themselves to resist those who may attempt their arrest.” It was believed that they were in communication with the Federal blockaders and had received arms through them. **61**

But it was a stretch to ascribe pro-Union sentiments to the conscript evaders and deserters, as the vast majority of poor whites conscripted were far more concerned with the destitution of their families than the war effort on either side. Nonetheless, the organized bands of conscript evaders and deserters would eventually join leagues with the Federal army in an effort to combat the pursuing conscription parties later into the war. While Northern-sympathizers did make up a portion of the “Union men,” a Confederate Florida historian recognized the class composition of the deserters and conscript evaders:

“The controlling motive with these men was hardly love for the Union. They seem to have been actuated by a strong desire to avoid service in the army. They wished to be at home more ardently than they wished to support their country or win the commendation of neighbors. They lacked patriotism. They were usually poor and illiterate.” **62**

George Carter, a Florida citizen who evaded the draft, did so to take care of his “young family of fifteen or sixteen children, none of them old enough to properly provide for the others.” He believed that this was a greater duty than enrolling in the Confederate army although he did so at great hazard: “he was hunted by conscription parties, and had to hide in the woods at night without fire, despite the inclemency of the weather. He managed to elude the conscription officers and provided for his wife and children.” **63**

It was quite possible that most Florida soldiers didn’t understand the ramifications of their actions by failing to show up for service following their furlough period. In December 1862, a Tallahassee newspaper complained that there were too many “stragglers, who, on one pretense and another have kept out of the fight.” It reminded the deserters, “the soldier who is absent without furlough, or who allows his furlough to expire without joining his company, is a deserter,” and urged that military force be used to “correct this evil.” **64** Planter heiress Susan B. Eppes recounted: “An enemy we had with whom we were unable to cope, the diabolical deserter... These men... belonged to a peculiar class... the descendents of criminals, who had taken refuge in the bays and swamps of the Florida coast. Their hand against everybody and everybody’s hand against

them.” **65** Further noting that they primarily inhabited the countries located adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico. These deserter communities would commission their women as spies to visit the Florida interior “until some news of military movements could be gained.” **66**

The wives and sisters of deserters would bring the news back home to their husbands who then quickly relayed the information to the Federal blockaders. This was a very effective method for the Federals to receive information and intelligence on Confederate movements. When the women and children were captured, they were locked into “Deserter’s Camps” where they were surrounded by guards. Wagons and a body of troops were commissioned to the “deserter territory,” known as the “Wagon Brigade,” in order to fill up the camps with captive women and children. As they traversed throughout these disaffected areas, an observer noted: “When each house was emptied of its contents and occupants, the torch was applied and the troops remained until each filthy cabin was in ashes.” **67**

Governor Milton denounced these extreme measures and claimed that they tended to backfire: “The course pursued has increased the number of deserters and excited among them the vindictive purpose to avenge the wagons inflicted, and to liberate the women and children and aged men, who have been deprived of their liberty as well as of their property upon a suspicion of disloyalty.” As a remedy, he recommended that liberty be restored to the women and children, their homes rebuilt, and aid provided in order to salvage some sort of popular support for the Confederate government. **68**

Confederate Florida had a serious revolt on its hands. Runaway slaves, army deserters, and conscript evaders organized into marauding bands throughout every district of the state, even threatening to overrun many sectors. A letter from a Confederate officer to Governor Milton in early 1862 suggested that martial law should be implemented in the counties of East Florida “as they contain a nest of traitors and lawless negroes”. **69** Deserters commonly expressed their dissatisfaction with the tyranny of Confederate Florida. One deserter who crossed into Union occupied territory: “says that they have a variety of yarns concerning Montgomery's intentions - the most common of which is that he intends to free the whole of Florida from the rebels under Finegan.” **70** In April 1864, the New York *Herald* depicted the large number of Confederate soldiers that had come over to the Union side at Jacksonville: “The laborers are in different departments...are crackers still attired in the dirty grey uniform furnished them by the Confederate government.” **71** In April 1862, a Confederate guerilla reported that the majority of East Floridians were already supporting the Federals only weeks after it had occupied the area:

“I regret very much to have to report to you that at least three-fourths of the people on the Saint John's River and east of it are aiding and abetting the enemy...It is not safe for a small force to be on the east side of the river; there is great danger of being betrayed into the hands of the enemy.” **72**

The planter counties of Middle Florida were the few vestiges of Confederate loyalty left in Florida. But even their peripheries were threatened by the incursion and depredations of roving armed bands of deserters. The impoverished coastal counties bordering Middle Florida were nests of soldiers and conscripted men who had defected from the war. A Madison County resident petitioned General Joseph Finegan:

“to check the accumulation of deserters in Taylor County. We have been informed that disloyalty is very general in that country, and they are not disposed to disguise their sentiments... I think from what I can learn that the immunity enjoyed by the deserters is producing a very bad effect; and if not checked soon, will be difficult to deal with.” **73**

A good number of the deserters had sought refuge in the thick swamps of coastal Florida from other states such as Virginia and Tennessee. They maintained communication with the blockaders on the coast and received supplies from them. By October 1863, the number of deserters in Middle Florida had “increased so much in number and boldness as to endanger the peace and safety of the neighborhood, and unless promptly arrested will prove demoralizing to the service.” **74** Desertion was so common that it grew increasingly difficult for conscription agents and government officials to hold anyone accountable. A Confederate officer promised the citizens of Levy County a sufficient force to “clear your locality of Yankees, deserters, and outlaws.” In Lafayette County, a resident denied that the people supported pro-Union candidates, but made it clear that they would neither support “those at home who are seeking to screen themselves from service behind some little office.” **75**

The increasing rate of desertion in Taylor County became alarming. The organized bands of deserters threatened to overrun the county. General John F. Lay saw “nothing which can be done at present toward checking them.” **76** The rapidly growing presence of the Unionists threatened pro-Confederate county officials. Sheriff Edward Jordon reported that he was “compelled to stop collecting, or assessing taxes for the





Florida crackers preparing to ambush an enemy, illustration by Frederic Remington, August 1895. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

present, in consequence of the Enemy.” This was after a threat he received from “a squad of Persons called Union men.” The sheriff thought it was “best to desist...until there is a force in the County to check them. If not, I shall have to leave, I cannot say how soon, for safety, for I have received orders to join them or I cannot stay in the county.” <sup>77</sup>

As troops were withdrawn from Middle Florida to combat the Federal invasion of East Florida, the refugee bands seized and enticed slaves from the plantations of Jefferson and Madison counties, “bordering on the disaffected region of Taylor and Lafayette.” <sup>78</sup> Soldiers from other states also found the dense areas of Taylor and Lafayette counties ideal to hide-out. Brigadier General John K. Jackson reported:

“Many deserters from the armies of Virginia and Northern Georgia, as well as from the troops of Florida, are collected in the swamps and fastness of Taylor, Lafayette, Levy, and other counties, and have organized, with runaway negroes, bands for the

purpose of committing depredations upon the plantations and crops of loyal citizens and running off their slaves. These depredatory bands have even threatened the cities of Tallahassee, Madison, and Marianna.” **79**

The Gainesville *Cotton States* reported that deserters were carrying out an organized attempt to “steal every Negro they can in an effort to ruin the Country.” **80** There was a regiment estimated to be made up of five hundred Unionists, deserters, and runaway slaves in the vicinity of Cedar Key that was committing raids on Gainesville. **81** In March 1864, a Gainesville newspaper reported that bands of organized deserters were “destroying railroad trestles, burning bridges, and cutting telegraph lines in an attempt to disrupt communications both within the state and between Florida and the other Confederate states.” **82**

Bands of deserters attacked Confederate mail so frequently that they completely disrupted the mail services in Tallahassee. It became dangerous for some Confederate officials to even leave the safety of the cities. The deserters grew bolder in their defiance as the war went on. A band of one hundred deserters had learned of Governor Milton’s plans to leave Tallahassee and waited outside of the city to ambush him, capture him, and turn him over to a Federal blockading vessel in the Gulf. Once Milton was warned of this, he cancelled his travel plans and remained within the city. **83**

Strong pro-Union sentiment particularly existed in West Florida. This region of the state, due to its proximal location, thick swamps, and sparse population, became an important safe-haven for Confederate deserters from Florida and other Southern states as well. A large portion of West Floridians, if not the majority, were “disloyal” to the Confederacy. One day laborer arrived at a Federal post in Pensacola: “I came to Pensacola to find work,” he said, “and something to eat.” A runaway slave at Pensacola reported: “The poor people [outside the lines] all want the Yankees to take the country so they can get enough to eat. They hear there is plenty of provision in Pensacola.” **84** In January 1863, a Federal officer at Pensacola found the city “occupied almost exclusively by poor whites, who have come in from the surrounding country to avoid starvation and the conscription.” **85**

In August 1863, the Governor of Alabama complained to General Cobb, the commanding officer at Quincy, that deserters were hiding out in the swamps and tributaries of the Chipola River, bordering Florida and Alabama. **86** In turn, General Cobb wrote the Confederate Chief of Staff that his troops in West Florida were limited due to the massive amount of conscript evaders. According to Cobb, there was a “disloyal

feeling” in that section “which should be crushed.” **87** But the military was powerless to act against them and to turn them over to the civil authorities would merely result in a “farcical trial.” **88** Raiding parties of Unionists and deserters were flowing into West Florida from East Tennessee. **89** In a 1864 letter to the Confederate Secretary of War, Governor Milton recounted the large number of deserters and conscript-evaders in Washington County who had “contaminated a large portion of the citizens,” including the sheriff of the county and other influential people. **90** Milton reported an incident where 43 deserters surrounded and disarmed a Confederate cavalry at night not more than eight miles above the Chattahoochee River. **91**

The main body of deserters in West Florida was located some 75 miles above the defenses and obstructions of the Apalachicola River and there were multiple bands throughout the western region. Milton contemplated implementing martial law in the western counties until a sufficient military force was at his disposal. But unless drastic measures were taken in this region, he claimed that it would be “in the possession of the enemy, and the lives and property of loyal citizens will be sacrificed.” **92** In 1864, Federal General Asboth of the Pensacola district claimed that if proper assistance was provided to the disaffected to come within Union lines then “not only one but several regiments could be raised in Western Florida.” **93** In Walton County, Asboth depicted the brutal punishment inflicted on the disaffected citizens:

“Very few recruits can reach our lines at present, as all West Florida is swarming with rebel cavalry hunting refugees and deserters. 7 citizens were hung last week for entertaining Union sentiments, and a woman, refusing to give information about her husband's whereabouts, was killed in a shocking manner, and two of her children caught and torn to pieces by bloodhounds.” **94**

The brutal methods of conscript parties did not stop the deserters from escaping behind Union lines and supporting the Federals. In March 1864, he reported that the recruitment of Confederate deserters had been successful: “Confederate refugees and deserters are continually coming into our lines, although the facilities I can afford are limited. The number of Florida recruits has already reached 300.” **95** These men were in a state of “open war with the Confederacy.” **96**

Since South Florida was the most sparsely populated region of the state, it turned out to be ideal for the enlarging squads of deserters, conscript evaders, and contrabands. Federal General Daniel P. Woodbury acknowledged the existence of up to eight hundred

conscript evaders and deserters residing between Charlotte Harbor and Lake Okeechobee. He proposed to establish a fort on Charlotte Harbor in order to enlist the refugees and break up the cattle ranches in South Florida. **97** In September 1862, a Federal naval officer in Tampa Bay reported: “Guerillas are scouring the woods, looking after deserters and conscripts; they rob, murder, and steal indiscriminately, if the reports of the refugees are to be credited; Union men they threaten to hang, and do shoot, as we have lamentable proof.” **98** A Confederate officer reported the success of cattle raiding operations on the part of organized deserter bands in South Florida. The Confederacy relied on South Florida for a good portion of its beef. By December 1863, some nineteen of the refugees in South Florida had already enlisted in the Federal army and it was expected that more would unconditionally enlist. **99**

Woodbury organized a company of 29 of these “refugee rangers” to operate on the mainland between Tampa and Charlotte Harbor in conjunction with Federal troops. **100** Captain Henry Crane, under Woodbury’s command, was a deserter who had served as a colonel in the Confederate militia of Florida. He greatly assisted the Federal army in several skirmishes through his militia training and extensive knowledge of South Florida. He was also important in gathering recruits in South Florida: “He is well-known and popular among the people of Lower Florida, and will, no doubt, be useful in recruiting.” **101** The primary objectives of Federal operations in South Florida were:

“To afford Union men in Florida an opportunity to volunteer their services to the United States; to break up or check the cattle-driving business in the neighborhood of Charlotte Harbor and as far North as practical; to procure able-bodied Negroes for the service of the United States; to obtain cattle for the use of the United States.”

**102**

There were few or no Confederate troops in the southwestern part of the state, but guerillas and regulators were a constant concern as they occasionally scoured the country to enforce conscription. **103** A small-scale guerilla war broke out in South Florida between deserters and regulators. The deserters stole cattle, sold it to the Federal garrison at Ft. Myers, and fed their starving families. As cattle had been impressed by the Confederate military and withheld from poor families to be sold at higher profits, these refugee cattle-raids were not strictly to support the Federal war effort. Those who didn’t join the militias remained on the coastal islands protected by the blockade. In April of



Cracker cowboys fighting over a stolen herd, illustration by Frederic Remington, August 1895. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

1864, a regiment of Georgian volunteers was commissioned to South Florida in order to “to arrest deserters, skulkers, punish and drive out plunderers and Yankees and to afford every assistance in his power to the agents of the Government whose duty it was to collect beef-cattle for the army, and to the farmers in the legitimate pursuit of their business.”

In May of 1864, South Florida was “still infested by bands of deserters, skulkers, and Yankees, whose numbers and depredations were daily increasing.” **104** In Manatee County, over “half of the tax-payers” had gone over to the Yankees, including one of the Country commissioners. The failure of the Confederate government to counter these disaffected bands is best exemplified by a force of eighty men commissioned to retrieve deserters in South Florida, only to have 57 of them ironically escape to the enemy as soon as they received arms and ammunition. **105** Stephen Harville, an ex-slave from Tampa Bay, recalled the frequent attacks by a roving band of Confederate deserters that had been successfully organized:

“They had succeeded...in organizing a band of Confederate deserters, who menaced the farmers in the vicinity of Tampa Bay and Fort Myers. Lanier and a man by the name of Thomas were riding together through the woods when they were attacked by a band of these marauders. Lanier was killed outright and Thomas’ horse was shot from under him. Running to Lanier’s horse, Thomas sprang into the saddle and escaped.” **106**

A conservative estimate placed the number of Confederate deserters in Florida at 2,211 soldiers and eight officers, although it was nearly impossible to fully count the combined number of conscript evaders, deserters, Unionists, and “contrabands” hidden in the Florida swamps and behind Union lines. **107** If deserters from other Southern states are added to the count, the anti-Confederate forces in the state probably amounted to a majority during the Civil War. The deserters had organized into independent bands that had evolved into tiny armies in themselves.

In Taylor County, William Strickland led the most powerful deserter band in Florida, self-titled the “Independent Union Rangers.” Strickland told the leader of a conscription party why he had abandoned the “Confederate cause”: “Ask Colonel Smith if I was not as good a soldier as long as he was captain, and would have been yet if Mr. Smith had of staid captain, but now I have went on the other side and tried what we call United States of Taylor, but I find it is like the Confederate men - more wind than work.” **108** At Strickland’s house, the conscription parties found the Rangers’ Constitution along with “2,000 rounds of fixed ammunition for the Springfield musket, several barrels of flour from the United States Subsistence Department, and several other articles which evidenced the regularity of their communication with the enemy's gunboats.” **109** The constitution of the Florida Rangers stated:

“We, the undersigned, members of a company called the "Independent Union Rangers," of Taylor County, fla., do agree that we will cheerfully obey all orders given by the offices we elect over us, that we will bear true allegiance to the United States of America; that we will not under pain of such penalty or punishment as a court-martial composed of ten men of the company, appointed by the captain, may inflict, given any information or speak in the presence of any one, even though it be our views and families, of any expedition, raid, or attack that we may be about to undertake; that we agree to shoot or in some other way destroy any person or persons who are proven to be spies of the enemy, or any person who has carried information from our camps. to any person through whom it may have gotten to the enemy; that

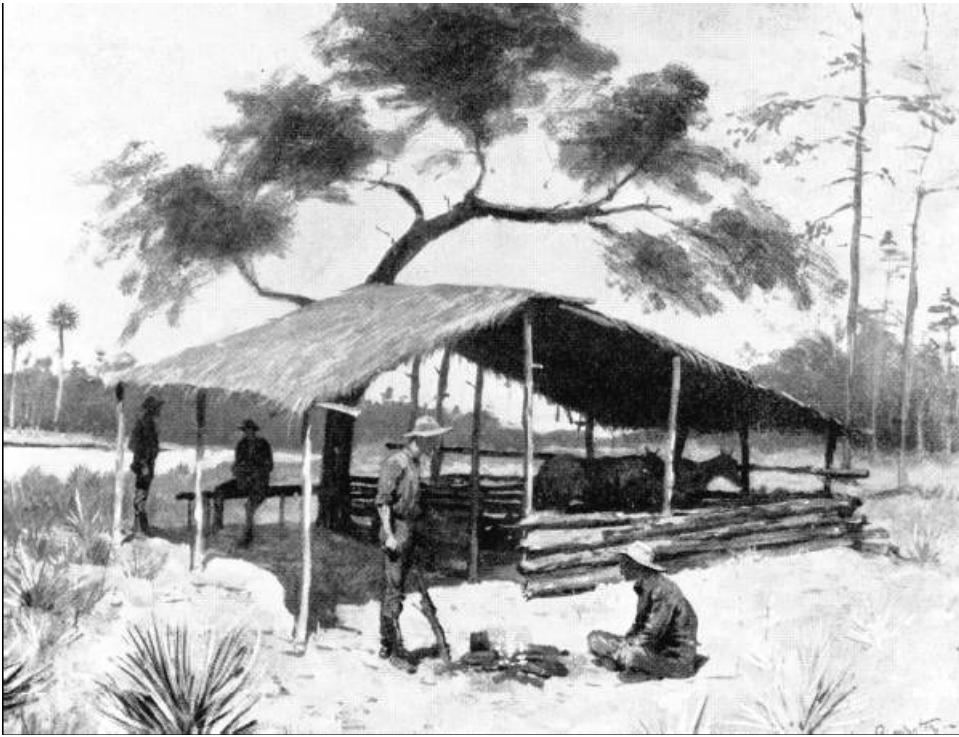
all orders issued by our commanding officers relative to the killing of cattle and seizure of provisions will be cheerfully obeyed; that we agree to bring all property seized on our raids and expeditions to such place as our commanding officers may direct for the common benefit of all concerned, and in case of a division the captain shall make such distribution as to him seems most just; that we agree to make known any meeting or traitorous proceedings or any violation of any orders of the superior officers, to our captain as soon as possible; that we agree to punish by death, or such other punishment as a court-martial may inflict, any person who may desert or entice others to do so, or shall treat with contempt his officer or weaken his authority in any way, or shall plunder or abuse any person known to be friendly to us.” **110**

A Confederate soldier James M. Dancy recalled “the most disagreeable service I was called upon to render was hunting deserters.” **111** The deserter hunts often ended unproductively with a vast amount of time wasted chasing nothing:

“On our next expedition a captain was sent with us with trained blood hounds to track the deserters down. We arrived before daylight in the vicinity of their homes. The dogs were released, and in passing an old mill house on the bank of a stream they struck a trail and dashed down a road leading from the mill house. With the captain in the lead we dashed after them. Very soon the dogs began to bay as though they had overtaken the object of their pursuit. They had. There with grave dug was a burial group ready to lower a body into a grave. Well, if anyone could have seen the faces of those deserter hunters. With downcast heads we turned and made a bee line back to camp.” **112**

Just like the Seminoles, some of the conscript evaders and deserters formed camps in impenetrable areas that made it difficult for Confederate parties to locate and send large forces against. It was reported that the deserters and disaffected citizens from several Florida counties were encamped

“near the month of the Econfina River, on the east bank, and surrounded by a thick marsh, which at high tide was overflowed, rendering communications with the adjoining swamps and hammocks exceedingly difficult. The recent heavy rains had swollen the rivers to such an extent that the swamps and hammock lands were covered with water and deemed almost impassable by the citizens.” **113**



“A bit of cow country,” illustration by Frederic Remington, August 1895. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

Yet some of them simply remained within the vicinity of their homes. Lt. Col. H.D. Capers made several excursions into the swamps of Florida to destroy these bands and only found empty huts previously occupied by the disaffected. He concluded that the deserters were hiding out in their homes and ordered “the destruction of every house on the east and west banks of the Econfina and Fenholloway Rivers belonging to these people...in addition to the removal of their families as directed in the orders referred from district headquarters.” **114** What mostly concerned Capers was preventing the deserters from destroying property and freeing slaves on the large plantations located at the borders of the swamps. The hundreds of slaves inhabiting these plantations were an “immense service to the Confederacy in the production of grain and bacon.” **115**

Capers suggested that hunting the deserters with dogs and mounted men commanded by woodsmen familiar with the territory would be the most practical way of capturing these deserter bands: “The experience of the Seminole war will fully establish this fact.” **116** Brigadier General John K. Jackson confirmed the difficulty of



apprehending these deserter bands: “They occupy the same portion of country which was held for so many years by the Seminole Indians, and without a force which cannot be spared from other quarters, they cannot be dislodged.” **117**

The brutal methods implemented by the conscription parties were an ultimate failure in returning these men to the army. In response to the burning of homes and the removal of families of the deserters, Governor Milton claimed the cruel acts were counterproductive: “Such lawless and cruel violence increased the number of deserters and prevented many from returning to their command who otherwise would have availed themselves of an offer of pardon which had been published and distributed in the disaffected region.” **118** The proof was in the pudding. Only 220 deserters were restored to the ranks of the Florida Confederate army throughout the war. **119**

Confederate officials made some lenient concessions, realizing that it would be impossible to stop the deserter bands through sheer force. On March 4, 1864, General Beauregard issued a proclamation offering amnesty and non-military employment to deserters and conscript-evaders in South Florida provided that they reported within forty days. **120** A few embraced the terms but even most of those were believed to have returned to the Unionists or remained at home where it was difficult to apprehend them. **121** On March 18<sup>th</sup>, Confederate General Gordon of West Florida promised amnesty to conscript evaders who would report to the camps by April 5<sup>th</sup>. However, he also promised

“severe punishment to all deserters after this clemency. All such persons found with arms in their hands will be shot without mercy. The families of deserters and the disloyal will be sent into the interior and their property destroyed, and all cattle, horses, and hogs will be driven away or shot.” **122**

On March 20<sup>th</sup>, another proclamation was issued by Governor Milton to the disaffected counties of Taylor and Lafayette but only a small number conceded. A week after the war, Lieutenant Colonel John Wilder of the Federal occupation reported 2,000 white refugees at Cedar Key: “crackers most of them – that is poor whites, not more intelligent or virtuous than the negroes.” He described them as “pale, cadaverous, ignorant, and many of them fierce.” While some of them had enlisted in the Federal army, “most of them have been persecuted by the Rebels and are very implacable. They are splendid rifle shots and go about all over the state. They talk of killing this man or that, when they go out as a matter of course – not in fight, but in murdering him.” **123** As the closing of the war loomed over Confederate Florida, it was overrun by a combination

of Unionists, deserters, conscript evaders, runaway slaves, and Federal soldiers. A missionary in Jacksonville at the end of war recognized that the Union victory not only meant liberation for the slave but for the poor white who was subjugated at the bottom of Florida's caste system:

“In the removal of slavery, almost as intolerable a burden is lifted from the "poor Whites" or "Crackers" as they are called here, as from the slave. We have had considerable opportunity to see this class of people who flock in here for protection, and to hear the sad stories of their wrongs. They are miserably poor and ignorant and dirty. In many instances needing as much sympathy and help as the fugitive negro.”

**124**

While the rebellion of poor white conscripts proved that they were far from complicit with elite planter authority, a far more prolific revolt that challenged a three centuries-long institution was being carried out by a force that entered into the white man's war through its own initiative: the runaway slaves.

## **Chapter 11**

### **“An Active War for their Liberation”: Slave Defection in Confederate Florida (1860-1865)**

Civil War history has been so grossly twisted as to provide the appearance that freedom was first imposed from above at the edicts of Northern Republican politicians and white abolitionists. This portrayal of Civil War history was primarily manufactured to instill a sense of gratitude in the former slaves and procure their allegiance to white supremacy, as if they had made no contribution to their own liberty. But freedom is only achieved through the struggles of oppressed people and not imposition from above, and freedom for slaves in the midst of the Civil War only confirms this perspective. A Civil War historian provides an alternative explanation for the Emancipation Proclamation:

“In the end it was not free blacks or white abolitionists, but slaves in the South whose actions most hastened emancipation. The destruction of slavery was thus begun on the battlefield and then ratified in the Emancipation Proclamation. In this quite restricted but important sense, abolition was first achieved neither by Republican politicians nor by white abolitionists, but by those blacks, free and slave, who intruded into a white nation’s civil war.” **1**

The Union simply siphoned the momentum of a mass black disaffection from their owners and utilized it for its own military and strategic gain in the war. If the Union had failed to co-opt the mass slave defection in the South, escaped slaves could have potentially organized and challenged the Confederacy on their own or become a destructive force. The North was not prepared to accept a slave insurrection or revolt that was “not on its terms.” Colonel Higginson noted this: “Insurrection on their part would at once have divided the Northern sentiment, and a large part of our army would have joined with the Southern army to hunt them down. By their waiting till we needed them, their freedom was secured.” **2** But Southern slaves did not wait until needed by the Union. To the contrary, many conceived the war as a white man’s war and absconded without any certainty that the North would grant them freedom. Also, Northern capitalists didn’t plan to fully obliterate the South. They surely didn’t plan to place it under the self-

governing and autonomous control of ex-slave communities. Bond holders and industrialists in the North saw the promise of cheap raw materials and cheap labor in the South. For the development of Northern capital and lucrative profits in the South, cheap black labor and land would have to be made available and this required a degree of cooperation and reconciliation with the Southern oligarchy. The land that the ex-slaves had cultivated for hundreds of years was still to be in the hands of privileged whites. Their labor was still to be under the management and supervision of whites, whether Northern or Southern.

Emancipation undermined the Confederacy, proved strategically necessary for the success of the war effort, and conceded freedom to the escape slaves who were flooding the Southern countryside in order to gain their alliance. Above all, the Union was motivated to control and direct the black revolt for their own ends. Florida's legacy of black maroon militancy and slave defiance proved an important prerequisite in laying down the intellectual foundations of the Emancipation Proclamation. The arguments made by Northern officials to emancipate Southern slaves during the Civil War found their precedent in the proclamation of freedom for the black Seminoles during the Florida War. Just as the pragmatic officials of the Second Seminole War argued that the rebel slaves and black Seminoles had to be granted their freedom as means to undermine and defeat the Seminole resistance - as well as prevent slave insurrection - the "pragmatists" of the Civil War argued that emancipating Southern slaves could effectively undermine the Southern rebellion. Just as the black Seminoles eventually formed a tacit alliance with the US army as interpreters, spies, and guides, the "contrabands" would fight alongside the Union to procure their freedom. Early into the Civil War, William Lloyd Garrison wrote a 24-page pamphlet, *The Abolition of Slavery: The Right of the Government Under the War Power*, documenting how the right to grant freedom to a slave population on the battlefield had its precedent with the black Seminoles:

"General Jessup had captured many fugitive slaves and Indians in Florida, and had ordered them to be sent west of the Mississippi. At New Orleans, they were claimed by the owners, under legal process; but Gen. Gaines, commanding that military district, refused to deliver them to the sheriff, and appeared in court, stating his own deference.

He declared that these people (men, women and children) were captured in wars and held as prisoners of war: that as commander of that military department or district, he held them subject only to the order of the National Executive: that he could recognize

no other power in time of war, or by the laws of war, as authorized to take prisoners from his possession.

He asserted that, in time of war, all slaves were belligerents as much as their masters. The slave men, said he, cultivate the earth and supply provisions. The women cook the food, nurse the wounded and sick, and contribute to the maintenance of the war, often more than the same number of males. The slave children equally contribute whatever they are able to the support of the war. Indeed, he well supported General Butler's declaration, that slaves are contraband of war.

The military officer, said he, can enter into no judicial examination of the claim of one man to the bone and muscle of another as property. Nor could he, as a military officer, know what the laws of Florida were while engaged in maintaining the Federal Government by force of arms. In such case, he could only be guided by the laws of war; and whatever may be the laws of any State, they must yield to the safety of the Federal Government. This defense of General Gaines may be found in House Document No. 225, of the Second Session of the 25th Congress. He sent the slaves West, where they became free.

Louis, the slave of a man named Pacheco, betrayed Major Dade's battalion, in 1836, and when he had witnessed their massacre, he joined the enemy. Two years subsequently, he was captured, Pacheco claimed him; General Jessup said if he had time, he would try him before a court-martial and hang him, but would not deliver him to any man. He however sent him West, and the fugitive slave became a free man, and is now fighting the Texans. General Jessup reported his action to the War Department, and Mr. Van Buren, then President, with his Cabinet, approved it. Pacheco then appealed to Congress, asking that body to pay him for the loss of his slave; and Mr. Greeley will recollect that he and myself, and a majority of the House of Representatives, voted against the bill, which was rejected. All concurred in the opinion that General Jessup did right in emancipating the slave, instead of returning him to his master.

In 1838, General Taylor captured a number of negroes said to be fugitive slaves. Citizens of Florida, learning what had been done, immediately gathered around his camp, intending to secure the slaves who had escaped from them. General Taylor told them that he had no prisoners but "prisoners of war." The claimants then desired to look at them, in order to determine whether he was holding their slaves as

prisoners. The veteran warrior replied that no man should examine his prisoners for such a purpose; and he ordered them to depart. This action being reported to the War Department, was approved by the Executive. The slaves, however, were sent West, and set free.

In 1836, General Jessup wanted guides and men to act as spies. He therefore engaged several fugitive slaves to act as such, agreeing to secure the freedom of themselves and families if they served the Government faithfully. They agreed to do so, fulfilled their agreement, were sent West, and set free. Mr. Van Buren's Administration approved the contract, and Mr. Tyler's Administration approved the manner in which General Jessup fulfilled it by setting the slaves free.” **3**

In August 1862, some four months before Lincoln made the Emancipation Proclamation, Governor Milton declared that slaves were engaged in an “active war for their liberation” and had become the single most dangerous asset of the enemy:

“Large numbers have fled from their owners in this State to the enemy for protection, and are daily escaping to them, and no aggressive move has been made by the enemy in particular localities except by the guidance of slaves which had escaped to them.” **4**

By March 1862, Milton already feared that the withdrawal of troops from Florida to defend the Confederacy would leave the large armament and ammunition depots in the state “subject to be seized and used by slaves against the lives of our citizens.” **5** In October 1862, Milton appealed to Confederate President Jefferson Davis to provide “forces and munitions to protect the State” from the “loss of slaves and other property, and possibly great loss of a servile insurrection.” Although Middle Florida was relatively safe from a Federal invasion, the western, eastern, and southern regions of the state were left open for an attack with the mass withdrawal of Florida troops to defend other states. Aware of this, Milton reported a slave population of 16,202 in East and South Florida that was “now considerably diminished.” **6**

Milton strongly opposed the aspect of conscription that enabled owners to purchase a substitute. This had left the state with a slave population that outnumbered the able-bodied white men over twenty-to-one. He believed this could possibly result in a slave rebellion without the much-needed overseers who were hired as substitutes for planters. **7** It left Florida without a force sufficient to prevent “the increasing disposition

on the part of the slaves to go to the enemy.” **8** As the vast majority of male citizens were absent from Florida and fighting the Union throughout the Confederacy, Governor Milton was concerned with the “exposed position of the State geographically” and the “large number of slaves in it.” **9** The Tallahassee *Senital* editor concurred with this sentiment:

“Many men could serve the Confederacy better out of military service than in it. It is a mistake for planters and overseers to desert their plantations...The governor should take immediate steps to see that at least one white male adult was left on each plantation.” **10**

Slaveholders constantly shifted their slaves from place to place and the Confederate military patrolled certain districts that were under the threat of insurrection. **11** But the militia forces and exempted overseers were insufficient to prevent a slave population determined on achieving its freedom through assisting an overpowering invading force. In response to this predicament, the Florida legislature passed a series of laws at the outbreak of the war intending to establish a system of slave patrols around the state. Though slave patrols had existed prior to the war, the legislature sought to consolidate, amend, and add to the stipulations that were already on the books. Each county was divided into districts and state officials announced certain periods of patrol duty for certain citizens in each district.

The mounted patrols moved at night to prevent the free movement of blacks and their cooperation with the enemy. They were to keep informed on the condition and opinion of the blacks within their district; to ride through the county one or more night each week; to arrest and question blacks found out at night; to apprehend thieves engaged in trading stolen products; to seize all vessels harboring or dealing with blacks; to disperse any “unlawful assembly” of blacks; and to seize all firearms found under their possession. **12** An “unlawful assembly” was defined as four or more blacks within a confined or secret place. The patrol had the authority to enter into the slave quarters and administer a punishment of twenty lashes on any slave found off of their master’s premises without a written permit. If an apprehended black was to “act insolently”, the patrol was authorized to inflict an additional punishment not exceeding thirty-nine lashes. **13** However, it was unlikely that the slave patrols were very effective because the lack of available white men made it difficult to fill up their ranks. **14**

Confederate militia groups bordering the lines of East Florida took place of the patrols in accosting fugitive slaves who were escaping to the Federals. Slaves who

remained on the plantations often harbored runaways and confronted these patrols. An ex-slave from Jacksonville “told of an incident during the Civil War”:

“Slaves, he explained had to have passes to go from one plantation to another and if one were found without a pass the "patrollers" would pick him up, return him to his master and receive pay for their service. The "patrollers" were guards for runaway slaves. One night they came to Aunt Rhoda's house where a crowd of slaves had gathered and were going to return them to their masters; Uncle Umphrey the tanner, quickly spaded up some hot ashes and pitched it on them; all of the slaves escaped unharmed, while all of the "patrollers" were badly injured; no one ever told on Uncle Umphrey and when Aunt Rhoda was questioned by her master she stated that she knew nothing about it but told them that the "patrollers" had brought another "nigger" with them; her master took it for granted that she spoke the truth since none of the other Negroes were hurt. He remembers seeing this but does not remember how he, as a little boy, was prevented from telling about it.” **15**

Some slaves immediately set off at the news of the war like Squires Jackson who escaped from a Jacksonville plantation with his brother and travelled to Wellborn where the Federals were encamped. But once he reached the camp, he found “wounded colored soldiers stretched out on the filthy ground,” and decided not to enlist in the Federal army. At first the slaves were not acting on a determined knowledge that the Union was attempting to free them, but simply to exploit the “white man’s war” to procure their own freedom. The ambiguity on the part of the Federals regarding the “slave question” caused Squire and many other runaways to avoid military service for the Union. **16** On March 12, 1861, some runaway slaves arrived to the Fort Pickens, a Federal base in Florida, “entertaining the idea,” according to the commander there, “that we were placed here to protect them and grant them their freedom.” Col. Thomas delivered the slaves over to the city marshals at Pensacola, declaring: “I did what I could to teach them the contrary.” **17**

A fugitive slave escaping to Union-occupied St. Augustine observed that the numerous fugitives he encountered along the way all shared one common goal:

“I met many runaway slaves. Some was trying to get North and fight for de freeing of they people; others was jes runnin' way cause dey could. Many of dem didn't had no idea where dey was goin' and told of havin' good marsters. But one and all dey had a good strong notion ter see what it was like to own your own body.” **18**



Edward Lycurgas, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, also recognized that emancipation was a strategic byproduct of the war rather than the primary cause:

“Whose War? The North and South's, of course. I hear my captain say many a time as how they was playin' ball wid the poor niggers. One side says 'You can't keep your niggers lessen you pay em and treat em like other folks.' Mind you dat wasn't de rale reason, they was mad at de South but it was one of de ways dey could be hurted—to free de niggers.” **19**

There was a contrast between white Floridian wives, who felt distress and even destitution as their husbands were off fighting in the war, and female slaves who had long experienced the loss of their children and loved ones. Old Aunt Sarah, an ex-slave from Tampa Bay, recalled what she told her distraught mistress, who was crying out of fear that her husband might die in the war:

“One day during the war Sarah went into the house and found grandmother rocking Aunt India and both of them crying. She asked them why they were crying, and grandmother replied that her husband and father of her child was away in the war and that he might be killed and they would never see him again, etc. Sarah then asked her if she remembered when she was first brought to Tampa she would cry for her mother and they would spank her. And for her not to cry as it would not do her any good.” **20**

In March of 1863, Col. James Montgomery's black 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Volunteers made an infamous raiding expedition up the St. John's River. The 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Volunteers initially comprised of fugitive slaves gathered at Key West. At one point in the raiding expedition, the black soldiers luckily captured a Confederate colonel named Stephen Bryant, proprietor of the extensive Laurel Grove Plantation alongside the St. John's River, after raiding his large plantation for food. Bryant's wife, furious at the arrest of her husband, spewed out hostile words onto the soldiers: “She was pouring out the vials of her indignation on the heads of us hard-hearted Yankees for separating husband and wife.” But then, as if it was the natural response, one of the black soldiers “spoke up and reminded her of the separation of their wives and husbands and children.” She replied as if the comparison was preposterous: “Your wives? What are your wives

but nasty old black things?” She could not find words to express herself on this point. Montgomery had to give a “stern word of command to restrain the men.” **21**

As the war dragged on, a good portion of slaves began to perceive their interest grounded in a Federal victory. Patience Campbell, an ex-slave from Jackson County, recalled the unanimous support for the Union among her fellow slaves: “Although Negroes could enlist in the Southern army if they desired none of them wished to do so but preferred to join Northern forces and fight for the thing they desired most, freedom.” **22** Many slaves learned events of the war through word of mouth and literacy. Rebecca Hooks, an ex-slave from Lake City who was literate under slavery, recalled that she had “learned of the war long before it ended and knew its importance. She had confided this information to other slaves who could read and write. She read the small newspaper that her master received at irregular intervals.” **23** Squires Jackson, an ex-slave from Jacksonville, had actually learned to read and write during the Civil War. He recalled one incident:

“One day as he was reading a newspaper, the master walked upon him unexpectedly and demanded to know what he was doing with a newspaper. He immediately turned the paper upside down and declared ‘Confederates done won the war.’ The master laughed and walked away without punishing him.” **24**

Most Floridian slaves learned of major events, such as the election of Abraham Lincoln and the outbreak of the war, through word of mouth and rumor that spread through the underground slave communication network. To the surprise of Colonel Thomas Higginson, black Floridians in his training camp were unanimously aware of the war and other national events:

“Corporal Prince Lambkin, just arrived from Fernandina, who evidently had a previous reputation among them. His historical references were very interesting. He reminded them that he had predicted this war ever since Fremont's time, to which some of the crowd assented; he gave a very intelligent account of that Presidential campaign, and then described most impressively the secret anxiety of the slaves in Florida to know all about President Lincoln's election, and told how they all refused to work on the fourth of March, expecting their freedom to date from that day.” **25**

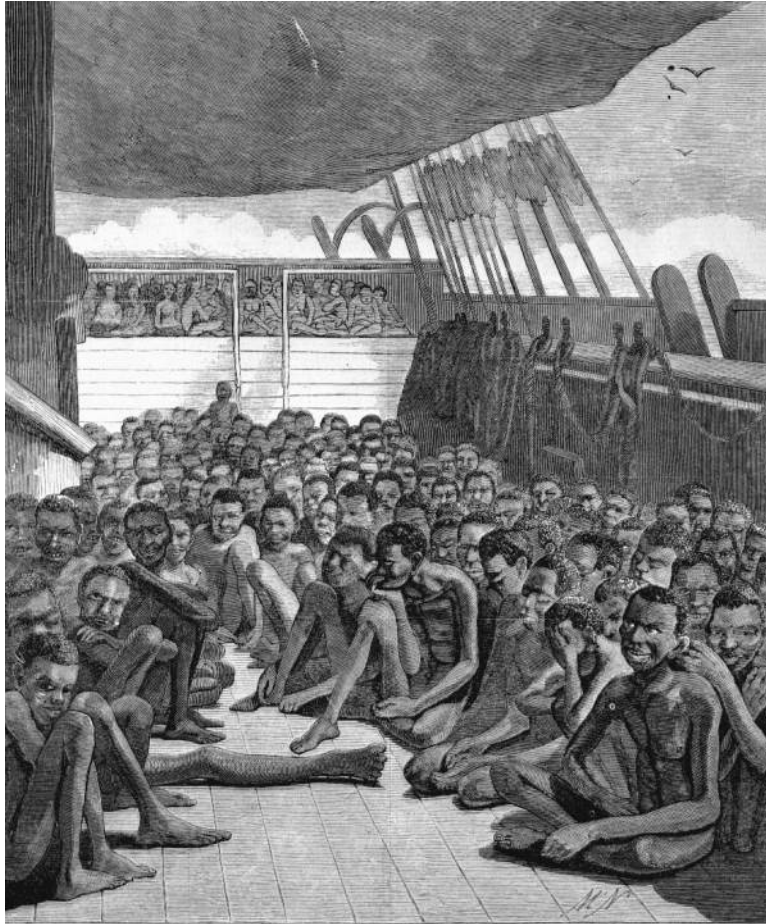
Even those slaves who neither fled the plantation nor became actively involved in the war still quietly hoped and prayed for a Federal victory. Word of the war only strengthened the resolve and hope of the average slave. Squire Jackson recalled that not even the vigilant overseers could stop “those silent songs of labor and prayers for freedom.” **26** Amanda McCray, an ex-slave from Madison County, recalled:

“It was from this minister that they first heard of the Civil War. He held whispered prayers for the success of the Union soldiers, not because freedom was so desirable to them, but for other slaves who were treated so cruelly. There was a praying ground where ‘the grass never had a chancet ter grow fer the troubled knees that kept it crushed down.’” **27**

Quiet prayer and hope were psychological tools for many slaves to cope with their last few years of bondage. Claude Augusta Wilson, an ex-slave from Columbia County, recalled: “The slaves on Dexter's plantation prayed for victory of the Northern Army, though they dared not show their anxiety to Mary Ann Dexter who was master and mistress since the master's death.” **28**

Initially Federal officers were a mixed bag. There were some who preferred to employ runaways and other who didn't think twice before returning them back over to the Confederates. Early into the war, the Federal Navy was one of the few outlets of refuge available for the runaways. As early as May 1861, slaves were already reported to have boarded Federal vessels in Key West. **29** In September 1861, the Secretary of Navy ordered the commanding officer of the Gulf Blockading Squadron at Key West to enlist the “large and increasing number of persons of color, commonly known as contrabands, now subsisted at the navy yard and on boards of ships of war.” They were to be allowed “no higher rating than boys” at a wage of ten dollars a month and one ration per day. **30** But in contrast to the army, the blacks served on integrated crews aboard the naval vessels. **31**

That month, the Lowes, a secessionist family, took their slaves to a warehouse and planned to ship them to Indian Key. The Union forces kept watch and seized their slaves as contraband of war when they attempted to load them on a schooner. **32** Despite the apparent policy on the part of the Federal blockade to hold fugitive slaves as contraband of war, some officers refused to do so. In January 1862, Federal Naval



Slave deck of the bark “Wildfire” brought into Key West, ca. 1860.  
Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

Commander George F. Emmons returned a party of three escaped slaves to the Confederates who attempted to board their steamer at Cedar Key. **33** But in July 1862, the Federal Secretary of Navy ordered the commanding officer in Key West to “resort to the expediency of enlisting contrabands, as no more men can be sent to you.” **34** In July, a Federal vessel at Egmont Key was reported to have recruited a host of Union sympathizers and runaway slaves who had taken refuge on the island. **35**

Furthermore, the blockading vessels at South Florida engaged in the unique role of breaking up the slave trade in South Florida and seizing the “cargo” of slave ships. It was estimated that nine-tenths of Key West rebels expected to increase the illegal slave

trade after Florida's secession. **36** In 1860, several slave ships were captured entering Key West with a total cargo of 1,432 slaves. **37** In January 1861, ships were detached from Key West to seize slavers off the coast of Cuba. **38** On June 18, 1862, the Federal blockaders accosted a slave ship that had discharged 750 to 800 of its slave cargo in Key West. **39**

Liberation came to blacks in Key West months before the Emancipation Proclamation was announced. In August 1862, all blacks in Key West that were under military service were declared free. On September 5th, Colonel Morgan announced freedom for all blacks in Key West. In late September, the liberated blacks occupying the island were already determining their own wage standard. A newspaper reported: "Negroes in Key West, with all mistaken notions of freedom, refuse work except at exorbitant wages." **40** Blacks from all across the state began flocking to the Keys. Cora Mitchel, a white resident in Apalachicola, recalled that "the negroes have begun to leave for Key West in large groups." **41**

In March and April of 1862, the Federals invaded and occupied most of East Florida. Runaway slaves flocked into the region and gave active assistance to the Federal troops in executing the war, serving as spies, informants, and guides. Fugitive slaves were instrumental in providing Federal gunboats with information on Confederate movements. The invading Federals reported: "A contraband brings news that the enemy is abandoning Fernandina." **42** The blacks had also informed the Union forces that the Confederates had abandoned Jacksonville. **43** Most slaveholders evacuated their families and slaves into the Middle Florida interior. East Florida slaveholder and militia volunteer Winston Stephens would not leave his slaves abandoned on his plantation: "I would not like to leave the negroes if I should leave, for it would give them more of a chance to be unfaithful, & if faithful would not like to leave them." **44** Only a week after writing the letter, he became even more fearful of his slaves than he was of the Yankees: "You speak of our going in the woods & not letting the negroes know where we are. It is impossible & we are afraid to go for fear they might cross from Dunns creek & find us." **45**

As soon as the Union forces reached Fernandina, fugitive slaves began flocking over to their lines. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, General Horatio Wright reported: "Some of these people are left behind, and others are presenting themselves daily, coming in from different directions." **46** On March 21<sup>st</sup>, Lieutenant Nicholson gave a similar report from St. Augustine: "Several contrabands have delivered themselves to, or been arrested by, the guard at the entrance of the city; they have fled from their masters, who are in rebellion." **47** The Confederate guerillas occasionally hung runaway blacks and the white deserters who were associating with the enemy. **48** On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Confederates

captured a runaway slave who was piloting a Union cruiser into Mosquito Inlet and planned to hang him. **49** On April 2, the Confederate Major Brevard ordered an inquiry to be made in Putnam County after hearing the “revelations” of a slave named Toby “concerning alleged conspiracies of the negroes in that section to leave their owners and go to the enemy.” **50** On April 11, Brigadier General Floyd wrote to Governor Milton suggesting that martial law should be imposed in the counties of East Florida “as they contain a nest a traitors and lawless negroes.” **51**

Before the Union forces abandoned Jacksonville, a naval officer informed an inquiring citizen that the runaway slaves would not be returned and the rebel slaveholders would receive no compensation for their loss: “You will never get relief.” **52** However, several days after abandoning the city, the Federals entered into Jacksonville under a flag of truce and returned some 52 runaway slaves as a parting gift. **53** At this point, the Federal plan for the black “contrabands” entering the Union camps was still highly ambiguous. On April 15, Lt. Col. Bell at St. Augustine wrote to Brigadier General Benham: “I have the honor to request instructions as to slaves belonging to disloyal men. I have retained such slaves, furnishing them with food and compelling them to work, and simply excluding other slaves from the fort.” **54**

During the brief occupation, Union officials managed to establish a colony of black “contrabands” on the abandoned island of St. Simons off the East Florida coast. Some forty blacks who had escaped behind Union lines were landed onto this island under Federal protection. Commander Godon reported on March 17<sup>th</sup>:

“There I landed all the contrabands, with their corn and provisions, tools, etc., and, having housed them, set them to work. Already they have planted potatoes. Tomorrow they will begin to prepare the land for corn. They have set up their mill, and have told them they are to plant cotton, and thus to become of use to themselves. They seem contented...” **55**

Forming these colonies of fugitive slaves to produce supplies for the Union war effort could be interpreted as an early Northern attempt to control and direct black labor. It would mirror the Northern strategy following the war ordering blacks to employ themselves under white planters and “thus to become of use to themselves” laboring for their former masters. These ex-slave colonies should be considered nothing less than the reformed slavery of white Republican utopists. That white supervision was necessary to manage black labor was the assumed notion. Later in June, Godon reported the

uncooperative nature of these colonized blacks: “Idleness, improvidence, theft, and disposition to vagrancy are the besetting sins of the contraband race on the islands.” He wrote Commander Goldsborough: “Your utmost efforts will be required to counteract the evil effects of the above vices in the colony.” **56** But the purpose of this black colony was not to create a self-sufficient community of free men. The contrabands were engaged in cutting wood for the Federal steamers and Godon promised “a supply to be kept on hand.” **57** Similar black contraband colonies were being established across Florida to furnish supplies and provisions for the Federal military. **58**

On May 9, 1862, General David Hunter issued an order declaring emancipation for the slaves of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida based on the reasoning that “slavery and martial law in a free country are altogether incompatible.” Shortly thereafter, President Lincoln repudiated Hunter’s order to the praise of the Northern press. **59** But the state of warfare over the next several months was proof that Southern slaves could be a potentially vital asset to the Federal war effort. Freedom would be a concession to not only undermine the Confederate plantation economy but provide motivation for black “contrabands” to enlist in the service of the Union. On August 25, the US War Department approved General Saxton’s request to

“enroll and organize, in any convenient organization, by squads, companies, battalions, and brigades, or otherwise, colored persons of African decent for volunteer laborers to a number not exceeding 5,000, and muster them into the service of the United States for the term of the war.” **60**

An additional force of 5,000 contrabands was to be organized to “guard the plantations and settlements occupied by the United States from invasion and to protect the inhabitants thereof from captivity and murder by the enemy.” Such troops would be used in reoccupying “islands and plantations heretofore occupied by the Government, and secure and harvest the crops and cultivate and improve the plantations.” It was further stipulated that “all men and boys received into the service of the United States who may have been slaves of rebel masters are, with their wives, mothers, and children, declared to be forever free.” The North was discussing plans of eventually turning Florida into a colony for the escaped blacks who entered the Union service. Organizations in the North believed that Florida, with its sparse population and extensive amount of good, available lands, was a perfect area to concentrate ex-slaves and free blacks from the ghettos of the North. **61** Governor Milton feared that the Union forces “may make of Florida a waste,

howling wilderness, or colonize it with negroes, unless suitable measures for defense shall be promptly adopted.” **62**

Scores of runaway slaves continued to escape behind Union lines as Federal gunboats made their way up the St. John’s River throughout the summer of 1862. **63** The presence of the gunboats was enough to bring in large flocks of runaway slaves from every direction. General Rufus Saxton reported: “The blowing of the steamer’s whistle the negroes all understand as a signal to come in, and no sooner do they hear it then they come in from every direction.” **64** Most who were taken aboard the ships gave the Federals important information on Confederate positions. Numerous intelligence reports from the contrabands contributed much to the success of Federal gunships on the river. **65** As time resumed, there was an increasing disposition of Federal officials to retain all runaway slaves as means to undermine the rebels and fill their own forces. Lieutenant Nicholson pointed out a basic strategic motive of liberating slaves: “The whole of the banks of the river as far as one can see is planted with corn. They say corn enough is in Florida for all of the Southern rebel States. If we carry their darkies off they can not gather it.” **66**

Admiral Du Pont gave orders to Acting Master A.T. Snell regarding Union loyalists who applied as claimants of contrabands: “You will record the circumstance in the log book, together with the name of such applicant, making a report of such circumstance to me; but you will not deliver any up.” **67** By July 1862, it was estimated that 1,500 black refugees had gathered in Fernandina. Slaveholders in East Florida were widely alarmed at the loss of their “property.” Ellen Call Long’s friend from East Florida wrote how she “discovered our servants about to bid farewell to the place the next morning he packed them all off to the interior. Can you imagine how we get along without a single servant?” Her friend later wrote to her:

“It is impossible to keep negroes on the river now, so Father determined it was better to have a home without servants than servants without a home. So we stay here living on cornbread and hope, our only consolation that we are no worse off than our neighbors.” **68**

At the training camp of Col. Higginson’s black regiment, one of the soldiers named Cato dramatized his story of escape to the Federal gunboats on the St. John’s River. Narrating the tale, he had just come unexpectedly upon a plantation-house and walked up to the door:



"Den I go up to de white man, berry humble, and say, would he please gib ole man a mouthful for eat?"

"He say he must hab de valeration ob half a dollar.

"Den I look berry sorry, and turn for go away.

"Den he say I might gib him dat hatchet I had.

"Den I say" (this in a tragic vein) "dat I must hab dat hatchet for defend myself from, de dogs!"

[Immense applause, and one appreciating auditor says, chuckling, "Dat was your arms, ole man," which brings down the house again.]

"Den he say de Yankee pickets was near by, and I must be very keerful.

"Den I say, 'Good Lord, Mas'r, am dey?'"

Words cannot express the complete dissimulation with which these accents of terror were uttered, — this being precisely the piece of information he wished to obtain.

Then he narrated his devices to get into the house at night and obtain some food, — how a dog flew at him, — how the whole household, black and white, rose in pursuit,—how he scrambled under a hedge and over a high fence, etc., — all in a style of which Gough alone among orators can give the faintest impression, so thoroughly dramatized was every syllable.

Then he described his reaching the riverside at last, and trying to decide whether certain vessels held friends or foes.

Den I see guns on board, and sure sartin he Union boat, and I pop my head up. Den I been-a-tink [think] Seceshkey hab guns too, and my head go down again. Den I hide in de bush till morning. Den I open my bundle, and take ole white shirt and tie him on ole pole and wave him, and ebry time de wind blow, I been- a-tremble, and drap down in de bushes," — because, being between two fires, he doubted whether friend

or foe would see his signal first. And so on, with a succession of tricks beyond Moliere, of acts of caution, foresight, patient cunning..." **69**

In September and October of 1862, the Federal army once again invaded East Florida, occupying Jacksonville and making excursions up the St. John's River. Federal gunboats began to shoot it out with the Confederate guerillas who roamed the territory. The blacks helped pilot the gunboats and made reconnaissance missions to inform the Federals of Confederate movements. In fear that both slaves and free blacks would aid the enemy, Confederate General Finegan ordered the removal of all blacks that were not under white supervision from the St. John's region:

"Captain Dickison will remove all negroes having no owners with them and free negroes from the Saint John's River into the interior at a safe distance from the enemy, and place them in charge of some white person, to be held subject to their owners' orders, and in case of free negroes to be left in their own charge, subject to the laws of the State." **70**

In late September, a Federal attack on some salt works at St. Andrews Bay obliterated the entire establishment. A Confederate newspaper reported that the Federals "stole all the negroes they could find, and took several of the white men prisoners – thus breaking up the whole works entirely." **71** On October 1<sup>st</sup>, Federal troops landed along the Pablo River and marched toward St. John's Bluff on land led by "Israel, our faithful Negro guide who ran away from Jacksonville a few weeks since and is thoroughly acquainted with all the country." **72**

Black pilots assisted Commander Woodhull's gunboats as his convoy traveled up the St. John's River. When Woodhull and the pilots anchored to assist the family of a white loyalist under threat from Confederate guerillas, the commander reported that the blacks refused to leave the boats as "the families of our black pilots would be hanged as soon as we left." The thirty black women and children aboard the vessels were taken off the ship for protection. Woodhull considered: "the services of these faithful men warranted me in doing all I could to prevent such a piece of savagery". **73** In fact, most black men went to great lengths to not only procure their freedom but that of their families. A black officer in Colonel Higginson's regiment narrated to him the story of his escape:

“He was a Florida man, and had been chiefly employed in lumbering and piloting on the St. Mary's River, which divides Florida from Georgia. Down this stream he had escaped in a "dug-out," and after thus finding the way, had returned (as had not a few of my men in other cases) to bring away wife and child. ‘I wouldn't have leff my child, Cunnel,’ he said, with an emphasis that sounded the depths of his strong nature.” **74**

By early October, most of the slaves remaining in East Florida had escaped to the Federals. Samuel Fairbanks announced: “They shall probably steal what few negroes there are left and destroy at will.” **75** On October 7<sup>th</sup>, General Brannan, commander of the expeditionary force on the St. John's River, reported: “about 100 contrabands have placed themselves under my protection, and it is my intention to bring them to Hilton Head on my return.” **76** On October 9<sup>th</sup>, the Federal transports and gunboats embarked from their occupation of Jacksonville, taking with them “all the negroes, free and slaves, they could find in the place.” **77** Winston Smith estimated that only four or five blacks were left in Jacksonville after the occupation withdrew. **78** The number of contrabands that crossed the picket lines in Jacksonville numbered 176. **79** The most “tangible result” of the Federal invasion and occupation was that 2,000 blacks from the territory adjacent to the St. John's River sought the “protection of our arms.” **80** These black fugitives would form the base of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Volunteers.

In November 1862, Brigadier General Rufus Saxton sought to put one of the formed black regiments to the test, commissioning the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Volunteers on an expedition throughout the east coast of Georgia and Florida. The primary objective of the mission was to test the fighting abilities of the black recruits. It was a training ground for the fugitive contrabands to test whether or not they could prove useful combatants against the Confederacy. **81** Afterwards, Saxton commended them for their bravery and skillful conduct:

“It is admitted upon all hands that the negroes fought with a coolness and bravery that would have done credit to veteran soldiers. There was no excitement, no flinching, no attempt at cruelty when successful. They seemed like men who were fighting to vindicate their manhood and they did it well.” **82**

Lieutenant Colonel O.T. Beard, the commander of the expedition, showered similar praise onto the black soldiers under his lead:

“The colored men fought with astonishing coolness and bravery. For alacrity in effecting landings, for determination and for bush fighting I found them all I could desire-more than I had hoped. They behaved bravely gloriously and deserve all praise.” **83**

Saxton declared the excursion “one of the important events of the war, one that will carry terror to the hearts of the rebels.” **84** The recruitment of slaves was so successful that Beard’s regiment increased their numbers by 150% through the enlistment of runaways. They had started from St. Simons with only 62 black soldiers but had “returned to Beaufort with 156 fighting men (all colored). As soon as we took a slave from his claimant we placed a musket in his hand and he began to fight for the freedom of others.” **85** Beard continued to list the number of successes: “Besides these men we brought off 61 women and children. We destroyed nine large salt-works, together with \$20,000 worth of horses, salt, corn, rice, &c., which we could not carry away.” **86** In the few weeks that the black regiments raided the Florida coast, they had “captured from the enemy an amount of property equal in value to the cost of the regiment for a year,” and had “driven back equal numbers of rebel troops” as other white regiments. **87**

Saxton saw the success of the mission as a great possibility for the Federal war effort. He made a proposal to place a company of one hundred black soldiers each at the command of a number of well-armed and barricaded light-draught steamers. The steamers could penetrate into the heart of Southern territory through the coastal water outlets and plunder the plantations. **88** Saxton was exuberant over the possibility of implementing this strategy: “Indeed I can see no limit to which our successes might not be pushed up to the entire occupation of States or their occupation by a large portion of the rebel army.” **89** Though the whole year of 1862, over one thousand runaway slaves in Florida enlisted to fight for the Union. **90**

On November 5<sup>th</sup>, General Saxton invited Thomas W. Higginson to command the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Volunteers. Believing that the war would directly affect the “destiny of the negro race,” Higginson was overjoyed at the offer: “I had been an abolitionist too long, and had known and loved John Brown too well, not to feel a thrill of joy at last on finding myself in the position where he merely wished to be.” **91** Unlike many other officers at the time, Higginson felt perfect confidence that the new black regiments could be trained: “having happily known, by experience, the qualities of their race, and

knowing also that they had a home and household and freedom to fight for, besides that abstraction of the ‘the Union.’” **92**

For nearly two months, Higginson implemented an unbroken interval of rigorous training that stressed military discipline, drill, and camp duty. **93** He was mostly impressed with one Florida company: “There is one company in particular, all Florida men, which I certainly think the finest looking company I ever saw, white or black; they range admirably in size, have remarkable erectness and ease of carriage, and really march splendidly. Not a visitor but notices them; yet they had been under drill only a fortnight and a part only two days.” **94** Higginson’s time in the camp had him identifying more with the ex-slaves than even other whites: “Nor is it till the line of white officers moves forward, as parade is dismissed, that I am reminded that my own face is not the color of coal.” **95**

His observations of the black army camp depict a quite different assortment of people than the “Sambo” image portrayed by Southern propaganda. Even though most of the blacks were highly religious, one “free-thinking” black soldier chastised his comrades for relying so heavily on God to give them strength: “When a man's got de sperit ob de Lord in him, it weakens him all out, can't hoe de corn.” **96** Their love for learning he observed not only foreshadowed the reverence that blacks held for education following the Civil War, but the desire of a population to regain their humanity after being withheld from any form of advancement for such a long time. Higginson recalled the small schools for the freemen established in his military camp: “Their love of the spelling-book is perfectly inexhaustible, they stumbling on by themselves, or the blind leading the blind, with the same pathetic patience which they carry into everything. The chaplain is getting up a school-house, where he will soon teach them as regularly as he can.” **97**

By January 1863, the 1<sup>st</sup> South Carolina Volunteers would execute their first mission in the form of a raid up the St. Mary’s River to plunder the lumber mills and acquire much-needed supplies. In a surprise attack on the Confederate headquarters, the black recruits killed the commanding officer of the enemy force and sent their cavalry retreating into the woods in dismay. **98** Only minimal casualties were suffered by the black regiment and even some of the men who were severely wounded attempted to dress their wounds so that they would not get placed onto the sick-list. **99** After the night-time skirmish, Higginson elated:

“Hereafter it was of small importance what nonsense might be talked or written about colored troops; so long as mine did not flinch, it made no difference to me. My

brave young officers, themselves mostly new to danger, viewed the matter much as I did; and yet we were under bonds of life and death to form a correct opinion, which was more than could be said of the Northern editors, and our verdict was proportionately of greater value.” **100**

As the expedition made its way up the St. Mary’s River, it successfully garnered the necessary supplies and caused a “perfect panic throughout the State of Georgia.” General Saxton was exhilarant at the success of the overall mission: “The negroes from Florida are far more intelligent than any I have yet seen, fully understand their position and the intention of the Government toward them. They will fight with as much desperation as any people in the world.” Nobody that knew anything about the regiment “now doubts its efficiency” as they had inflicted over sixty casualties on Confederate forces since their first engagement. The black regiment would next be commissioned to occupy Jacksonville along with the portion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Volunteers that had already been mustered into service by Colonel Montgomery. **101**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Volunteers was primarily formed out of the black recruits garnered in this next mission. The first two companies of 120 black soldiers had been recruited by James Montgomery at Key West, where numerous runaways from northeast Florida had congregated. **102** Dave Taylor recalled the story of how his father, a slave who accompanied his master Pinckney on a vessel escaping to Key West during the Civil War, was liberated by Montgomery. When his master’s ship was captured by a Federal steamer, freedom was granted to the slaves on board. Taylor recalled that Montgomery “took advantage of the helplessness of the slave owners to sow discord among the blacks, and before many days big Dave...had “joined de Yankees” as a color sergeant.” **103**

Although much effort was undergone to conceal the plans for the next invasion, soon enough there were numerous reports from Northern newspapers that greatly exaggerated the proposed expedition of two black regiments as “a great volcano about bursting, whose lava will burn, flow, and destroy,” — “the sudden appearance in arms of no less than five thousand negroes,” — “a liberating host,” — “not the phantom, but the reality, of servile insurrection.” **104** But the number of black troops garnered for the mission only numbered around one thousand. **105** General Saxton expounded the objectives of the mission: “To occupy Jacksonville, and make it the base of operations for the arming of negroes, and securing in this way possession of the entire State of Florida.” **106**

On March 10, Higginson and the black soldiers reached Jacksonville from up the St. John’s River and occupied it without firing a shot. The men jubilantly celebrated at

the relative ease of overtaking the city. **107** Expecting to increase their forces through black recruits, they found that every able-bodied slave in the city had already been removed by their owners. But they were already making plans to recruit the slaves in the surrounding region. **108** Only five hundred whites remained in the city, “at the mercy of their former slaves.” To some of these whites, this was the “last crowning humiliation, and they were, or professed to be, in perpetual fear.” **109** Indeed, although the black soldiers maintained the best conduct, Colonel Higginson was well-aware that his men had “private wrongs to avenge” and were in “utter disbelief in all pretended loyalty” on the part of the residents. **110** The blacks were constantly sworn at and insulted, particularly by the women of the city. **111** Two of Higginson’s leading black officers calmly pointed out to him the spot where their brothers had been hanged by the lynch law. Yet his disciplined soldiers restrained from any acts of retaliation. **112**

Minor skirmishes between the black regiments and the Confederate forces began the night of the invasion and sporadic fighting was maintained for days. Saxton reported: “In every action the negro troops have behaved with the utmost bravery.” He believed that not a single incident could cause “greater panic through out the whole Southern coast” than this raid of black troops in Florida. **113** By March 14<sup>th</sup>, runaways had already begun flocking into the city: “the negroes are collecting at Jacksonville from all quarters.” **114** In fact, immediately after the invasion began, Confederate General Finegan ordered all troops that could be mustered in four or five days to the vicinity of Jacksonville to prevent Federal movement into the interior. But in doing this, he was “compelled to leave with entirely inadequate protection many important points on the coast whence negroes may escape in large numbers to the enemy and where they have easy access to the interior.” **115**

As Higginson’s force occupied the city, Montgomery led his force of 120 men on pillaging expeditions up the St. John’s River. Colonel Higginson depicted these raids:

“In Colonel Montgomery's hands, these up-river raids reached the dignity of a fine art. His conceptions of foraging were rather more Western and liberal than mine, and on these excursions he fully indemnified himself for any undue abstinence demanded of him when in camp. I remember being on the wharf, with some naval officers, when he came down from his first trip. The steamer seemed an animated hencoop. Live poultry hung from the foremast shrouds, dead ones from the mainmast, geese hissed from the binnacle, a pig paced the quarter-deck, and a duck's wings were seen fluttering from a line which was wont to sustain duck trousers.” **116**

Montgomery's black regiment next attempted to set up a post at Palatka and swell up their ranks through slave recruits. Confederate General Finegan noted that the objective of the mission was to occupy Jacksonville as gunboats made their way up the St. John's to "establish another secure position higher up the river, whence they may entice the slaves." **117** Finegan feared that a Federal outpost at the St. John's River manned by black soldiers would bring about the imminent destruction of slavery in Florida if means to hold the river could not be supplied:

"That the entire negro population of East Florida will be lost and the country ruined there cannot be a doubt, unless the means of holding the Saint John's River are immediately supplied... To appreciate the danger of the permanent establishment of these posts of negro troops on the Saint John's River I respectfully submit to the commanding general that a consideration of the topography of the country will exhibit the fact that the entire planting interest of East Florida lies within easy communication of the river; that intercourse will immediately commence between negroes on the plantations and those in the enemy's service; that this intercourse will be conducted through swamps and under cover of the night, and cannot be prevented. A few weeks will suffice to corrupt the entire slave population of East Florida." **118**

After the Federal base was to be established at Palatka, the Federals planned to reinforce it with Higginson's black regiment, falsely estimated by the Confederates to number four thousand, while Jacksonville was to be occupied by several white regiments. The entrance of two white regiments into Jacksonville, the Sixth Connecticut and the Eighth Maine, resulted in an equal number of white and black troops under Colonel Higginson. **119** It was a rare occasion that an integrated force of soldiers was formed under the Federal army. Higginson wrote: "It was the first time in the war (so far as I know) that white and black soldiers had served together on regular duty." **120** On March 26, Montgomery began the expedition of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Volunteers upriver to Palatka, raiding plantations along the way: "taking everything they could ally their hands upon-negroes, horses, and provisions of all kinds." **121**

The black regiment reportedly plundered and ransacked the plantation homes of Baza, Dupont, Sanchez, Dancy, Mays, Ballings, Simkins, Cole, and many others on the riverside. **122** They did not show the same discipline as Higginson's regiment, exacting retribution on their former masters without mercy or restraint. James M. Dancy, a Confederate Florida guerilla who served under General Dickison's command, believed that Montgomery's expedition was sent out for the "express purpose of capturing my



father, F. L. Dancy,” a planter on the St. John’s River. But fortunately for his father, “he had decided the day before to move his family and servants from the old home on the bank of the river to the plantation two and one-half miles back.” **123** The black slaves along the river supported the arrival of their liberators. As the Federal gunboats approached the wharf, Dancy sent some of the slave boys to watch the river but instead, “the boys became busy at play and forgot their mission.” Dancy left behind one of the able-bodied male slaves who joined the Federals and was enlisted into the army several weeks later. **124** On March 27, Montgomery’s expedition arrived at Palatka, not expecting to receive any kind of resistance in the remote town. As the black soldiers exited the gunboats, they were immediately turned back by an ambush of Colonel Dickison’s militia and failed to occupy the town. **125**

On March 28, an order was made to recall the entire expedition and withdraw from Jacksonville despite the overall success of the mission. The Federals had recruited many runaway slaves in the brief occupation. Fernandina’s black refugee population had swelled to 1,500. Colonel Milton S. Littlefield recruited 101 new volunteers for the 4<sup>th</sup> South Carolina among these refugee camps. **126** On March 29<sup>th</sup>, the Federal troops set Jacksonville ablaze and plundered the homes as they evacuated. General Finegan believed that both black and white soldiers were involved in the decimation of the town. **127** But Colonel Higginson differed on this point: “The white soldiers frankly took upon themselves the whole responsibility; and as all the fires were made in the wooden part of the city, which was occupied by them, while none were made in the brick part, where the colored soldiers were quartered.” **128** Northern newspapers concurred with his story. **129** The *Boston Journal* lamented: “We know not whether we are most rejoiced or saddened to observe, by the general concurrence of accounts, that the negro soldiers had nothing to do with the barbarous act.” **130**

It seemed as if the black regiments of Florida had ensured their role in further shaping the events of the Civil War. On April 1, Abraham Lincoln wrote to General Hunter praising the work of the black soldiers in Florida:

“I am glad to see the accounts of your colored force at Jacksonville, Florida. I see the enemy are driving at them fiercely, as is to be expected. It is important to the enemy that such a force shall not take shape and grow and thrive in the South, and in precisely the same portion it is important to us that it shall.” **131**

After the Federal occupation withdrew from Jacksonville, slaves from every district continued to arrive daily to the occupied cities of Fernandina and St. Augustine. In June 1863, a Northern war correspondent in St. Augustine depicted the city:

“Their houses are filled up with contrabands, of whom over one thousand are now in the place, most of them being refugees from slavery. They come into our lines daily men, women and children - most of them from Southern Georgia. The able-bodied men are put into the ranks of the colored regiment now being raised here, and the rest are supplied with rations by the Government and are put to work upon plantations where practicable, but most of the poor creatures are hived up by hundreds in the abandoned houses of the former inhabitants, and have nothing at all to do. Some of them are very aged, there being several Negroes here of an age over one hundred years.” **132**

Colonel Milton Littlefield was busy recruiting among the black refugees of St. Augustine to establish the next regiment: “he has very good success, having raised one company at once by volunteering.” Yet he would not have procured nearly as many recruits among the black refugees without the threat to conscript adult males. **133** The correspondent noted one fugitive slave who had recently escaped from Georgia:

“By his own account, he had been a very hard case - that is, he had been a refractory slave, and had been repeatedly whipped for contumaciousness. On the morning of his escape he had been promised thirty-nine lashes; but, said he, with a grin, ‘when de time came dis chile was about five miles from dar, and he nebber stopped until las night.’ He was a mass of rags from top to toe, the original material of the garb being fairly undistinguishable.” **134**

Although the Federal expedition was prematurely called to a halt, the frequent number of raids had “inspired the rebel with a most wholesome terror.” **135** In 1863, a Northern observer believed that slave insurrection was almost thoroughly absent in the South, “except perhaps in the last expedition on the Florida coast, where negro troops were sent into the interior, and brought in a large number of contrabands.” **136** Perhaps a legacy of East Florida slave militancy was engendered in the mass insurrection at the start of the Second Seminole War. This militancy apparently carried over to the Civil War. Just as East Florida’s slaves had organized the largest insurrection in the Antebellum

South's history in collusion with the black Seminoles, they generally disaffected from the plantations in large numbers when the Yankees made their way through the area.

By the end of the year, plans for an occupation of Florida were once again revitalized to increase the number of black recruits in the Federal army. On December 15, 1863, General Gilmore proposed a military expedition to Florida with the objectives to "recover all the most valuable portion of that State, cut off arch source of the enemy's supplies, and increase the number of my colored troops." **137** In early February 1864, Gilmore commissioned Brigadier General Seymour to Florida at the command of several black regiments, the 8<sup>th</sup> Regiment US Colored Troops and Montgomery's Brigade - the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina, the 3<sup>rd</sup> US Colored Troops, and the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts. **138** But this excursion into Florida territory would not be as grandiose as the prior campaigns.

On February 7, the Federals seized Jacksonville for the fourth time since the war had begun. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, Confederate Chief-of-Staff Thomas Jordon reported to General Finegan that he had ordered reinforcements for him: "Do what you can to hold enemy at bay and prevent capture of slaves." **139** A Federal officer reported that a runaway slave of Confederate Captain Able had "given us much valuable information relating to the enemy's forces and movements, which was subsequently confirmed." **140** However, the massive influx of runaway slaves in every single one of the prior Federal invasions was not characteristic of this campaign. The planters of East Florida had taken the necessary precautions to remove their slaves into the state's interior or out of the state. Sergeant George E. Stephens wrote from Jacksonville: "There are comparatively few contrabands coming into our lines. The rebels had been expecting our force here in Jacksonville a fortnight before its arrival, and ran all their negroes off to Georgia." **141** One Federal officer reported:

"The rebels, having received a warning at the time our troops landed last March, have taken particular care to send their negroes over the line into Georgia and Alabama. On the route of sixty miles that I traveled on horseback, I did not observe but three negroes. One had been left on Ten Mile Run the night we captured it, and another walked from Lake City to Sanders on the night we were bivouacked before the former place. We cannot count on liberating many negroes in Florida for the simple reason that they have been sent out of the state." **142**

On February 13<sup>th</sup>, Captain Marshall of the 40<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Mounted Infantry advanced upon Gainesville. After skirmishing all night with Confederate infantry,

Marshall's force of 49 men occupied the town on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup>. A black contraband gave the Federals only forty minutes notice that an impending attack of Confederate cavalry was nearby. "Instantly calling to his aid and willing services of about 100 liberated negro men," Capt. Marshall was able to kill or capture the entire Confederate force of one hundred men without a single casualty. The Federals appropriated 1.5 million dollars of property in Gainesville. 36 of the insurrectionary slaves left with the Federals and all but three enlisted. At the same time, Marshall's forces had prevented a general slave uprising in the town:

"A negro insurrection in the neighborhood being apprehended, the proper means were taken to secure all negroes coming into town. These were told that they were free, but their responsibilities and duties as freemen were strongly insisted on, while their rights were explained and conceded. No evil from emancipation resulted in the neighborhood or town of Gainesville." **143**

This communication from Marshall shows the paternalistic thought pattern that Federal military officials applied in "emancipating" the slaves. They could not let them take freedom into their own hands nor receive freedom without teaching them what they perceived to be their "responsibilities and duties" as free men. A New York *Tribune* war correspondent reported the contribution of the blacks in Gainesville to their own freedom:

"Among the negroes liberated, were several who could write fairly. One of these "excattle" had been his master's bookkeeper, cashier, clerk, and managing man. His owner, utterly ignorant of the merest rudiments of education, had actually brought the negro at a high price, on purpose to use his superior intelligents! Another, who had been a house servant, brought in an Enfield rifle, which his master has set up against a fence, while superintending the work of the field hands. Bringing the weapon into the town, he insisted on being allowed by Capt. Marshall to strike a blow for liberation of his race. The negroes who were in the town procured clubs, and begged for permission to fight on the side of the Yankees. So much for the theory of the pro-slavery men, that all negroes are and must be ignorant, debased, unenterprising, cowardly, and supine!" **144**

On February 20, the Federal expedition came to a quick halt at Olustee, in what proved to be the only major engagement that occurred in Florida throughout the entire Civil War. The Federals suffered a severe setback and endured heavy casualties that were

disproportionately shared by the black soldiers. Seymour led the Union forces to advance on Lake City and disrupt the railroad communication between East and Middle-West Florida. **145** As the black regiments marched along, they joyously sang: “We’ll be bound for Tallahassee in the morning.” **146** The expedition was completely taken by surprise when they were ambushed by a large Confederate force garrisoned at Olustee. After the white 7<sup>th</sup> New Hampshire Volunteers in the front retreated under the first round of heavy Confederate fire, General Seymour ordered the relatively amateur black regiment 8<sup>th</sup> USCT to the front under the command of Colonel Fribley. Instead of completely pulling back the forces, which would have been the most reasonable mode of action, the blacks were sent to the front to be slaughtered like cattle. Sergeant Rufus S. Jones recalled that the black regiment had “received orders to go into the war without unslinging knapsacks, or the sergeants taking off their sashes, which caused nearly all the first sergeants to be killed or wounded. Only one-half the regiment was loaded.” **147**

Lieutenant Oliver Norton recalled that the black regiment had managed to initially endure the Confederate onslaught even when the white soldiers hadn’t:

“Military men say it takes veteran troops to maneuver under fire, but our regiment with knapsacks on and unloaded pieces, after a run of half a mile, formed a line under the most destructive fire I ever knew. We were not more than two hundred yards from the enemy.” **148**

As soon as the regiment reached the front, they attempted to gather themselves after their initial fears had subsided, but were then ruthlessly picked apart. While the white regiments had been permitted to fall back, the blacks became cannon fodder under the heavy Confederate guns. There were “eight or ten regiments ready” but only “two or three regiments fighting.” **149** Norton depicted the scene:

“At first they were stunned, bewildered, and knew not what to do. They curled to the ground, and as men fell around them they seemed terribly scared, but gradually they recovered their senses and commenced firing. And here was the great trouble—they could not use their arms to advantage. We have had very little practice in firing, and, though they could stand and be killed, they could not kill a concealed enemy fast enough to satisfy my feelings.

After seeing his men murdered as long as flesh and blood could endure it, Colonel Fribley ordered the regiment to fall back slowly, firing as they went. As the men fell

back they gathered in groups like frightened sheep, and it was almost impossible to keep them from doing so. Into these groups the rebels poured the deadliest fire, almost every bullet hitting some one. Color bearer after color bearer was shot down and the colors seized by another.

Behind us was a battery that was wretchedly managed. They had but little ammunition, but after firing that, they made no effort to get away with their pieces, but busied themselves in trying to keep us in front of them. Lieutenant Lewis seized the colors and planted them by a gun and tried to rally his men round them, but forgetting them for the moment, they were left there, and the battery was captured and our colors with it.” **150**

The black regiment courageously held its position in the front for two hours, losing three hundred soldiers in the process. **151** Norton reported the heavy losses endured by the command: “Company K went into the fight with fifty-five enlisted men and two officers. It came out with twenty-three men and one officer. Of these but two men were not marked. That speaks volumes for the bravery of negroes.” **152** Even though the 8<sup>th</sup> USCT was forced to retreat, Norton praised the black soldiers for their determination under the adverse circumstances:

“No braver men ever faced an enemy...Our regiment has been drilled too much for dress parade and too little for the field. They can march well, but they cannot shoot rapidly or with effect. Some of them can, but the greater part cannot. Colonel Fribley had applied time and again for permission to practice his regiment in target firing, and been always refused.” **153**

They had neither received the adequate ammunition nor training necessary to confront the large Confederate force. As most black regiments were forced to succumb to the monotony of garrison duty under the Federal army, there was little time invested in practical military training. The lack of sufficient training reflected the attitude of many high commanders who were unwilling to recognize the fighting capabilities of black soldiers. The results at Olustee were the lives of many pointlessly lost. The white regiments held the ground for some time after the retreat of the 8<sup>th</sup> USCT, enduring heavy losses until Seymour mobilized the black brigade under Colonel James Montgomery and retired to the rear. As the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts rapidly advanced, they shouted: “Three



The Battle of Olustee, lithograph published by Kurz and Allison of Chicago in 1894, depicting the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts under fire. The battle actually took place in the piney woods rather than out in the open as shown in the print. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

cheers for Massachusetts and seven dollars a month!” **154** The arrival of the black troops to the front was greatly welcomed by the white regiments. A white soldier recalled:

“An incident that is well remembered, when the day was already practically lost, was the coming forward into action of Colonel Montgomery's colored brigade, the First North Carolina passing between the Forty-seventh and Forty- eighth on the double-quick, and cheered by those shattered regiments as it went into battle. The coming of the fresh troops on to the field staggered the enemy for a moment, and prevented an effective pursuit.” **155**

A member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers recalled the charge: “The colored troops went in grandly, and they fought like devils.” **156** Even though the introduction of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts had halted the Confederate advance, Seymour

perceived that the battle was lost, calling for a retreat. But now the black 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts was left exposed to cover the withdrawal of Federal forces. An officer of the 54<sup>th</sup> recalled: “No orders were received to retire. No measures were taken for its safe withdrawal. It would seem that either the position of the regiment was forgotten, or its sacrifice considered necessary.” **157** The black troops had been left under the Confederate guns, essentially used as a shield to cover the white Union troops while they fled. After successfully diverting the enemy’s attention from the retreat, the 54<sup>th</sup> gradually withdrew until they could rendezvous with Seymour’s main force. **158**

Sergeant Jones recalled the scene of the medical camps at Baldwin after the battle, confirming that the black soldiers were far braver than their white counterparts: “It looked sad to see men wounded coming into camp with their arms and equipment on, so great was their endurance and so determined were they to defend themselves to the death. I saw white troops that were not badly wounded, that had thrown away everything.” **159** A corporal of the Confederate 19<sup>th</sup> Georgia Infantry wrote: “The Yankees...pitched three negro regiments against us, and all acknowledged that they fought well.” **160** Seymour reported that the three black regiments involved in the battle, the 1<sup>st</sup> North Carolina Volunteers, the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, and the 8<sup>th</sup> USCT Regiment, had

“behaved credibly...like veterans. It was not in their conduct that can be found the chief cause of failure, but in the unanticipated yielding of a white regiment from which there was every reason to expect noble service, and at a moment when everything depended upon its firmness.” **161**

More accurately, the blacks were used as cannon fodder to protect the lives of white soldiers and officers. Even Floridian Ellen Call Long pondered, “I wonder what the poor negroes of Olustee, who were put in the front to receive the bayonets of the Confederate force, thought of the white patriots in the rear.” **162** A fugitive slave from Arkansas who joined the Federals explained why he decided to desert the Union army from his post at Jacksonville: “I was scared to death all the time. They put us in the front to shield themselves. They said they was fighting for us – for our freedom...I wanted to quit but they would catch them and shoot them if they left. I didn’t know how to get out and get away.” **163**

The casualties of the battle were staggeringly high. There were 1,861 Federal soldiers killed, wounded, or missing, 626 from the ranks of the several black regiments. A large number of soldiers were left missing on the field of battle, including a



disproportionate 157 black troops. **164** Over the several days after the battle, the brutal treatment that the black prisoners received at the hands of their Confederate captors would become one of the most infamous atrocities of the war. The brutality inflicted by the Confederates reflected their bitter feelings towards the growing use of black troops by the Union forces. Some Union white soldiers expressed concern for the fate of their black comrades in the hands of the enemy for precisely this reason. At the Federal medical camp at Baldwin, a doctor wondered: “I know what will become of the white troops who fall into the enemy’s possession, but I am not certain as to the fate of the colored troops.” **165** Sergeant Rufus Jones recalled:

“I cannot fail to contrast this treatment which rebels receive at the hands of our authorities with that meted out to the negro soldiers by the rebel authorities. A flag of truce was sent out to the rebels the other day, and when asked about the negro prisoners and their officers, the reply was ‘We will hang every damned negro officer we catch’” **166**

Jones expressed dismay for the lack of follow through on the part of the Federal officials to avenge the murder of black prisoners of war:

“We learn nothing of the colored prisoners. It was reported that they were killed on the field. When shall this weakness and folly on the part of our authorities cease? And when shall these atrocities be met with that vengeance and retaliation they so justly merit? Where are the colored prisoners captured on James Island, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 1863, and those captured at Fort Wagner, July 18<sup>th</sup>? And lastly, where are those captured at the battle of “Olustee,” February 20, 1864? Can any escaped prisoner answer? If, while we are pampering and petting rebel prisoners, Federal prisoners are hung and enslaved, we are exchanging smiles for kicks – paying gold and honor for dross and dishonor.” **167**

Prior to the battle, Colonel McCormick of the Confederate 2<sup>nd</sup> Florida Cavalry ordered his troops to spare no black prisoners:

“Comrades and soldiers of the 2nd Florida Cavalry, we are going into this fight to win. Although we are fighting five or six to one, we will die, but never surrender. General Seamore's Army is made up largely of negroes from Georgia and South

Carolina, who have come to steal, pillage, run over the state and murder, Kill and rape our wives, daughters and sweethearts. Let's teach them a lesson. I shall not take any negro prisoners in this fight." **168**

Sergeant A.J. Clement of the First Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers observed what had happened the day after the battle: "Major Bogle was lying with his wounded colored troops at a mill a few miles to the rear, where the rebels slaughtered all the wounded "niggers" who had crawled there from the battle-field, -- about three hundred." **169** A soldier of the 19<sup>th</sup> Georgia Infantry recalled: "We walked over many a wooly head as we drove them back...How our boys did walk into the niggers, they would beg and pray but it did no good." **170** James Jordon of the 27<sup>th</sup> Georgia Volunteers recalled: "The negroes were badly cut up and killed. Our men killed some of them after they had fell in our hands wounded." **171** The slaughter of the black soldiers was an explicit message to slaves of what would happen if they joined the enemy. Captain Winston Stephens of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Florida Cavalry wrote to his wife following the battle: "Tell the negroes if they could have seen how the Northern negroes were treated I think it would cure them of all desire to go." **172** One white captive Sergeant Henry Long of the 48<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteers recalled his kind treatment at the hands of the Confederates in contrast to that of the blacks. As some rebel soldiers kindled a fire for him and gave him some tobacco, water, and a blanket, he had also heard "the blasphemous language of some marauding soldiers who were ill-treating wounded negroes." **173**

William F. Penniman of the Confederate 4<sup>th</sup> Georgia Cavalry recalled the scene of the battleground after the fight: "Niggers dead, niggers wounded in all directions, some severely, other not so much so, groans and prayers from the heard in all directions." Penniman questioned a young officer to the cause of the firing he heard after the battle. The officer replied: "Shooting niggers Sir. I have tried to make the boys desist but I can't control them." When Penniman objected to the shooting of unarmed prisoners as morally repulsive, the officer replied: "That's so Sir, but one young fellow over yonder told me the niggers killed his brother after being wounded, at Fort Billow, and he was twenty three years old, that he had already killed nineteen and needed only four more to make the matter even, so I told him to go ahead and finish the job." **174** As Penniman rode along, the sounds of firing continued. The next day, he arrived at the battlefield early in the morning before the burial squads had begun their work. He eerily depicted the aftermath of the massacre:

“The results of the shooting of the previous night became quite apparent. Negroes, and plenty of them, whom I had seen lying all over the field wounded, and as far as I could see, many of them moving around from place to place, now without a motion, all were dead. If a negro had a shot in the shin another was sure to be in the head.

A very few prisoners were taken, and but a few at the prison pen. One ugly big blackbuck was interrogated as to how it happened that he had come back to fight his old master, and upon his giving some very insolent reply, his interragater drew back his musket, and with the butt gave him a blow that killed him instantly. A very few of the wounded were placed on the surgeons operating table- their legs fairly flew off, but whether they were at all seriously wounded I have always had my doubt.”

**175**

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, Col. Benjamin C. Tilghman, commander of the Third US Colored Troops, left Jacksonville with a scouting party composed of black soldiers and civilians. Reaching Marion County, they scoured the plantations for slaves, horses, and mules, bringing back 74 naked and destitute refugee slaves to Jacksonville. The expedition would have probably brought in more slaves if it wasn't for the betrayal of a girl on one plantation “where they had killed the Overseer, & burned the sugar mills with a quantity of sugar syrup & whiskey and the body of the Overseer in the sugar house.” With the girl's assistance, John Dickison's seventy Confederate cavalrymen ambushed the expedition. When the two bands charged upon each other, the black soldiers reportedly shouted “in the name of Fort Pillow!” in commemoration of the numerous Union black soldiers who surrendered at Fort Pillow in Tennessee only to be massacred by the Confederates. The black troops drove the Confederate guerillas back, killing the captain and twenty-seven of his men, wounding eleven, and capturing four, while the black expedition suffered no losses other than a guide whom the Confederates captured. As a missionary teacher in Union-occupied Jacksonville rhetorically asked, “Doesn't this show Negro valor?” **176**

The news of the Emancipation Proclamation brought forth predictable responses from all parties. The immediate reaction of Southern whites was violence. Shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation was declared, runaway slaves congregating in Union-occupied Key West jubilantly celebrated in the streets when the news was heard. Around 250 blacks with waving flags and military music paraded in the streets and attended a dinner at the “Barracoons.” But the procession was stoned by the whites of the town, the flag taken from the leader and the flag staff broken over his head. **177** On the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation the following year, blacks at Union-occupied St.

Augustine held a similar celebration. The black school children sang the popular tunes “When this Cruel War is Over” and “John Brown’s Body.” Republicans and Unionists rejoiced in the liberation of their “allies” but also believed that their direction and guidance was necessary so that the freemen did not get the “wrong idea” about their emancipation. Rev. Wilson of the 24<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts and Rev. Trumbull of the 10<sup>th</sup> Connecticut made speeches to the freemen “urging the necessity of labor in order to prove themselves true men, and worthy of the blessings of freedom.” That night, over a hundred persons would attend a dinner where the blacks would serve the guests before taking a seat for themselves. Some of the blacks claimed that the military officials were attempting to force them to labor and compared them to their former masters in this aspect. **178**

The resistance of Floridian slaves had reverberating effects throughout the South. One of the most significant blows was their assistance in destroying the immensely important salt-works that lined the coast. The Federal blockade had limited the production of salt throughout the Southern coastline. Shortly into the war, the need for the commodity had become critical to the point where famine would become a reality if a necessary supply of salt could not be procured. Salt had been an essential need for the preservation of meat. Considering Florida’s importance in supplying beef to the Confederacy, the lack of available salt certainly had adverse effects on the army’s food supply. In July 1862, the *Florida Senital* urged the production of salt to save the Confederacy from famine: “Starvation will be the inevitable consequence should the war continue and the ports continue blockaded, if we fail to make salt on our coast.” **179** A month later, the *Senital* had a more urgent tone to the need for a salt: “MAKE SALT! MAKE SALT! We have more to fear this fall from a lack of this article than we would from Lincoln’s invading hordes.” **180**

Because of its extensive shoreline, its secluded bays and inlets, and the cheap, plentiful fuel from its vast tracts of uncleared forest and swampland, Florida’s salt-works quickly became one of the most important sources of the commodity. Clearly aware of this, the Federals engaged in a campaign to eliminate the Florida salt-works with the assistance of the many slaves who labored on them. **181** Their assistance to the raids was integral to the successful destruction of Florida’s salt industry. In February 1862, four contrabands reported to the Federals that salt was being produced by means of large iron boilers in the back of the Cape San Blas lighthouse. **182** On September 8<sup>th</sup>, Federal gunboats destroyed the extensive steam salt works at St. Joseph’s Bay and carried off eleven blacks who had undoubtedly assisted them. This raid had

“created great excitement throughout Georgia and Florida, these works having been the main source on which those States relied for a supply of salt for the winter’s provisions for their troops, and that it was a greater injury to the rebels than if we had captured 20,000 prisoners.” **183**

In early October, the contrabands provided reliable information that the Confederate troops had withdrawn from the Fernandina railroad and the Federals destroyed the extensive salt works there. The blacks informed them that the works were producing 150 bushels of salt per day. **184** In June 1863, two Federal steamers made an expedition up the St. Mark’s River and destroyed fifty salt boilers, together with the buildings attached and some sixty bushels of salt, besides capturing three prisoners and taking along six contrabands who willingly volunteered. **185**

While most of these raids were sporadic attempts to harass the Confederate economy, the Federal blockade sought to completely eliminate Florida’s salt works by late 1863. In December, the blockading force at St. Andrew’s Sound made a concerted effort to destroy the “extensive and valuable salt works” at Lake Ocala and St. Andrew’s Bay. The raid resulted in the destruction of salt works amounting to three million dollars. Thirty-one contrabands employed at the salt works “gladly gave themselves up to us and assisted materially in destroying the works and digging up kettles.” **186** Soon after, the Federals completed the expedition by eliminating the remaining salt works at the north end of St. Andrew’s Bay. Forty-eight contrabands and five Confederate deserters joined them along the way. **187**

In January 1864, the rebels attempted to rebuild these salt works. They had only been in operation for ten days when the Federal blockade decided to take action. Acting Master William R. Brown ordered two gunboats fitted out for an expedition to prevent the resurgence of the salt industry at St. Andrew’s. The rebels fled at the sight of the approaching force and the Federals “proceeded in the destruction of everything connected with the manufactories.” Seven slaves fled to them for protection and assisted the troops in the destruction of the establishment. **188** The contrabands informed them that a large barge would leave the Wetappo River on February 18<sup>th</sup> to the east end of St. Andrew’s Bay with the necessary materials to erect a large salt work and return with a large cargo of salt. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, two gunboats awaited the entrance of the barge to its destination. When it failed to arrive, they instead landed and destroyed fifteen of the salt works in the vicinity, “among which were some of the largest Government salt works ever erected in Florida.” They took with them six of the contrabands found at the place. **189**

In February 1864, Acting Master Edmund C. Weeks commissioned a raid to destroy the salt works at Goose Creek. When he landed at the works and captured the workers, the blacks assisted him with information. **190** In December 1864, Acting Master J.C. Wells learned from Confederate refugees that considerable salt was being produced at St. Andrew's Bay and dispatched an expedition to destroy the works. After doing so, they took away three contrabands, one who enlisted onboard and the other two refused as their families had been left behind. **191** Although seemingly minimal, the destruction of the salt works throughout Florida dealt a significant blow to the Confederacy when it came to procuring necessary food supplies. The Confederacy had spent about six million dollars on the salt work installations of St. Andrew's Bay alone. **192** The black slaves among the various salt works were more than willing to not only procure their own freedom but take vengeance on their former masters by undermining these establishments.

Slave disaffection was not concentrated within East and West Florida alone. In all sections of the state, slaves were abandoning the plantations to Federal lines, joining organized expeditions of Federal troops, organizing with Confederate deserters and conscript evaders to combat the Confederacy, and supplying the Federal outposts with information of Confederate movements. Not all slaves who ran away worked directly with the Federals. At some point, white Confederate deserters and runaway slaves formed a tacit alliance on an "enemy of my enemy" basis. Even though Middle Florida remained relatively safe from Federal incursions, a number of slaves organized with Confederate deserters within the thick swamps of Taylor, Levy, and Lafayette counties. Brigadier General John K. Jackson reported that Confederate deserters from Virginia and North Georgia, along with Florida troops, were collected in the swamps of these counties,

"and have organized, with runaway negroes, bands for the purpose of committing depredations upon the plantations and crops of loyal citizens and running off their slaves. These depredatory bands have even threatened the cities of Tallahassee, Madison, and Marianna." **193**

The deserters and runaway slaves were making excursions onto the large plantations that bordered these swamps, increasing their recruits through the slaves they brought back with them. **194** This is a largely unknown aspect of the Civil War in Florida. Organized bands of Confederate deserters and runaway slaves were liberating slaves from the cotton plantation complex of Middle Florida. The poor white "Union

men” and freemen would build the base for the Republican Party in Florida during the Reconstruction era. They first established their ties in fighting alongside each other in their mutual interest of seeing the Confederate Florida government fall.

But the same yeomen who had been conscripted into the war, deserted, and hid-out in the Florida swamps, had proven themselves rabid anti-abolitionists in the past, supporting the aristocracy’s notions of black inferiority. What changed their perspective during the Civil War? Confederate deserters, allied with Federal officers, probably adopted the pragmatic viewpoint of the Federal army to liberate the “contraband” blacks as a way to undermine their enemy. Runaway slaves, Confederate deserters, and Federal officials all had a mutual goal to bring down the Confederacy, organizing on this common ground even if they cared little for each other. These guerilla bands rapidly spread throughout the state. It was reported that up to eight hundred runaway slaves, Confederate deserters, and conscript evaders were hiding out in South Florida between Charlotte Harbor and Lake Okeechobee. **195**

Five hundred Unionists, deserters, and runaway slaves were organized in the vicinity of Cedar Key, committing depredations on Gainesville. **196** A Gainesville newspaper reported that this particular band was “destroying railroad trestles, burning bridges, and cutting telegraph lines in an attempt to disrupt communications both within the state and between Florida and the other Confederate states.” **197** While Federal officials were normally in charge of the operations in Florida from 1864 to the war’s end, most of the damage done to the Confederate Florida government was perpetrated by these organized guerilla bands. In the battle of Marianna, the county-seat of Jackson County, General Asboth commanded several hundred Confederate deserter recruits from West Florida to seize the Confederate garrison there. After the deserters successfully took hold of the city, there were “over 600 contrabands,” Asboth reported, “who followed us with the greatest enthusiasm.” **198**

Emancipated black soldiers found that liberation from chattel slavery did not free them from the racial discrimination of the Federal government and military in matters of pay, assignment, equipment, and treatment. The ex-slave troops quickly figured out that their freedom was not only grounded in the defeat of the Confederacy, but in the struggle for equal treatment under the Federals as well. The early attempts of Union military officials to exploit and oppress their “contraband” recruits dampened prospects for emancipation. The early organization of black regiments under General Hunter, formed mostly of self-emancipated blacks from Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, resembled more the forced conscription of slaves under the Confederacy than the liberation of slaves. Potential black recruits and soldiers grew skeptical of the Federals over time.

Colonel Higginson found it difficult to garner new recruits and convince existing soldiers that the government would come through on its promises:

“They show no jealousy or suspicion towards their officers. They do show these feelings, however, towards the government itself, and no one can wonder. Here lies the drawback to rapid recruiting. Were this a wholly new regiment, it would have been full to overflowing, I am satisfied, ere now. The trouble is in the legacy of bitter distrust bequeathed by the original organization under General Hunter, — into which they were driven like cattle, kept for several months in camp, and then turned off without a shilling, by order of the War Department. The mode of formation of that early regiment was, on the whole, a great injury to this effort; and the men who came from it, though the best soldiers we have in other respects, are the least sanguine and cheerful; while those among them who now refuse to enlist have a great influence in deterring others. Our soldiers are constantly twitted by their families and friends with their prospect of risking their lives in the service, and being paid nothing; and it is in vain that we read them the instructions of the Secretary of War to General Saxton, promising them the full pay of soldiers. They only half believe it.” **199**

Higginson wrote this in November 1862. Only eighteen months later he sincerely regretted his admonitions to his black soldiers to trust the government to come through on its promises:

“With what utter humiliation were we, their officers, obliged to confess to them, eighteen months afterwards, that it was their distrust which was wise, and our faith in the pledges of the United States Government which was foolishness. The attempt was made to put them off with half pay.”

Higginson reported the reaction of his regiment to the news of their reduced pay. His black regiment, made up largely of Florida blacks, refused to be so degraded as to even accept it:

“This pride was afterwards severely tested during the disgraceful period when the party of repudiation in Congress temporarily deprived them of their promised pay. In my regiment the men never mutinied, nor even threatened mutiny; they seemed to make it a matter of honor to do their part, even if the Government proved a defaulter; but one third of them, including the best men in the regiment, quietly refused to take



a dollar's pay at the reduced price. "We 'se gib our sogerin' to de Guv'ment, Cunnel," they said, "but we won't 'spise ourselves so much for take de seben dollar." They even made a contemptuous ballad, of which I once caught a snatch:

'Ten dollar a month  
Tree ob dat for clothin!  
Go to Washington  
Fight for Linkum's darter'

This "Lincoln's daughter" stood for the Goddess of Liberty, it would seem. They would be true to her, but they would not take the half pay. This was contrary to my advice, and to that of their other officers; but I now think it was wise. Nothing less than this would have called the attention of the American people to this attempted fraud." **200**

After the battle of Olustee, Sergeant George E. Stephens harshly criticized the unequal pay received by the black soldiers after their brave standing at the engagement:

"Now it seems strange to me that we do not receive the same pay and rations as the white soldiers. Do we not fill the same ranks? Do we not cover the same space of ground? Do we not take up the same length of ground in a grave-yard that others do? The ball does not miss the black man and strike the white, nor the white and strike the black. But, sir, at that time there is no distinction made; they strike one as much as another. The black men have to go to the same hurling of musketry, and the same belching of cannonading as white soldiers do." **201**

Enlisted runaways found that military service under the Union closely resembled the slavery they escaped from. Several months after Olustee, a soldier of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts wrote to the *Christian Recorder* expressing outrage for the unequal pay and treatment black soldiers had received even though they disproportionately sacrificed for the Union:

"What do you think of this? We rally to the defence of our imperiled country; we freely offer our lives in its defence. The Government acknowledges the value of our services, and yet they permit our brave men to be treated in a shameful manner. When I enlisted at Boston, Mass., Feb. 21st, 1863, I enlisted on the same terms as

other soldiers - clothing, rations, and pay. But all their promises are false and untrue. We have been serving nearly sixteen months, faithfully and truly, the Government of the United States, yet not received one cent of pay. No! they come with woe-stricken face and say they can pay us but \$10 a month, and \$3 deducted for clothing, which leaves us but \$7 a month. Just let them think of Fort Wagner, James' Island, and Olustee, Florida!

The men of the 54th have suffered terribly, and still they have the cheek to rest these brave men of color out of their rights. When the 54th left Boston for the South, they left many white men at home. Therefore, if we are good enough to fill up white men's places and fight, we should be treated then, in all respects, the same as the white man. We have families as well as the white man. The State of Massachusetts has given our people nothing. We, that came out of other States to fill up her regiment, the 54th, for the sake of the service, for the sake of the country, for the sake of justice, and the rights of our gallant regiment, we call upon the authorities of Mass., in behalf of this noble regiment; and, if not, we should like to have an honorable discharge. This regiment has, for many a day, mourned the loss of their gallant Colonel Shaw. The contrabands are better off to-day than the men of the 54th. If there are any slaves, the men of the 54th are as much slaves as any. But the day will soon come when God Almighty will drop the weight on their own shoulders that they are pressing on the black man.” **202**

As blacks were highly active in procuring their own freedom in Confederate Florida, it's reasonable to question the mainstream historical belief that the Union was a liberating force for a passive slave population, whose actions and contributions to their own freedom are marginalized in mainstream history. The rebellious slaves who had taken the initiative to liberate themselves long before the Union clearly announced their freedom have been ignored in the majority of Civil War history books. The Republican politicians and abolitionists simply utilized the vast number of runaway slaves roaming the backwoods and filling up the Federal camps to undermine the Southern rebellion. The mass slave desertion was the rebellion inside the rebellion. The majority of runaways simply took advantage of the “white man’s war” to procure their own freedom without any real assurance that the North would truly liberate them. If nothing was done to guarantee their freedom, which ensured their support, the “contrabands” could have potentially become a destructive force that would have undermined the war effort or snowballed into a revolt threatening both the South and the North. The Union was

unwilling to accept a rebellious slave population outside of its control or direction, but realized if controlled, under white management, it would prove useful for its ends.

The escaped slaves replaced their uncontrolled “war of liberation” with a strategic alliance with the Union, unknowingly delaying their full emancipation for many years to come. It would turn out that the Federals were unwilling to abandon white supremacy as the de facto mode of reconstructing the post-war South, beginning with maintaining white land monopoly. The sentiments and notions of Federal military officers, Northern politicians, abolitionists, and the Northern press all reveal that black inferiority and white dominion were to continue following the war. Black soldiers who received inferior pay, treatment, weapons, and rations, were forced into labor camps, denied proper training, and placed on the frontlines had no illusions about their Northern allies. Many saw right through the ambiguous proclamations of liberty. Black soldiers struggled both to destroy the slavery regime in the South and for equal treatment under the Federal military. The twin-struggle revealed that blacks were not simply satisfied with the end of slavery, but sought to break down the walls of white supremacy as a whole. This struggle would translate into class struggle, revolving around the distribution of land and labor, wage rates, employer treatment, and the monopolization of capital in the South. In early 1865, the Civil War came to an end in Florida, but the struggle of black Floridians to achieve their freedom was only beginning.

## Chapter 12

# Slavery with a Human Face: The Postwar Struggle over Land, Labor, and Freedom (1865-1876)

### The Freedman's Bureau and Neo-Slavery

Although slavery legally came to an end, the social relations of the Antebellum South remained intact after the overhaul of Confederate Florida. Shortly after emancipation, there was a general hostility from the ex-slaves who had “grown more reckless of former restraints,” with “feelings of spite and revenge for being heretofore held in bondage.” <sup>1</sup> A Northern traveler in Fernandina shortly after the war observed this general sentiment among ex-slaves: “the negroes seemed deficient in love for the old masters, to whom we have been told that they were so much attached and when informed of Jeff. Davis' capture, spontaneously struck up the same song as at Hilton Head – ‘We'll hang Jeff. Davis on a sour apple tree.’” The traveler recalled the horrified reaction of ex-Senator and railroad owner David Yulee when he learned of his potential fate at the hands of the emancipated slaves:

“He had not recovered from the shock of learning that, instead of being again clothed with the authority of the State, he and his fellow conspirators stood a better chance of being dealt with for treason, when the negro question came up. He was desirous that the State officials should control the freedmen. It was suggested that the freedmen, being in some sections in the majority, and in all having the advantage of loyalty, might better control the State officials.” <sup>2</sup>

Susan B. Eppes, the wealthy planter heiress of a Tallahassee plantation, had constantly espoused and praised the willful obedience of her slaves throughout the Antebellum period, arguing their contentedness as evidence of slavery's benevolence. After their emancipation, things quickly took a turn for the worse in her eyes. On April 23, 1865, Eppes looked out in her yard and saw “some twenty or more half-grown negro

boys and girls” singing, to the tune of “John Brown’s Body,” a familiar song that newly emancipated blacks throughout the South were singing:

“We’ll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree, We’ll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree, We’ll hang Jeff Davis on a sour apple tree, As we go marching on.” **3**

As her own slaves joined the crowd, Eppes quickly rushed in their midst and flung her carriage whip about with all her might, sending the blacks retreating back to their quarters. But when she attempted to follow the injured ex-slaves with the whip in her hand, she noticed “behind the magnolia tree a dark figure was visible and I did not know how many more there might be.” She then retired to her manor. The planter heiress began noticing “insolence from the negroes became more and more frequent.” **4** Later on, Eppes had requested that one of her supposedly loyal house cooks prepare a meal for her sick mother, only to receive a surprising response back: “Take dat basket back ter your mother an’ tell her if she want any dinner she kin cook it herself.” After Susan pled with the cook to no avail, she reflected to herself: “They are free, I thought; free to do as they please. Never before had I had a word of imprudence from any of our black folks but they are no longer ours.” **5**

A week later, Eppes found that her former slaves had abandoned their work posts to attend a congregation of black and white Union soldiers who would officially declare their freedom. As the ex slaves attended these political meetings, the planter self-admittedly feared the “change of demeanor of those around the house; a sullen air they had not had before. If this goes on, and we have no way to stop it, what will the end be? The terrors of San Domingo rise before our eyes.” **6** Susan’s sick mother told Lula, one of their ex-slaves, that she was prohibited from taking her daughter Hannah, who was attending to her while she was ill, out to a meeting at the Union military camp at Centreville. Lula “reminded her that they were now free and if she saw fit to take her daughter into that crowd it was nobody’s business.” **7**

Louis Napoleon, a former slave from Tallahassee, recalled the jubilant celebration that took place as ex-slaves crowded the Tallahassee streets:

“It was in May, in the middle of the day, cotton and corn being planted, plowing going on, and slaves busily engaged in their usual activities, when suddenly the loud report of a gun resounded, then could be heard the slaves crying almost en-masse, “dems de Yankees.” Straightway they dropped the plows, hoes and other farm

implements and hurried to their cabins. They put on their best clothes "to go see the Yankees." Through the countryside to the town of Tallahassee they went. The roads were quickly filled with these happy souls. The streets of Tallahassee were clustered with these jubilant people going here and there to get a glimpse of the Yankees, their liberators. Napoleon says it was a joyous and un-forgettable occasion." **8**

Margrett Nickerson, an ex-slave from Tallahassee, also recalled the loud sound of the cannon as the moment when the slaves generally recognized that the Yankee troops had arrived:

"Dis is whut I know, not whut somebody else say. I seen dis myself. En missus, when de big gun fiahed, de runerway slaves comed out de woods frum all directions. We wuz in de field when it fiahed, but I 'members dey wuz all very glad." **9**

As the Third US Colored Infantry entered Tallahassee at the end of the war, blacks crowded the streets to celebrate the arrival of the brethren to emancipate them. A black private in the regiment recalled the scene:

"The people of color were glad to see us, and cheer after cheer rent the air as we marched through the principal streets...with colors flying and our band playing (John Brown's marching on.) The would-be rebels looked on in silence, not daring to speak above a whisper...The rebs here seem to die very hard at the idea of black troops to guard them, but they have been very quiet, and do not have much to say. How true is the saying that we not know what a day may bring forth! Great changes are being wrought." **10**

In East Florida, ex-slaves occupied abandoned and confiscated property. When their former owners attempted to take possession of their lands, the blacks forcefully resisted efforts to oust them. A Northern traveler to Fernandina reported: "There is a terrible state of feeling in this city between the whites and blacks...In all my travels South I have seen no such exclusiveness or bitter feeling." **11** When General McCook's cavalry entered Tallahassee on May 20<sup>th</sup>, "two hundred guns were fired on the occasion, and Yankees and negroes were the only participants in the ceremonies." In some areas where there was a large concentrated slave population, Ellen Call Long reported that the freemen "had driven proprietors and overseers from the fields." The main reason for the

mass migration of black Floridians was the general impression that the master's land would be distributed among them, but many apparently refused to wait. On the fourth of July, blacks from as far as twenty to thirty miles away gathered at Tallahassee "with the avowed expectation of receiving a share of the property of the white people, which they had been informed would be divided among them." Long complained: "the Negroes flock into town, leaving the planter crop uncultivated." **12**

Most of the freemen population went into persistent migration at the close of the war, drifting throughout the state for months to get a taste of freedom and with the expectation of receiving lands of their own. **13** There were multiple reasons why ex-slaves refused to return to plantation labor: 1) Their former masters attempted to force them back into bondage 2) The Federal encampments behind Union lines provided food and protection from their former masters 3) The underground slave network had widely communicated the news of General Sherman's executive order to distribute forty acres and a mule out to every ex-slave family following the war, and the blacks, having faithfully assisted the Union in winning the war, expected this compensation at the very least 4) Some former slaveholders expelled the blacks from their property without pay or subsistence.

Thomas W. Osborn, assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau in Florida, reported to Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner Oliver Howard:

"I am not disposed to believe that the tendency of the negro to wander about the country was owing alone to the negro, but in a considerable degree the disposition shown by his former owner and to the unwillingness of the owner to adapt himself to the new condition of the negro." **14**

The Federal camps served more as a temporary guard for the ex-slaves seeking to avoid the vengeance of their former masters who were attempting to prevent them from realizing their new found freedom through coercion. But they eventually became more internment camps than they were protective zones. A Northern observer vividly depicted these impoverished camps:

"A more destitute set of human beings could not be imagined. The clothing they wore was just sufficient to cover their bodies. A few dirty bundles of rags comprised the limit of their wealth, and there they sat in the sand—an ignorant, homeless, poverty-stricken set of wretched humanity." **15**

After several years of service that proved vital to the Union victory, black soldiers in Florida were now being forced into obscurity, abused and exploited by their commanding officers. In late October 1865, one of many mutinies took place among the Third Colored Regiment stationed at Jacksonville. One of the soldiers had been suspended by his thumbs “after the approved style of slaveholders and according to the practice in the regiment.” One private, Jacob Plowden, reportedly disputed the authority of officers to tie up men by their thumbs, arguing that: “White soldiers were not tied up that way, and no other colored soldiers only in our regiment.” A Private Miller was described as “very fiery, walking from one part of the crowd, to the other, talking loudly, using language calculated to lead the men to cut down the man undergoing punishment.”

The suspended soldier was cut down by a group of soldiers in his regiment and again suspended by the orders of Col. Brower. When the attempt was made to cut him down again, Brower fired upon the unarmed men, killing one and wounding another. Amid general cries of “one of us is shot, get your muskets...shoot the son of a bitch,” the black soldiers fired back and shot the officer through the hand, stabbing a lieutenant several times as well. **16** Six of the soldiers were tried by a military commission and executed for attempted murder. They were hung at Fernandina in November. Eight other soldiers were tried for similar charges, six of whom were convicted and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. A military report concluded:

“The colored soldiers have been acting very badly in the State of late, and it seems to be the opinion of officers and citizens that the sooner the colored soldiers can be mustered out of the service and their places filled by white soldiers the better it will be for all concerned. There have been several mutinies and eementes of late in the Third and Thirty-fourth Colored Regiments. There have been several other disturbances, and as a general thing the colored soldiers are inciting the freedmen to acts of lawlessness and misbehavior, which, if not checked, will go far toward undoing the great good which has been done in this State by the Military Governor and the officers in charge of the Freedmen’s Bureau.” **17**

What was this reputed “misbehavior”? As the Federals attempted to reconcile with their white counterparts in the South, they were unable to understand why a population free from several hundred years of the most inhumane and degrading bondage would want to possibly take vengeance or even exercise power over their former



oppressors. Neil Coker, an ex-slave from St. Augustine, amusingly recalled black soldiers humiliating their former masters and overseers:

“Dozens of the Negro soldiers, he says, discarded their uniforms for the gaudier clothing that had belonged to their masters in former days, and could be identified as soldiers as they passed only with difficulty. Others would pause on their trip at some plantation, ascertain the name of the 'meanest' overseer on the place, then tie him backward on a horse and force him to accompany them. Particularly retributive were the punishments visited upon Massrs. Mays and Prevatt—generally recognized as the most vicious slave drivers of the section.” **18**

A Louisiana black soldier wrote an anonymous letter to the Secretary of War depicting the harsh conditions that he was laboring under in Florida a year after the war was over:

“A partay of Us went to work Sassay Creeck Florida working on the Rail Road and Some Days with Nothing to Eat only what we Could Get from the Citizens by paying our Money for it and here we is at Jack Son ville Florida working on the whoft from 7 oClock AM until 12 M and from 1 p.M. to 5 pM And working very hard in Deed Loading And unloading Steame Boats And loading and unloading wagons with woods and So forth and with hardly Anything to Eat Much And here we is in Jack son ville Fla working from Monday Morning to Saturday Evening but we Don't work any of the Night but work the hold week & Dont have one Day so we may wash our Close and Cleans our Musket with All that we have to Go on Ensppection Every Sunday and if our Guns or Clothes is not Cleans we have a large piece of wood to tote all Day and sir I am Going to tell you one thing About the Disperseation of the 99<sup>th</sup> Regiment officers how they is the Meaning of officers that is in the holds of the Union they Even Dont like to hear any Metting And they try to keep Us as Egnorance as they Can... Though our offices treat Us very mean in Deed yet I hope God will be with them for they have a Strct Account to Give for their Bavaore [behavior] here.” **19**

As blacks monopolized labor and whites monopolized land in post-Civil War Florida, outright class struggle began between ex-slaves and ex-masters. Both Northern and Southern whites quickly concluded that force was necessary to subjugate a black laboring class to white authority. Black migrants who left the plantations immediately

after the war seeking lands and rations were considered idle and indolent, proof that white oversight and coercion were necessary to make them efficient workers. The rights of self-management and autonomy desired by the freemen were diametrically opposed to the forced-labor system ushered in by the Freedmen's Bureau and white planters. The freemen wanted to own decent land and self-sufficiently produce crops to sustain their families. Ex-slaves considered working for their ex-masters under a contract system eerily reminiscent of the old system. Their former masters equivocally despised the idea of employing them under a free labor system. This Catch-22 would have only been resolved if successful land reform and redistribution was implemented, giving the freemen the independence and autonomy they desired in managing their economic affairs through land ownership.

But most whites, including Northern officials, believed that white supervision over black labor was necessary to restore Florida's economy, increase productivity, transform the state into a haven for capital, and, above all, to maintain white supremacy. Yet the freemen were unwilling to labor unless granted a degree of self-management and rights to ensure their protection. Many were resistant to the idea of working for whites at all and either sought out homesteads or claimed their former master's land. To resolve this dilemma, they were legally declared "vagrants" and "idlers" and coercive measures were implemented to force them back onto the plantations working under whites. Thus attempts to fix the ruined Florida economy would remain under the assumption that whites would own the land and wealth, while the freemen were to be a subordinate laboring class with little rights or protection from relentless exploitation. What ensued was a struggle between the white landowner and the black laborer over the meaning of freedom in the post-Civil War era. Class struggle and racial conflict were one in the same.

President Andrew Johnson sought a policy of reconciliation with ex-slaveholders, returning 850,000 acres of their land confiscated by the Federal military during the Civil War. **20** Provisional Florida Governor William Marvin followed Johnson's moderate Reconstruction policy, appealing to Southern planters and Northern capitalists. As other moderate Republican military officials, he was first and foremost concerned with stability that would facilitate the growing development and migration of Northern capital to Florida. This "stability" meant a subordinate, disenfranchised class of former slaves to provide cheap, docile labor. In his address to a crowd of freemen at Marianna, he assured them that they would not receive one parcel of their former masters' lands:

“There has been a story circulated in Middle Florida that on the first day of January next the land and mules will be taken from your former owners and divided among you. Such a story I suppose, you have all heard. Have you? Speak out if you have and tell me. (‘I’se hearn it! I’se hearn it!’ say all) Well, who told you so? (An answer: ‘The soldiers.’) . . . I want you to understand me. The President will not give you one foot of land, nor a mule, nor a hog, nor a cow, nor even a knife or fork or spoon. (A voice: ‘Dar ole man, you hear dat!’).” **21**

Louis Napoleon recalled that some of his fellow slaves remained on the plantation after the war: “having no place to go, they decided it was best to remain until the crops came off, thus earning enough to help them in their new venture of home-seeking.” **22** He was unaware that he along with many others would come out at the end of year with little more than debt. Ex-slave Frank Berry recounted his experiences following the Civil War as an indentured tenant:

“The master gave him a strip of land for farming purposes. However, they were to pay for the use of this parcel of land each year. Vividly he recalls helping his mother raise cotton and corn so that at the end of the year they would be able to help pay off the landlord. Christmas eve was the end of the fiscal period for all accounts. Each year found them in debt to the landlord deeper and deeper.” **23**

A Northern correspondent in Florida reported that blacks were holding off from forming labor contracts in anticipation of acquiring lands or negotiating better terms of employment:

“The freedmen here have shown some unwillingness to make contracts, which is partly attributable to an expectation that they will get better terms by holding off, and also to the expectation of getting lands for themselves, either from the Govt or of the Planters as many of them have already done, the owners furnishing implements & mules & 1/2 forage, and receiving one half the Cotton etc.” **24**

The freemen, having a monopoly on labor in Florida, could effectively coerce higher wages by holding off until planters would concede to better terms. The freemen wanted higher wages as well as a degree of self-management in the workplace. The coercive, exploitative contract system provided neither. The Northern correspondent also

believed that the independent black colonies would “rapidly degenerate” unless “there is enough of the white element among them to set them good examples of industry & direct their labor.” On the other hand, it was acknowledged that “the desire of whites to control their labor makes them prejudiced in this matter.” While large planters claimed that the “negroes could not be relied on” they were unable to comprehend why “men suddenly freed from the restraints to which all their lives been subjected” were “experimenting with the sudden prize of freedom.” While its often believed that the freemen migrated throughout the state after the war to the test the limits of their freedom, its more accurate to state that they understood independent ownership of land would grant them power to back their new emancipation, which was not so much a “sudden prize” but something that they had fought for tooth and nail and forced the Union to concede them.

The redistribution of plantation land would have established a socioeconomic backbone to the black community, giving the freemen the self-sufficiency and autonomy to assert their rights without the need for Federal support. But it was Federal intervention that turned blacks back to the plantations working under their former owners in similar conditions to chattel slavery. The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Land, a Federal agency theoretically created and assigned to help and protect the former slaves, worked to correct the black misconception that their master’s plantation land would be divvied out to them. Shortly after Emancipation, the Bureau sent their agents out to congregated assemblies of black freemen to assert the fact that they would labor for wages under white planters and urged them to form contracts with their ex-masters. Often the Bureau and military officials applied force to return the freemen back to the plantations. Thomas Osborn, Assistant Commissioner of the Freedmen’s Bureau in Florida, threatened to send all of the “indolent” freemen residing in the outskirts of Tallahassee and Jacksonville back to the plantations. Threats like this worked so effectively that nine-tenths of the ex-slaves in Florida would return back to the plantations and sign contracts with their former masters by 1866. **25** In October 1866, Bureau agent Ansel E. Kinne approvingly wrote: “The condition of the Freedmen is generally better than expected. Instead of finding them wandering from place to place, or idling, they were generally employed on the plantations, in mechanical labor or as house Servants.” **26**

After the devastation that Florida faced from the war, mass production of cotton was generally perceived as necessary to revitalize its broken economy. Union army officials and Bureau agents believed it necessary to return their ex-slave “allies” back to the cotton plantations. Rebuilding the South’s economy took preference over the rights of the freemen in the immediate aftermath of the war. Cotton was a labor-intensive cash

crop and Antebellum Florida had solely depended on African slave labor for its cultivation and harvest. Moderate Republicans now grasped onto the age-old belief of Southern whites that black labor and white oversight were both necessary for cotton production. A New York *Times* correspondent in Florida reported the general consensus of Middle Florida planters:

“The planters in the vicinity...believe it will be impossible to succeed by free labor. Cotton, they say, will never be profitably cultivated by free labor-‘the negroes will not work it, and the whites cannot’-is their theory. It takes almost constant labor the entire season through to prepare the ground, cultivate, gather, gin and prepare for market the cotton, and ‘negroes will prefer to cultivate corn and potatoes and live easy.’” **27**

The climactic theory, the belief that black labor was necessary to work in tropical climates, prevailed in the minds of many whites. An article written by a moderate Republican in the Gainesville *Florida Independent* advertised Florida’s cheap black labor:

“Labor is abundant; the best farm labor can be had at from ten to fifteen dollars per month - men who know how to work, have been brought up to it, and if certain of getting the greenbacks, will do a full days work; are kind, tractable, obedient, and glory in their bone and muscle and in their indifference to the mid day sun.” **28**

Because many blacks decided to wait until they received a share of their master’s land, the Freedmen’s Bureau resorted to force and arrested black “vagrants” who would not return to work on the plantations. Brigadier General Israel Vogdes, the army commander in Jacksonville, reminded the freemen that “orderly and industrious habits” were “essential to the preservation of society” and that “idleness, vagrancy and all marauding pilfering” would be promptly and severely punished.” **29** Bureau agents in Georgia and Florida practiced more coercion in matters of labor than most other states. **30** Assistant Commissioner Thomas Osborn was more interested in the “prosperity of the manufacturing interests of the State” and creating a “healthy system of labor” than in preventing exploitation of the ex-slaves and encouraging land reform. On November 21, 1865, he sent out a circular among the ex-slaves urging them to obediently labor for their former masters:

“The agents of the Bureau will use their influence to induce and assist persons desiring to employ laborers and freedmen as speedily as possible to make contracts for labor, to disabuse the minds of freedmen of any erroneous ideas they have acquired resulting from their new relations to the proprietors of the soil, and also to instruct them that the only possible means to obtain a livelihood is by honest industry, and also that the government will not support them in their idleness.” **31**

The pathetic contract standards that Osborn required for contract laborers were even less sufficient than conditions under slavery. They were to include comfortable quarters, a minimum of a peak of meal or four pounds of bacon each week, and medical attendance when necessary “at the expense of the laborer requiring such attendance.” Osborn required that both contracting parties understood that the “time of the laborer belongs to the employer; and the employer will designate the kind of labor the laborer is to perform.” Sharecroppers were to be guaranteed a portion of the crop or monthly or yearly wages in return for their labor. For any ex-slaves who failed to seek employment under their former masters, “The usual remedies for vagrancy, breaking of contracts and other crimes, will be resorted to, the freedmen and other persons of African descent having the same rights and privileges before military or civil courts that white citizens have.” **32**

That the freemen initially migrated throughout the state following emancipation was used as propaganda by Southern planters that blacks were intrinsically “idle,” “indolent,” and unwilling to labor unless coerced and managed under the supervision of whites. The Freedmen’s Bureau, moderate Republicans, and Union military officials held this sentiment and set up laws against “vagrancy” to force the freemen to labor for their ex-masters. A Northern visitor in Florida observed that the freemen were averse to the contract system because it was too much like slavery: “They dislike, as a rule, to do any labor for their old masters, since that would seem to them very much like the old system which they now have such a horror of. Again, we suspect the chief reason why the negro is loth to labor is the uncertainty of his wages.” **33**

A Bureau agent in Marion County agreed that many freemen were averse to the term contract, “believing as it is binding that it partakes of the character of slavery.” Instead, “the moment they were free,” the freemen in Marion County “took advantage of the Homestead Act and took up lands in the tracts belonging to the government, and refused to work on the plantations.” Because of this, a planter lamented, “There are

plantations on which were machines and implements for making sugar, costing, perhaps, twenty thousand dollars, all of which are useless and ruined for that reason.” **34** Klan violence in Marion County would later intend to dispossess black landowners. But following Reconstruction, Southern whites stuck to the narrative that blacks abandoned the plantations because they refused to work, not to the historical reality that they desired to manage their own labor and acquire their own lands.

The Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner Oliver Howard reported that black Floridian workers, contrary to Southern claims, were mostly working well and that “their idleness in such cases may be traced to the oppression of employers, which tends to dishearten the laborers.” Good employers offering good term made no complaint of a labor shortage following the war. Bureau agent Ansel E. Kinne observed:

“It was found that those freedmen, who had been fairly dealt with both in humane treatment and an equitable division of the crops, were diligently and contentedly laboring for their former masters under contracts - while those who were otherwise treated, or supposed themselves to be, were separated, by, sometimes their own choice and sometimes by the choice of the employer, from the old plantation and either laboring for others or their whereabouts quite unknown. Most commonly, the freedmen know, from general reputation, the character of the neighboring planters - so that they are found with those whom they have chosen to labor for.” **35**

The Bureau generally opposed a fixed or minimum wage rate, which could have effectively offset some of the starvation wages paid to the blacks. Agents of the Bureau were given considerable discretion to choose standard wage rates. In June 1865, Bureau Commissioner Oliver Howard sent out circular instructions for all assistant commissioners: “No fixed rates of wages will be prescribed for a district, but in order to regulate fair wages in given individual cases the agent should have in mind minimum rates for his own guidance.” **36** But the Bureau seemed uninterested at all in securing a living wage for the freemen. In August 1866, Florida Bureau agent James G. Foster reported that “the present wages paid are not sufficient to enable the freed people to meet their necessities.” Why was this? In another report, Foster explained: “The rates of wages and terms of contracts have, as far as possible, been left to be regulated by the law of supply and demand.” He continued:

“The course pursued to secure the personal welfare of the freedmen has been to require all to labor at some employment; to observe the terms of their contracts or agreements; to comply with the state laws respecting marriages; to be industrious and economical, to provide for the education of themselves and their children; to be faithful and useful to their employers, and to strive to secure their good opinion; to labor contentedly; to abandon migratory habits, and to save their earnings in a safe place of deposit against a time of need.” **37**

The Bureau seemed more interested in using force to drive down wages to rates that were more favorable for white planters, even if they couldn't provide basic necessities for the freemen. F.F. Flint, a Federal official in Tallahassee, reported that there were numerous convicted freemen - arrested by the Freedmen's Bureau - under charge of the guard at his post for various “crimes,” including “violations of contracts, idleness, neglect of duty, and culpable disregard of the interests of their employers.” The freemen, having a monopoly on labor, were attempting to determine their own wages at rates that were unsuitable for white planters. There existed, in Flint's words, “a combination to prevent ...work being done at reasonable and customary rates.” He acknowledged that there was a secret union of freemen that was determined on enforcing a higher wage rate on white employers. To ensure cheap black labor for Southern planters, the Federal military and Bureau implemented force. Flint reported: “exorbitant wages and unreasonable conditions are too frequently demanded by them for their services, and insolence and refusal what they agreed to do follow necessary and proper convictions for their faults and improprieties as servants.” Flint suggested that the freemen “work and conduct themselves with propriety, and to render faithful services to their employer at reasonable rates of compensation.” To ensure this, Flint requested that “the necessary means for prompt and rigid enforcement of the same should be fully provided.” **38**

The freemen had a chance to get better wage rates outside of the contract system or by holding out until homesteads, equipment, and seeds were available for independent landownership. But the Bureau ensured that if the freemen failed to form or abide by contracts with their ex-masters, at rates solely determined by their employers, they were arrested and forced to labor at even worse terms than the contracts provided. Thus they ushered in a tyranny of white employers in Florida and the rest of the South. Northern and Southern whites both agreed on a forced-labor system to suppress black laborer demands for higher wages and better working conditions. The low wages of “supply and



demand” contract work placed the freemen into near-slavery conditions, unable to purchase the goods necessary for survival from the plantation store and were thus forced to procure debt. Was this renewed slavery? Southern planters recognized that “if negroes are not allowed to acquire property or become landholders, they must ultimately returned to plantation labor, and work for wages...and they feel that this kind of slavery would be better than none at all.” After Emancipation, a Florida planter expressed his intention to exploit black wage labor to the greatest degree possible: “There is now nothing between me and the nigger but the dollar-the almighty dollar-and I shall make out of him the most I can at the least expense.” **39**

The ex-slaves who returned to their former plantations were originally organized under conditions similar to chattel slavery in the Antebellum South. They were employed by their slave masters, formed into work gangs, managed under the strict supervision of an overseer, subjected to strict regulations intended for social control, housed into slave quarters, etc. **40** But defeat of the masters to reproduce the same social relations as the Antebellum South came from the struggle of black laborers for autonomous control over their land, labor, and lives. A battle between the landowners and the laborers would commence as blacks resisted the dominance of former slaveholders.

Class conflict at the time was aimed to transform the socioeconomic relations of the South or, in other words, revolution. A complete revolution in the social relations of the South would have had drastic consequences to the Northern industrial capital that migrated there after the Civil War. In response, Southern planters used intimidation, coercion, terrorism, mob violence, assassinations, legislative restrictions, etc. to restrict the liberty and autonomy of their former subjects. It wasn't Federal legislation that defeated the work gang system after the Civil War. In fact, Bureau ordinances had enforced the maintenance of gang labor. The slave revolt in the Civil War had carried over to the subsequent black resistance to their master's imposition, making it impossible to continue the previous degree of manor social control. There were four elements of the landowner's fight to institute a labor system similar to chattel slavery: 1) The Freedmen's Bureau 2) the post-Civil War labor contracts 3) Florida's black codes 4) The Ku Klux Klan. **41**

The system of sharecropping was the product of class conflict between white landowners and black laborers in the years following the Civil War. Although it could hardly be considered complete freedom, it was a relatively decentralized form of economic arrangement. Black families were given more autonomy on their plots of land in response to black resistance against the imposition of the work gang system. The individual fifty acre plots of land gave black families more independence than the slave

quarters of chattel slavery. **42** The neoclassical ideas that sharecropping came about as the result of superior economic efficiency are false. The planter class was more concerned with maintaining the same degree of social control they enjoyed in the Antebellum years through the prevalence of the work gang system. Shortly after the Confederate defeat, the Union occupation attempted to reinforce the establishment of the work gang system in Florida. On July 3, 1865, General Newman made several orders with provisions that ex-slaves remain on the plantations, that vagrant blacks be returned to the plantations, that laborers should obey their employer, and that overseers should be appointed by the ex-slaves themselves to superintend the work gangs. **43**

Under the work gang system, the ex-slaves were whipped, punished, and regimented in the same fashion as chattel slavery. Generally refusing to return to the plantations and attempting to form homesteads, black laborers forced the white planter class to revert to sharecropping as a concession. The former slaves refused employment on the plantations until they were ensured some form of protection from planter exploitation. Although planters relinquished some control over the black labor force with sharecropping, black laborers were not free from landowner management and supervision. White planters would still oversee sharecropper cultivation. Crop decisions were still in the hands of the landowners. Landowners could also make decisions whether or not to renew the lease at the end of the labor contract. **44**

A prime example was George N. Jones' Tallahassee plantations, which incorporated a crop-sharing gang system following the Civil War. Certain parcels of land, comprising mostly 150 to 200 acres, were parceled up and worked by squads of eight to ten blacks under a "head man." Jones was entitled to two-thirds of the cotton crop and an agreed proportion of the corn. The squad's share of the cotton was divided up among its members after deducting individual debits for the advanced supplies. In the early 70's, the entire system collapsed due to the "dissatisfaction among the negroes at the autocracy and indolence of their head men." In 1871, Wallace S. Jones, George's brother, reported the growing disaffection among the black hands:

"The tendency on the part of the hands appears to be to break up in very small squads, as for instance a man with his wife and children; and even if he has no children, to attempt to make a crop with the help of his wife. This might be tried if the negro owned the mule. There is general dissatisfaction expressed by hands with the head men of squads. The latter, it is claimed, are too dictatorial, and do not perform their share of the labor – a great deal of truth in the latter complaint." **45**

No universal plan existed any longer for the black hands on Jones' plantation. Some of them continued as sharecroppers; others, if they could raise cash or credit for the price of a mule, rented land at fixed rates with money or cotton; and others worked for wages. Meanwhile, scattered black houses replaced the cluster of cabins in the old slave quarters – a sign of decentralization.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, famous abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, resided in Florida for the remaining years of her life throughout the Reconstruction era and took extensive notes on her observations. Her philosophy for the ex-slave was an embodiment of the moderate Republican ideal that white domination should remain a fundamental aspect of Southern society. Paternalistically, Stowe used patronizing rhetoric to refer to the freemen:

“My plan is not in any sense a mere worldly enterprise. I have for many years had a longing to be more immediately doing Christ's work on earth. My heart is with that poor people whose cause in words I have tried to plead and who now, ignorant and docile, are just in that formative stage in which whoever seizes them has them.” **46**

Unquestionably assuming white ownership and management, Stowe adopted the climactic theory, believing that black workers were necessary to labor under the Florida sun:

“Who shall do the work for us?...let us look at the facts before our face and eyes...the black laborers whom we leave in the field pursue their toil, if anything, more actively, more cheerfully, than during the cooler months...one may be pardoned for thinking that the negro is the natural laborer of tropical regions.” **47**

As the black laborer was educated under the “worst possible system for making good, efficient, careful, or honest laborers,” Stowe believed it was upon the moderate reformers to teach them. She wrote a considerable amount of her observations on the black women servants around her Florida residence, allowing some insight into the demeanor of black women in the state. She noted that “one of the most dreaded characters” on one plantation was the dairy-worker and cook Minnah, who had “a tongue that never hesitated to speak her mind to high or low.” Stowe had embedded herself in the daily work routine of a Florida plantation in order to patronizingly “teach” the black

laborers how to subsist as free people. Stowe wrote that she had the “task of organizing this barbaric household and bringing it into the forms of civilized life.” She quickly found that the women domestic workers had their own ideas of freedom. Stowe noted:

“Democracy never assumes a more rampant form than in some of these old negresses, who would say their screed to the king on his throne, if they died for it the next minute. Accordingly, Minnah’s back was all marked and scored with the tyrant’s answer to free speech.” **48**

The two women in her staff were Minnah and Judy. Stowe soon found herself embittered in her attempts to mold them into satisfactory house workers. Stowe considered Minnah to be “kinky” and “argumentative,” while she called Judy a “fat, lazy, crafty, roly-poly negress.” Stowe imagined that domestic work was a full-time job, while the women were constantly attending to other tasks throughout their day. These black women workers saw domestic house work as only one aspect of the day’s regiment rather than a full-time commitment. Judy often left her work to prepare meals for her husband, who was the foreman on the plantation. At one point, Minnah complained about the overbearing workload she faced by herself: “Such a heap of clothes to be washed all in one day! It was a mountain of labor in Minnah’s imagination.” Stowe noted: “We kept at Minnah as the only means of keeping her at her work.” So the next day, Minnah wouldn’t finish her ironing work because she was attending to some of her cows. When Stowe chastised her for not finishing, she replied: “She was tired of ironing. Did anybody ever hear of doing up all one’s things in a day? Besides, she wanted to see her calves, she felt just like it.” **49**

“After a short period of struggle,” Stowe turned Minnah back to the fields and hired a “trained, accomplished, neat” cook from Jacksonville to replace her. But soon enough, the new worker left behind the plantation for a high-paying job as a cook in a Jacksonville hotel. “Such has been the good fortune of all the well-trained house-servants since emancipation,” Stowe contemplated, “they command their own price.” **50** Stowe had adopted the Southern ideology that blacks could not work without some kind of white supervision. She could not accept the fact that the newly free blacks did not desire patronization, lessons, or supervision, but decent pay, decent hours, and a measure of self-control in their workplace.

The contract system had numerous inherent flaws that gave the planter the upperhand in exploiting black laborers. State Senator Robert Meacham told the Ku Klux

Klan hearings how former slaveholders managed to manipulate contract terms because many freemen were illiterate and unable to comprehend the terms:

“A majority of them do not know how to make a contract for their interests. The farmers who make the contracts with them draw up the contracts in writing and read it to them. The colored people are generally uneducated, and when a contract says this or that they hardly know what it means. A great many of the contracts give the farmer a lieu upon what portion of the crop is coming to them for any debt they incur.” **51**

An investigation committee on the Freedmen’s Bureau reported that the agents were indeed supporting the power of the employer in some locations: “In some localities the Bureau officers interfere arbitrarily between the planter and the freedman, in favor of the freedman; in other localities the Bureau is used a means of coercing the freedman in favor of the planter.” **52** But planters were only subjected to a civil suit at worst, while the freemen laborers were arrested under the harsh vagrancy codes for breaking the contract terms. Bureau historian George R. Bentley said of the Bureau’s early policies: “on the whole its policies, both in the administration of relief and in the supervision of labor, had been those that planters and other business men desired.” **53** The Bureau contracts had succeeded in forcing the wage rate down for black labor. The average wage rate in 1866 Florida was twelve dollars a month for black men and around five dollars a month for black women and children. Shack Thomas recalled shortly after the war was over

“working for \$5 a month, payable at each Christmas. He recalls how rich he felt with this money, as compared with the other free Negroes in the section. All of the children and his mother were paid this amount, he states.” **54**

These low wages ensured perpetual debt to the plantation stores. In regulating contract disputes, the Freedmen’s Bureau mostly sided with the planters. “Sanctimony of contract” meant planter domination in real terms. It hardly even held white planters accountable if they didn’t adhere to the terms of contract, while imprisoning blacks under the general umbrella category of “vagrancy.” Debt peonage was the new form of slavery in the “New South.” An investigation committee on the Freedmen’s Bureau concluded

that the contract system was renewed slavery and denied the freemen their rightful market wages:

“If the freedmen could at this moment demand the wages which the high prices of the products of the South would justify, \$1 per day and board would be the ruling wages instead of \$16 or \$12 per month, the prices now paid. But they cannot take advantage of the demand for their labor. They are bound by contracts-enslaved for twelve months through the agency and influence of the Freedmen’s Bureau.” **55**

The contract laws permitted planters to dismiss laborers without compensation if they could come up with a “good and lawful excuse.” The results were obvious: planters came up with any pretext to kick the laborer off of the land right before the crop came due for harvest. **56** Most of the Bureau contracts gave the employer a lien on the contract’s portion of the crop for advancing the supplies necessary to cultivate the crop. Instead of money wages, the workers were to be compensated for their year’s harvest out of their own crop. This was supposedly to give them an “incentive” to labor the whole-year round. Nevertheless, the Bureau even tolerated non-compensation contracts refusing to pay the laborer if their crop failed in the winter. Lacking money to pay for necessities and supplies throughout the year, the laborers received credit to pay the plantation stores. Because the plantation stores were unregulated in their inventory and account books, the planter could claim that the worker ran up their account and owed the store more than they earned. The “indebted” were forced to either vacate the premises or work another year to pay off their debts. The cycle continued and a new process to enslave the freemen was born. A missionary teacher in Jacksonville recounted some of the constant complaints she received from black laborers:

“There is not much justice or humanity among the Southerners. Some of the parents of our children have told us how they have been employed by Southerners, to work on their farms & they would not pay them in money, but told them to go to the store & get what they wanted on their account. The freedmen, not realizing the price of articles, would draw all their wages-sometimes more before they were due thus keeping them behind hand all the time-which pleases their enemys-for they have not been in the habit of handling money & economizing. . . . Some pay them in produce, charging what they please, taking care to have the account come out even at the end of the year, or else in their debt.” **57**

The system itself operated to exclude any possibility of outside regulation or accountability. Julius Quentin, a Freedmen's Bureau agent in Madison County, gave a theoretical example of how these "pernicious instruments of oppression" worked:

'Sam' is under contract to work with 'Powers' for the year - is to get one third or one fourth of the crop, feed himself or be fed as the case may be. 'Sam' may have a wife and children and may be obliged to provide for them as well as for himself - 'Sam' has no ready money. 'Powers' has a store - and 'Sam' gets credit to buy tobacco - shoes - hats - pants etc. which 'Powers' marks on his books- 'Sam' is thus induced to run a long account - the end of the year comes and 'Powers' turns 'Sam' off telling him that he ('Sam') is greatly indebted to him ('Powers'). That he magnanimously remits the debt but if he shows himself on the plantation again -he will blow his brains out. 'Sam' enters complaint with me. 'Powers' is cited bringing his account books along with him - A long account there is entered against 'Sam' which to all appearances is correct. . . . 'Sam' swears never to have received half of what is marked against him - 'Powers' swears to the accuracy of the books. . . . 'Powers' books appear to be correct, he swears to them - and no court can refute their validity. I can do nothing for 'Sam' **58**

Numerous ex- slaves found that their ex-masters quickly turned back on contract agreements. Mary Biddle, an ex-slave from Columbia County, recalled after the war:

"He called Mary's mother and father, Phyliss and Sandy, "I ain't got no more to do with you, you are free," he said, "if you want to stay with me you may and I'll give you one-third of what you raise." They decided to stay. When the crop was harvested the master did not do as he had promised. He gave them nothing." **59**

State Senator Robert Meacham told the Ku Klux Klan hearings how state laws offered little protection or regulation of the exploitative contract system:

"Another reason why they do not get much is, that in the months of August and September mostly, when the crops are laid by, the slightest insult, as they call it, or the slightest neglect, is sufficient to turn them off, and according to the contract they get nothing. The contracts are made in this way; articles of agreement are drawn up which provide that if either one of the parties of the first part or the second part

violate any of the articles they are to be turned off and get nothing. Now that is remedied a little; there is a law now in this State that allows a man to get what he works for, unless it is proven fairly that he has willfully neglected or violated any of the articles of agreement. In a great many instances about my portion of the country—I know this personally—you will find that for the slightest offense the laborers are turned off and get nothing.” **60**

Former abolitionists, Northern capitalists, and moderate Republicans sought to create an “ideal” Florida where economic growth driven from above would turn the state into a virtual paradise for white investors and wealthy migrants. This included measures whereby the ex-slaves would learn to obediently labor under a manufacturing system. Cheap labor and cheap land were the main selling points for Northern investors. As the utmost proof that the post-war State was conciliatory to capital’s strength over labor, the free migration of capital was to be encouraged as the black laborers were told to “abandon migratory habits.” It recognized that free migration was necessary for capital to flourish but would not extend the same luxury to labor. A report from the US Department of Agriculture advertised the cheap labor of Florida for wealthy Northern migrants: “For the man of capital, Florida offers a large variety of specialties...the shrewd real-estate dealer can buy and sell at a profit; the money-lender loan at high interest, with ample security...Labor is plenty and cheap, crops sure and good, always in demand, and fair prices rule.” **61**

Florida Congressman E.C. Cahell expressed the earnest desire for “the immigration of honest industrious white men. Especially do we invite, cordially invite, those having means to become proprietors to the soil.” **62** The face of labor in Florida was to be black, cheap, and politically powerless. But the uncooperative nature of the black ex-slave population, as a result of their increasing political strength, was denounced by numerous Northern boosters of Florida attempting to broadcast the cheap lands and labor of the state. A Northern employer in Florida wrote: “Some of the niggers are industrious and are doing well – in many cases they are doing better than the whites as they stand this hot climate better than the whites, but take them as a class, they are lazy and worthless, and will not work unless compelled by necessity.” **63** Northern capitalists were frustrated that the blacks failed to work on their terms, suggesting that compulsion was necessary to deal with the “labor problem”:

“Outside the old slave-owning settlements, too, negroes are scarce, they preferring as a rule to work for their old masters rather than to be driven by the impetuous



Northerner, who they suspect wishes to get more work out of them than is agreeable to their indolent nature. While the African is as necessary in clearing away forests and in hard manual labor as the Irishman is at the North, now that he is free he has no idea of working more than is barely necessary to keep him in pork and grits.” **64**

But it was miserable working conditions, bad contract terms, uncertainty of pay, employer tyranny, and the common desire for self-management and dignity in the workplace that made black laborers defiant and uncooperative:

“It has been said that the Negro here will not work, that they are becoming indolent and vicious. The facts are, they have become tired of working without pay...those who have considered it their God-given right to swindle the negro out of the hard-earned money due him are left without help.” **65**

In some working quarters, the laborers had a cross-plantation communication network where they could inform each other about the treatment received by the planters in their neighborhood. An abusive planter would find himself without a workforce which flocked to other employers for better treatment. Freedmen’s Bureau agent Ansel E. Kinne reported:

“Said one influential planter, ‘the Negroes have a kind of telegraph by which they know all about the treatment of the Negroes on the plantations for a great distance around.’ I judge they avail themselves of this knowledge in the choice of their employers. Indeed so certain and sudden is the retribution, that I found some large planters who were unable to employ a single laborer-their broad fields . . . doomed to be uncultivated . . . the present season-while others more favorably known, are able to obtain all the help, and more, than they can employ.” **66**

As blacks monopolized labor in the state, their insubordinate behavior caused planters to devise ways that they could procure loyal, obedient workers from alternative sources. Planters could tolerate the fact that blacks acted like a free laboring class. The editors of the *Florida Dispatch* claimed that it was the “rule for a negro servant, male or female, to completely ignore the interests or wishes of their employers or patrons, and to go their own devious and often very “crooked” ways, regardless of the inconvenience or loss it may entail upon those who are fairly and honestly entitled to their steady and

faithful services.” As a result, planter could “no longer rely on the upon the great mass of negroes in Florida as hired farm laborers” and immigrants were proposed as their replacement. **67**

Importing immigrant workers became a widely accepted proposal to replace the uncooperative, self-determined black labor force in Florida. Yet few experiments with immigrant labor proved successful. The employer desire for politically powerless immigrant labor foreshadowed the disenfranchisement of poor whites and blacks following Reconstruction. The immigrant labor that employers desired would be subordinate to the whims of white employers and unable to vote, leaving the political realm to be shaped in the interests of wealthy capitalists. One Northern booster expressed this growing disposition in Florida towards hiring disenfranchised immigrant labor:

“Of Chinese there are very few, though there ought to be many of them in Florida. I believe in the "heathen Chineese"; his neatness, thrift, and excellent unobtrusiveness, always quiet and orderly, are in every way commendable; and everywhere I found the people favoring Chinese immigration—in fact, a general desire to replace the colored labor with Chinese labor. Colored labor for the house, field, grove, or garden, while easy to control, is very far from satisfactory. It is always uncertain, indolent, and negligent, unless closely and incessantly watched. As a class, the colored servants are given to falsehood and petty theft, are liable to leave you without a word of warning just when badly needed, and are wasteful of your stores and provender. There are exceptions, but such are few, and can not be relied on; their only praiseworthy quality is their easy good-nature. The silent, neat, careful, polite Chinese are far preferable.” **68**

A *Floridian* editorial opposed black migration to the state, claiming that the increased number of black migrants would fail to labor on the plantations and instead, “labor a little while, and then become paupers, vagabonds and thieves, living upon the industry of the industrious, and to be hunted like untamed savages.” The Leon County resident agreed with the Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner’s order that blacks had “better stay on the plantation.” **69** In 1867, an editorial from a Florida newspaper reflected the common belief that black political involvement was the largest obstruction to the state’s “development”:

“But as a partial crop is still raised notwithstanding the refusal of the negroes to work while Radicals are training them as politicians, and instilling into their minds the

wildest ideas of being supported by the Bureau, and by confiscation of the lands of the whites, and notwithstanding the general feeling of distrust and uncertainty which prevents the investment of capital and enterprises... We must remove the Radical Party from power, which is the last and only obstruction to Union.” **70**

As Northern capital further penetrated into the state, it was believed black political participation would eventually take a backseat to “economic development.” Democracy was incompatible with the drive for white-led economic growth. Booster James Woods Davidson, author of *Florida of Today: A Guide for Tourists and Settlers* espoused this necessity of white supremacy: “The future fortunes of the negroes are largely in the hands of the controlling race, and they themselves will probably have little to do in shaping it; and doubtless the less they have to do with it the better.” **71** Florida boosters constantly reassured migrant capitalists that the political involvement of blacks would subside with the political and economic dominance of Northern wealth:

“The negro, I think, will not play a permanent or prominent part in Florida. In moderate numbers, no doubt, he will always be found there, but his shiftless, incompetent, and indolent ways will not be long endured by the class of vigorous and thoroughgoing Northern and Western men who constitute the bulk of immigration to Florida at the present.” **72**

One Florida booster enthusiastically reported that blacks had left the “plantation of politics” after the end of Reconstruction and since then “have been working somewhat more and voting rather less, and are doing vastly better in all important aspects.” **73** In 1873, after the bloody campaign of Klan violence in the South, a *New York Times* correspondent in Florida enthusiastically declared: “If labor had not become perfectly fixed in its reciprocal relations to the capital of the country, it is here, at least, no longer demoralized.” To the white fears of increasing black migration to the state, the correspondent stated that the growing number of white migrants was thought to exceed the number of black ones. The end of “rampant” black political strength at the hey-days of Reconstruction was considered important to reduce the impact of a potential black majority:

“Whatever political significance may be attached to a heavy colored majority in Florida, it is certain that the white immigration equals if not exceeds it, and the other

palpable fact of the growing desire of the negroes to enjoy the fruits of their industry and to pay more attention to their crops than their politics, is equally significant.” **74**

### **Black Union Militancy**

The organization of black labor unions asserted that the freemen would not quietly submit to white economic monopoly or employer terms of labor. While most of Florida’s slaves were forced to return to their former plantations out of necessity, some migrated into the small, growing industrial sectors of the state. With the recent migration of Northern capital attempting to exploit the black labor pool, unions became a growing necessity for blacks to gain their rights in the workplace. In the 1870s, there were some signs of black labor militancy emerging in Florida’s industrial port cities. Black laborers expressed their dissatisfaction with long work hours, low wages, and job instability. While industrial capitalists wished to avoid the large wave of Northern labor unrest following the Civil War, what they found was a black labor population willing to organize and challenge the tyranny of white employers. Capital migrated down to Florida believing that labor was cheap and disenfranchised. One moderate white Republican gushed over Florida’s attractive investment climate with its cheap black labor:

“Colored labor is the cheapest, and therefore just the kind suited to the South in its present condition. This fact must have weight also with capitalists, for other things being equal, the returns from an investment must increase in proportion to the cheapness of the labor employed.” **75**

After the Civil War, Northern capitalists and the Southern oligarchy collaborated to expand their monopoly over the land, resources, industries, and labor of the United States. Florida native Timothy Fortune depicted this growing inequality that arose from capitalist expansion and private monopolization:

“There is no fact truer than this, that the accumulated wealth of the land, and the sources of power, are fast becoming concentrated in the hands of a few men, who use that wealth and power to the debasement and enthrallment of the wage workers.” **76**

In response, Northern white labor fought against capital applying various tactics: large-scale industrial unionization, wild cat strikes, sit-ins, violence, etc. Yet Florida was

still largely pre-industrial and its economy dominated by a handful of industries: particularly agriculture, tourism, and lumber. But in the industrial port cities of Jacksonville and Pensacola, blacks organized on the local level and at times employed extralegal tactics and even violence to back up their demands. The migrant ex-slaves found employment in the lumber industry's unskilled jobs as whites monopolized skilled and management positions. Unskilled black industrial laborers in Jacksonville had little bargaining power to make improvements in the work place. There were frequent layoffs to ensure that labor was not only cheap but dispensable. The low wages in the lumber mills were inadequate to afford basic living requirements for the expensive port city. Hours were long when the mills were operating and employees received no compensation for the frequent idle periods. <sup>77</sup>

White-only unions not only divided the working class but allowed white employers to keep separate pay-scales, conditions, and hours based on race and ethnicity. While white workers enjoyed certain privileges retained by their exclusive unions, their dark-skinned counterparts grew to become a subordinate laboring class – one that the boss could turn to in order to break strikes and drive down wages. What ensued was white propaganda that depicted people of color as scabs unwilling to put the good of organized labor over their own personal gain, further splitting the working class along racial lines. Employers played on the prejudices of their white workers to prevent class unity. But two incidences in Jacksonville and Pensacola provide an example with the shoe on the other foot. When blacks would organize and strike for demands from their white lumber bosses, it was white laborers who were brought in as the scabs in Jacksonville. In West Florida, immigrant white laborers from Canada were imported in the winter to drive down wages for black lumberjacks and dockworkers. In 1873, black Floridian workers on the docks, in the lumber mills, and on the railroads would organize and implement some form of collective action to make demands.

In Jacksonville, lumber mill workers organized the Labor League to force their employers to make concessions. The Labor League decided to take action to address “relations now existing between capital and labor in this vicinity” which were “unequally and unjustly balanced.” <sup>78</sup> The union demanded \$1.50 a day minimum wage for unskilled workers and a standard ten hour work day. <sup>79</sup> The hours worked on the mills were too long to “allow the laborer that recreation and rest the laws of his nature demand.” <sup>80</sup> The Labor League's demands were considerably moderate at the time, considering most Northern workers were fighting for an eight hour day standard. When the lumber companies failed to meet these demands, the lumber workers walked off of

the job. By June 7, 1873, seventeen mills were idle while only three continued to partially operate. **81**

Although Labor League policy prohibited the use of violence, some strikers assaulted laborers who kept working and used force to keep out scabs. But by July, the strike had failed. There were several reasons why: 1) The picket line was not successful in keeping out scabs 2) The strikers were not able to subsist long without employment because no strike fund was established 3) The low-skilled workers would cost little for training so they were easily replaceable. Northern white labor unions could generally expect sympathy from others in their community and were able to easily establish strike funds for subsistence. Black strikers, on account of the severe poverty in their community and the lack of a long-standing tradition of unionism, could not count on gathering many funds. The lumber mills used white laborers as scabs to undercut the demands of the black Labor League. After a month, the mill was operating again and most found employment elsewhere. **82** Yet the meaning and repercussions of the strike proved successful even if it immediately failed.

In 1875, the Florida legislature enacted a ten hour work day standard, a concession for direct action that black laborers had applied in the work place. **83** The Jacksonville strike provided a notable example of black working class resistance to the dual-oppression of white supremacy and labor exploitation. Industrial white workers were under the misconception that years of plantation slavery had tamed the black laborer and made him unwilling to push for better wages and conditions. This strike contradicted this notion and the general white perception of “colored strikebreakers.” It reasserted that black struggle against capital was not simply “indolence” or “idleness,” but the uncertainty of wages, instability of employment, and harsh conditions that freemen laborers suffered. The strike also served as an early example of conflict between industrial capital and labor in a still pre-industrial but developing Florida.

In August 1873, a railroad strike proved more immediately successful. The Jacksonville, Pensacola, and Mobile Railroad Company was three months late on its payroll. On August 5 at twelve o’clock in the afternoon, every railroad laborer, both black and white, simultaneously stopped work and demanded their three months pay before they continued. A week into the general strike, the railroad company was reorganized and placed into the hands of a receiver who agreed to pay the overdue wages.

**84**

Black Floridian dockworkers first struck in 1868 and continued to resort to collective, direct action throughout the Reconstruction era. In Fernandina, the dockworkers expressed their dissatisfaction with the employment practices of the New

York and Fernandina Steamship Company. The dockworkers refused to unload a company steamer that arrived at the docks. The strike was soon broken and the leaders were fired but the union remained active. **85** The longshoremen organized “Workingmen’s Associations” in northwest Florida to follow the trend of black labor unionizing throughout the South. Black workers applied direct action and the ballot to agitate for reforms. Democracy in government and workplace were combined in the freemen’s campaign for emancipation. Leon County Representative John Wallace spoke to an audience of Pensacola’s black union longshoremen and, “pictured out, in glowing terms, the readiness of the rich to oppress the poor. The longshoremen were present in large numbers, and declared that former Confederate navy secretary S.R. Mallory should not go to the Senate by their votes.” **86**

But rather than working strictly through legal or electoral means, the dockworkers occasionally resorted to violence to gain better wages and conditions, as well as to force to the Florida legislature to pass pro-labor reforms. Canadian lumberjacks were often imported into West Florida in the winter months when it was too cold for black Floridian laborers to work in the woods. **87** Believing that their employers were attempting to undermine their wages, the black lumberjacks took action. In the winter of 1872, hundreds of armed black laborers prevented the Canadians from working on the docks. When the Canadians retreated, the armed posse of black workers pursued and literally seized Pensacola in search of the foreigners. Residents were forced out of their homes as armed blacks rummaged throughout the town for any sign of the Canadians. Blacks formed armed patrols and maintained a hostile vigilance against the foreigners. White residents were frightened at the scene of black militancy and the military was called in to break the riot up. **88** But in February 1873, one white Pensacola resident reported that there was a “mob of armed negroes who seemed to have entire control of the city.” **89**

The 1874 Florida legislature responded with legislation in favor of the black Workingmen’s Association in Pensacola. Now a stevedore on the docks could only hire workers with six months of prior Florida residence, protecting black dockworkers from competitive foreign labor. **90** This example of black labor militancy in the small port cities of Florida is proof that the freemen were adopting many characteristics of white labor unions, resorting to direct militant action when their bosses attempted to undermine their wages with foreign labor.

Northern capitalists falsely believed that the black industrial wage laborers in Florida would be docile, cheap, and easy to exploit in comparison to Northern white unions. As Reconstruction was winding down, the Florida turpentine industry, as well as

other industries made up largely of Northern capitalist investors, leased convicts to confront the insurgence of black industrial labor and to stop the drain on plantation labor. The emancipation of ex-slaves meant a serious labor shortage throughout the South following the Civil War. Agricultural and industrial sectors competed for the free black laborers. Freedmen's Bureau agent Ansel E. Kinne noted this labor shift: "Some are engaging in lumbering, and by the liberal wages they are offering are taking from their accustomed places many freedmen who otherwise would be planting." **91**

In order to avoid a clash with Southern planters over the "labor question," Northern capitalists turned to alternative sources of labor. Since white planters depended on their ex-slaves working in their fields, the prosperity of Florida's industrial sector relied on black convicts detained for trivial crimes and leased out for bargain prices. In both ways, the white state acted as the main driver for the powerful interests. The black codes and the Freedmen's Bureau successfully diverted black labor to the plantations, while the Republican administrations set up a convict-leasing system for industrialists. It was real slavery rather than wage slavery that prevailed in Florida. Since labor was mostly monopolized by blacks, their grassroots political organization could have more easily transferred to the workplace under a wage labor system. Through convict-leasing, Northern capitalists could avoid the labor unrest and unionization that tends to characterize an industrial wage labor system. **92**

The turpentine industry in Florida became notorious for its below-sustenance wages and dangerous working conditions as it expanded at the end of Reconstruction. The turpentine camps were pools of miserable destitution only comparable to the worst conditions of chattel slavery. The black labor employed in the turpentine camps was involuntary. Most who arrived at the camps expecting higher wages quickly found themselves trapped in a cycle of debt peonage. Others were convicts. In 1866, a memorandum of the New York & Mobile Turpentine Industry depicted the collaboration between Northern capitalists and Southern planters to subjugate black labor:

"The labor question, now nearly settled, has rendered all branches of industry in the South uncertain during the past year. The difficulty we no longer anticipate, as the freedmen, realizing that "liberty" does not mean "idleness", but that work is a necessity, remain more permanently on the plantations. The Southern men themselves are ready to treat fairly with their former slaves, and Northern men understand more fully the proper way in which to manage the peculiar disposition of the blacks." **93**



## Homesteading

With the preponderant strength of the black franchise and abundant opportunities for land ownership, J. Willis Menard, black Floridian grassroots leader and editor of the AME Church newspaper, reflected: “Florida is destined to become the negro’s New Jerusalem.” <sup>93</sup> Land and labor were integral aspects of black emancipation in postwar Florida. Even though the hope of every black family owning forty acres and a mule had been denied shortly after the Civil War, there were still many opportunities for the freemen to establish autonomy through land ownership. As white planters and railroads increasingly monopolized Florida’s land, blacks desired land reform and decentralization to weaken dependence on their former masters. The large, sparsely populated, and open public domain of Florida gave hope for freemen across the South to acquire land. There was over nine million acres of land available for homesteads in Florida, nearly twice the amount of public land that was available in any other Southern state. But perceived as a major threat to white supremacy, white employers used extralegal and economic measures to keep the freemen a dependent, cheap labor force. The Florida Commissioner of Lands and Immigration said of the freemen homesteaders: “There is every evidence of a desire on the part of our large landholders to break up their property and dispose of portions to industrious settlers on favorable terms.” <sup>94</sup> Along with unions in urban areas, many of the freemen recognized that independent land ownership was the only real alternative to white economic domination in the South. The widespread acquisition of black homesteads would not only form the base of strong, independent communities, but would transform ex-slaves from tenants, wage laborers, and servants to self-sufficient farmers. Ex-slaves believed that the final blow to the master-slave relationship was their transition from a propertyless laboring class to independent landowners.

By 1868, blacks had three thousand homesteads in the Florida alone, surpassing every other Southern state. This represented nearly three-fourths of all homesteads entered into by the freemen under the 1866 Homestead Act. <sup>95</sup> Even the Tallahassee *Floridian*, a conservative newspaper, acknowledged a number of blacks who had “through hard and continued work obtained a farm and homestead in the country.” Furthermore: “The colored people, the most of them, have shown a commendable industry in acquiring property, especially land, mules, stock, and farming utensils.” <sup>96</sup> House delegate Emanuel Fortune of Jackson County noted that “a great many of our

people take up homesteads.” **97** Dennis Eagan, moderate Republican official in Madison County, elated:

“In no State of the South has the degree of progress been so marked as here. The large body of our colored citizens have already acquired means enough to build houses, purchase property, and surround themselves with most of the comforts of home....When it is considered that less than one decade ago they were thrown on their own resources, and forced to rise through the fearful weight of poverty, ignorance, and prejudice that oppressed them, and that at present the vast majority of them have homes and control property.” **98**

By 1874, the Florida Commissioner of Lands reported that 18,000 acres had been taken up in homesteads over the prior four or five years, “mostly by the freed people.” The newly free slaves did not have the money to pay hired hands to produce cash crops for export. The difficulty of cultivating the bad soil of many homestead lands was already straining enough on black families, who could rarely produce more than what sustained them. So the Florida Land Commissioner decried the black homesteads for subsidiary farming: “This has not added to the material wealth of the country, but has been the cause of less production of agricultural products.” **99** A Freedmen’s Bureau agent explained why: “The Government lands are worthless for any purposes whatever. The most of them being barren sand hills with little or no vegetation upon them.” **100**

Black religious leaders emphasized egalitarianism and urged their flock to acquire homesteads. Religious, educational, and political independence were tied in with the attempts of the freemen for economic independence in a several front campaign for complete emancipation. Planter Susan B. Eppes was particularly disgusted at one black preacher who taught an assembly: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.” After declaring the wealthy damned with no chance for salvation, the preacher celebrated: “But now, thank God, we are all poor alike.” Eppes later reflected: “It is needless to say that the Reverend never preached again for the Bradford neighborhood and the doors of Mount Zion closed upon him forever.” **101**

Blacks believed that labor, not capital, was the base of all wealth. The AME Church pledged its support for black land ownership as the only way for blacks to take control of their own labor and establish a communal base of independent wealth:

“Whereas labor is the basis of all wealth, and wealth is an absolute necessity of civilized society, and a peaceful condition of society, the security of life and property, a jealous regard for the rights of labor, are among the imperative duties of a well ordered government;

Resolved by the convention of ministers and laymen of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Florida, that we congratulate our people upon the rapid progress they have made in the past six years, and upon the increase of mixed industry, homestead and small farms in opposition to the ruinous plantation system. . .we proudly point to these facts as a refutation of the slanders by our natural-born enemies, the democrats, that the freedmen do not work.” **102**

The “unsatisfactory negro labor” that so many planters complained of was actually a revolt against the plantation system. The homesteads not only countered the Southern white claim that the freemen could not suffice as a free people, but provided a viable alternative that threatened white land monopoly. A Florida freeman homesteader told a Northern teacher:

“I got a handsome piece [of land] both side of the road. I chose him there purpose to hurt their feelings; to be riding ‘long the road and see the nigger crop a flourishing; for they tells me there won’t no cotton go to the market from the niggers this year. Niggers can’t do it on their own responsibility. We’ll show them how the nigger can work the farm for himself.” **103**

A Northern traveler observed numerous black homesteads as he passed through Key West:

“We passed dozens of new frame houses, built and occupied by negroes, who had bought, with their own earnings, the lots on which their dwellings stood. As to the general character of the negroes, the common testimony seemed to be that their behavior would compare favorably with that of any other class of the laboring population.” **104**

In George F. Thompson’s travels through Florida at the end of 1865, he noticed a general disposition among blacks to work for decent wages, obtain productive farms, and

become independent citizens in every aspect of society: “My observation and experience with the people of this district has thoroughly convinced me that, compare the negro with the whites, in reference to his desire for education, his respect for religion, or his disposition to lead an industrious life, he is in none of these respects their inferior.”

Thompson accredited the Freedmen’s Bureau for informing the freemen that they would not receive shares of their ex-master’s land: “They have learned...that the boon conferred upon them is the right to choose the kind of labor and enjoy its fruits, and not to "reap when they have not sowed.” Contrary to the general belief among Southern planters, he found that most blacks were busy at work and would only refuse to work if not done on their terms:

“One of the most general complaints among the whites is, that "the Negro won't work." I have investigated the ground of this complaint in many cases, and generally have arrived at the conclusion from facts ascertained, either that the employer wanted the labor for less than value, or the negro could do better at some other employment than that offered. While I was in Tampa, the same complaint was made by several parties, and I had occasion to test the justice of the charge. I desired to employ a man to accompany me, to assist in sailing the boat, cooking, &c., but was able to find but two men disengaged, and they said their labor was worth \$1.50 per day, with plenty of work. I advised them to remain at home and accept of the certain employment, and concluded to work myself.” **105**

In Dade County, Thompson further observed a group of freemen:

“Their desire to become land owners is almost universal, and according to the provisions of that bill, they can become so by having a little direction how to proceed, from individuals or officers of the Bureau. I have, however, counseled them, in all instances, to hire themselves out for a year or two, and save their earnings as far as possible, so as to have some capital to commence with in case they should avail themselves of the provisions of the law.” **106**

Colonel Higginson, some years after the Civil War, found that all of his former black soldiers were doing well and had acquired homesteads during Reconstruction:

“Now I noticed bedstead and bedding in every cabin I visited in South Carolina and Florida. Formerly the cabins often had no tables, and families rarely ate together,

each taking food as was convenient; but now they seemed to have family meals, a step toward decent living. This progress they themselves recognized. Moreover, I often saw pictures from the illustrated papers on the wall, and the children's school-books on the shelf. I rarely met an ex-soldier who did not own his house and ground, the inclosures varying from five to two hundred acres; and I found one man on the St. John's who had been offered \$3000 for his real estate. In many cases these homesteads had been bought within a few years, showing a steady progress in self-elevation." **107**

Traveling with a black woman along the St. John's River, Higginson was clearly impressed with the progress made by the ex-slave settlements he encountered:

"I do not think the world could show a finer sample of self-respecting peasant life than a colored woman, with whom I came down the St. John's River to Jacksonville, from one of the little settlements along that magnificent stream. She was a freed slave, the wife of a former soldier...She told me that she and her husband owned one hundred and sixty acres of land, bought and paid for by their own earnings, at \$1.25 per acre; they had a log-house, and were going to build a frame-house; they raised for themselves all the food they needed, except meat and flour, which they bought in Jacksonville. They had a church within reach (Baptist); a schoolhouse of forty pupils, taught by a colored teacher; her husband belonged to the Good Templars, as did all the men in their neighborhood. For miles along the St. John's, a little back from the river, such settlements are scattered; the men cultivating their own plots of ground, or working on the steamboats, or fishing, or lumbering. What more could be expected of any race, after fifteen years of freedom? Are the Irish voters of New York their superiors in condition, or the factory operatives of Fall River?" **108**

Yet blacks faced six major obstructions to acquiring land: 1) The low quality of available homesteads 2) White violence that drove them from their property 3) The disposition of landowners to prevent them from becoming independent of the plantation system 4) White land monopoly 5) The contract system and debt peonage 6) The high prices of land. Many large landowners outright refused to sell their land to blacks or increased the price to make it unaffordable, while some would only sell their land in large tracts. House delegate Emanuel Fortune recounted: "They will not sell it in small quantities. I would have bought forty acres there if the man would have sold me less than a whole tract. They hold it in that way so that colored people cannot buy it." Fortune also

noted that in Jackson County, a largely black populated area, he knew of “no Government land there that will raise cotton,” that the homesteads there were “of no account at all – very poor,” and that the good lands were “all taken up.” Leon County, also a largely black populated county, had no public land available at all after large landholders and railroads had taken them up. Blacks in Leon County “cannot get homes very well; the lands are owned by large landowners, who are unwilling to sell their lands.” **109** Northern observers in Florida reported the common difficulties blacks encountered in purchasing land:

“Hence the colored people have been compelled to give their time to building homes for themselves wherever they were permitted to purchase lands and live in quiet. We say "permitted"; for that more nearly expresses the case than any other term. It seems almost a resolution among the whites not to dispose of any land to the colored people, however much they may be anxious to sell. They are put off with promises; and, in case of sale, they are charged two prices. It is the one thing dear to the late slave population, a home. They seem very anxious to secure to their families a resting-place, where they shall be free from molestation.” **110**

Blacks approached the idea of self-managed farm ownership with almost a religious fervor. State Senator Robert Meacham of Jefferson County believed that if white obstruction to independent land ownership was removed, then most blacks, “if not all, would try and get homes. I believe there always be some who will not try to be of any account, but two-thirds of them or more would try and get homes.” **111** Nevertheless, planters could only conceive of the freemen as a subordinate laboring class. To them, the black inclination to possess their own land was evidence of the “peculiar negro mentality.” A *New York Times* editorial on the freemen forming homesteads in Florida reflected this white sentiment: “This idea of possessing some acres of land is a very seductive one to the negro mind. From infancy he has been accustomed to associate the idea of the ownership of land with a life of ease and comfort.” **112** Rather than being driven into regimented labor by a tyrannical foreman, blacks preferred to own their own land and manage their own labor. A Northern visitor to Florida recounted the story of an old black man denied his life’s aspiration to achieve a personal holding of good land for his family:

“We met an aged negro, living on Black Creek, a basket-maker, who was working in the shade of a bay-tree, close beside a rude cabin, the temporary home of himself and family. Approaching, we entered into conversation, and learned, from quivering lips, his history and present circumstances. His story was a touching one. He had toiled for his master half a century, in the broiling sun and chilling winds; the war had left him a free man: but he was now aged and infirm, and the fruit of his long life of toil was beyond his reach. He had rented this log-cabin, without floor or chimney, and gathered into it his family, and was struggling to secure a home of his own. He had commenced life anew, and at a time when most of us end ours. He longed to purchase one of God's acres, where he could build his castle, and read his title clear. He did not mind paying Shylock his price, if the acre could be had. Tears filled the old man's eyes, and his arms grew nerveless, as he repeated his doubts and fears. His family had gathered round, and the wife, an intelligent, thoughtful woman, with eyes fastened intently on the ground, trying, as it were, to solve the mysteries of Providence, in human affairs. Looking out and around us, upon the worn-out and unimproved lands, stretching miles on either side, with scarce a human hand to tend them, yet here was this worthy, industrious, hard-working, and native citizen, half denied the right, in his new condition, to a home among those who recently periled life that he should not go away. This is but one of many cases coming to our knowledge.” **113**

## Education

Establishing autonomous schools was an important objective of black independence, only comparable to political organizing and homesteading. Until a public school system was built, blacks set up their own schools, collectively contributed funds, and paid for teachers themselves. **114** Shortly after the Civil War, students gathered funds to establish schools since the public proceeds were limited. One Northerner reported that a black community was

“collecting funds for founding a college at a place called Live Oaks. The frame is a specious structure, and has been put up and enclosed; seven thousand dollars have been raised for the completion of its plan, and eighteen thousand more are wanted. I was present at a meeting at which a colored man was setting forth its claim on the public liberality.” **115**

Immediately following the war, black Floridian education suffered primarily from a lack of funding. Whites approached black education in one of two ways: violent resistance out of fear that their children would be made to integrate into schools with black children or acceptance that education would make blacks better, more productive laborers. Nevertheless, funding to build schools for blacks was initially a community and Federal effort. In 1869, the Freedmen's Bureau alone surpassed the rest of the donors for public education and tripled the amount paid for by Florida county taxes. **116** A one dollar tax had been imposed on every black man between the ages of 21 and 55 for the purpose of education, "but very little money was obtained or used," as no such tax was collected from white men. **117** A Florida teacher's convention noted that the primary obstacle for education was money for books and teachers as the poor freemen found it difficult to carry the burden of the school tax. And even though general white sentiment had somewhat turned in favor of black education, the state government had failed to make any adequate provision to fund education by 1867. **118** Furthermore, even after the special school tax was collected from blacks, the school fund was not a separate entity and was often absorbed for other purposes, leaving little to build schools, fund books, and pay teachers. **119**

The establishment of black private schools could be attributed to the one dollar tuition fee charged for children to attend state schools. It was cheaper, more efficient, and more independent to set up schools in association with churches. The African Methodist Episcopal Church at the time became the most important black organization to support black education in Florida. While a religious institution first and foremost, its leaders encouraged its black members to become actively involved in politics, education, and economics to build up their community strength. The AME Church scrapped together funds to supplement the limited public subsidies for schools. By 1867, there were 2,000 black children attending Sabbath schools. **120** By 1871, the AME Church in Florida had established 48 Sabbath schools attended by 2,500 children. **121**

By 1866, 3,000 black children in Florida had already been taught to read and write. The black students had "shown remarkable intellectual capacity in acquiring knowledge." **122** Harriet Beecher Stowe observed that blacks in Florida "showed a most affecting eagerness to be taught to read and white." **123** When they brought down a stock of spelling books to the blacks they eagerly accepted them and "treasured them with a sort of superstitious veneration." **124** A missionary teacher wrote about one sixty-year old woman "just beginning to spell, seems as if she could not think of any thing but her book, says she spells her lesson all the evening, then she dreams about it, & wakes up thinking about it." **125** Freedmen's Bureau Commissioner Rufus Saxton examined a



“contraband school” in Florida shortly after the Civil War and observed that the black students “answered their teachers’ questions promptly and properly.” **126** In 1866, Freedmen’s Bureau agent Ansel E. Kinne listed 990 black public school students for seventeen teachers in contrast to 172 white children for four teachers. **127** In 1867, a convention of Florida teachers claimed that 2,000 black children were receiving daily instructions and 12,000 altogether were attending public and private schools. **128** Northern reporter William C. Bryant interviewed a Florida school teacher about her black pupils:

“The colored people were so eager to learn that she gave, last summer, lessons to washerwomen at ten o'clock in the evening, after the labors of the day were over, and found others waiting at her door for their daily lessons at six o'clock in the morning, before their work was begun. Some of our party were present at a Sunday-school held in a Methodist church in St. Augustine, and were struck with the readiness shown by the little pupils in apprehending their instructions.” **129**

While the freemen schools were progressing greatly, a convention of Florida teachers declared the system of public schools for whites was wholly inadequate. The Florida teachers’ convention believed that the lack of effective white public schools was the most defective aspect of Florida’s educational system. **130** But still, many areas of Florida had no established schools or decent teachers. In April 1867, Emanuel Smith, a freeman from Apalachicola, wrote to the American Missionary Association requesting a good and affordable teacher:

“Will you be kind enough to inform me as early as practicable on what terms your association would furnish a female teacher to take charge of a colored school in this place. I say female because I suppose they can be had on cheaper terms. We have never had a good school here. Except for a short space of time. We have had schools here but very poor ones. Then the prices were so high that many were not able to send their children. The prices has been all the while 1.50 per month. We have never had any aid here in schools. Have heard of a greadeal in other places but none here. We wish a Day and Night School also. Please write and let me know the terms. When one could be sent, how many scholars she could take, and how much and how we would have to pay. We have plodded along this far, the best we could. Some children has leant some, but far behind all other parts we hear of. We expect and are willing to pay some. But wish to know if you will aid us some, and to what extent.

Very true the state of Florida has passed an act to establish schools for us. What they have done in other parts, we do not know. But they have never gave us here any benefit of that act. hoping that I may hear from you soon. Good teachers in these parts will not teach colored people and if they did, the scarcity of money would not enable us to pay them. This is the first application that has been made to any source for help since we have been free. But have been doing the best we could. Please let me know what can be done.” **131**

One Northern reporter visited a freemen’s school in Florida and was surprised at the great progress made by the black students in comparison to the white students:

“I witnessed the performance of one of the best classes in geography I have ever seen. Reading and spelling, I thought would compare favorably with those I have seen in our schools for white children. Mathematics and grammar classes were not up to our white school standard. I saw a little black fellow, who had not been to school but seven days, who knew his alphabet. The scholars were very attentive to their studies, and were as a general thing well-behaved. On the whole the colored schools are a great success in this State.” **132**

A Florida booster observed that the freemen greatly emphasized the importance of education and literacy:

“As a rule, the young blacks can read and write, and are very proud of the accomplishment. They seize the pen and delight to attach their autographs in an airy, rapid, careless sort of style; it always profoundly impresses the assembled lookers-on, and adds a dignity to labor that is quite overpowering to witness. The blacks are always solid friends to all educational improvements.” **133**

The booster noted that the young laborers were also more rebellious and unwilling to submit to the regiment of plantation labor. He unintentionally connected the education of the ex-slaves with their willingness to be controlled. The young educated blacks argued with the foremen about their pay, their rations, their time-accounts, and just about everything. They would only work half of the month for the necessity of pay. The booster noted: “After pay-day they would strangely be missing.” **134** This was compared to the older uneducated blacks who would “work hardest, most willingly, honestly, and

efficiently; always performing the most labor in a day, and making least trouble to the foreman and officers.” **135**

Plantation schools were formed across the state. The fervent desire of blacks to attain an education led their employers to create these schools as a concession. Unsurprisingly, their intention for the freemen was to “make their labor profitable to their employers” and they were primarily “taught the nature of a contract.” **136** The purpose of state education throughout the South was the creation of a docile black labor force. Planters found it the best way to “secure permanent and reliable laborers.” **137** Harriet Beecher Stowe, echoing the moderate Republic stance, believed that public education was necessary for this purpose:

“The untrained plantation hands and their children are and will be just what education may make them...All that is wanted to supply the South with a set of the most desired skilled laborers is simply education...if the whites, who cannot bear tropical suns and fierce extremes, neglect to educate a docile race who can and will bear it for them, they throw away their best chance of success in the most foolish manner.” **138**

Black schools were often subjected to white violence, particularly from white students in other schools who routinely assaulted the teachers and students. One teacher reported they went so far as to throw objects at the teachers and challenge black students to fight, knowing that “nothing would please them so much, as to have a battle with our children, and kill some of them.” **139** White students threw stones, picked fights, regularly harassed, and threatened black students and Northern white teachers. White teachers at black schools were sometimes run out of the state, ostracized and treated with contempt by the general white population. Mary Archer Brown, a white teacher in Florida, expressed this common feeling: “If we charged we could get a big school, but, as yet, I don't care about placing myself upon the level of these "Yankee school Marms" who teach darkies.” **140** Secretary of State Jonathan Gibbs noted of white teachers of black students in Leon County: “the people do not recognize them, have nothing to do with them, and talk of them as though they were the offscouring of the earth.” A teacher was sent to a black school in north Leon County, “and they ran him off, and would not let him teach the school.” **141**

House delegate Emanuel Fortune reported that the schools in Jackson County were continuously attacked until some blacks formed armed bands to protect them. This was out of necessity because the marshal failed to defend them on request for help.

Amongst the whites of his Jefferson County, “the feeling was against the education of colored children.” **142** The 1866 Florida acts for black education required that Northern teachers obtain a license costing five dollar per annum before they could be qualified to teach – to which the Superintendent could give or withhold at his pleasure. This was meant to exclude Northern white teachers and place black education under state supervision and control. The penalty for violating this provision ranged from a \$100 to \$500 fine or imprisonment from anywhere between thirty and sixty days. **143** However, none of the Northern teachers in the thirty black schools had complied with this provision. **144**

Even though independent education, religious, economic, and political institutions were important for building up the ex-slave community, blacks had to avidly defend themselves and their new gains if they were to mean anything. Black school children in Jackson County became aware of this at a young age when they found it necessary to use self-defense against white students. Timothy Fortune recounted the story of a small war that took place between white and black school children in Jackson County:

“The white academy opened up at the same time the same time church opened for school for the negro children. As the colored children had to pass the academy to reach the church it was easy for the white children to annoy them with taunts and jeers. The war passed from words to stone which the white children began to hurl at the colored. Several colored children were hurt and, as they had not resented the rock-throwing in kind because they were timid about going that far, the white children became more aggressive and abusive.

One morning the colored children armed themselves with stones and determined to fight their way past the academy to the school. [They] approached the academy in formation whereas in the past they had been going in pairs or small groups. When they reached hailing distance, half dozen white boys rushed out and hurled their missiles. Instead of scampering away the colored children not only stood their ground and hurled their missiles but maintained a solemn silence. The white children, seeing there was no backing down as they expected, came rushing out of the academy and charged the colored children.

During some fifteen minutes it was a real tug of war. In the close fighting the colored children got the advantage gradually and began to shove the white children back. As

they pressed the advantage the white children broke away and ran for the academy. The colored fighters did not follow them but made it hot for the laggards until they also took to their heels. There were many bruises on both sides, but it taught the white youngsters to leave the colored ones alone thereafter.” **145**

The primary objection to black teachers was that they gave their black pupils the inspiration to rise above their subordinate class position and become something more. The Florida *Dispatch* claimed that black education was “greatly hampered by the incompetency of the colored teacher” and in turn proposed that “what the negro needs is mainly a plain, thorough comprehension of the simple course of common school education.” This was necessary for the Northern capitalist as the “openings for the negro in the higher walks of life are few, his destiny is to labor, and skilled labor is more certainly profitable than unskilled attempts at fulfilling professional positions.” **146**

The Superintendent of Common Schools in Florida disagreed with this sentiment and claimed that the children learned rapidly and there was never a single complaint about the fifty mostly black teachers under his charge. In fact, he concluded, there was a demand for more. The black teachers were “active, energetic, and exemplary, and though they have never received anything more than meagre support, have persevered under the most straightened circumstances.” **147**

Teachers were often more than just educators. While many of the Northern white teachers simply felt their job was to instill a rudimentary education in their pupils, others engaged in community activism. One teacher in Palatka was openly promoting the interests of the freemen, subjecting her to much “obloquy and even threats of violence” for trying to “guard them against being imposed on in their contracts with the whites.” In response to the threats, the freemen offered to form of guard of six men to protect herself and her premises, although she declined this offer. The teacher took receipts for homesteads and distributed out seeds among the freemen, hoping to relieve the burden of the exploitative contract system from their shoulders. **148** Black teachers were often more disposed to engage with the community and work outside the walls of the classroom. Douglas Dorsey recalled:

“After the establishing of schools by the Freedmen's Bureau, Douglas' father made him go, but he did not like the confinement of school and soon dropped out. The teachers for the most part, were white, who were concerned only with teaching the ex-slaves reading, writing, and arithmetic. The few colored teachers went into the community in an effort to elevate the standards of living. They went into the

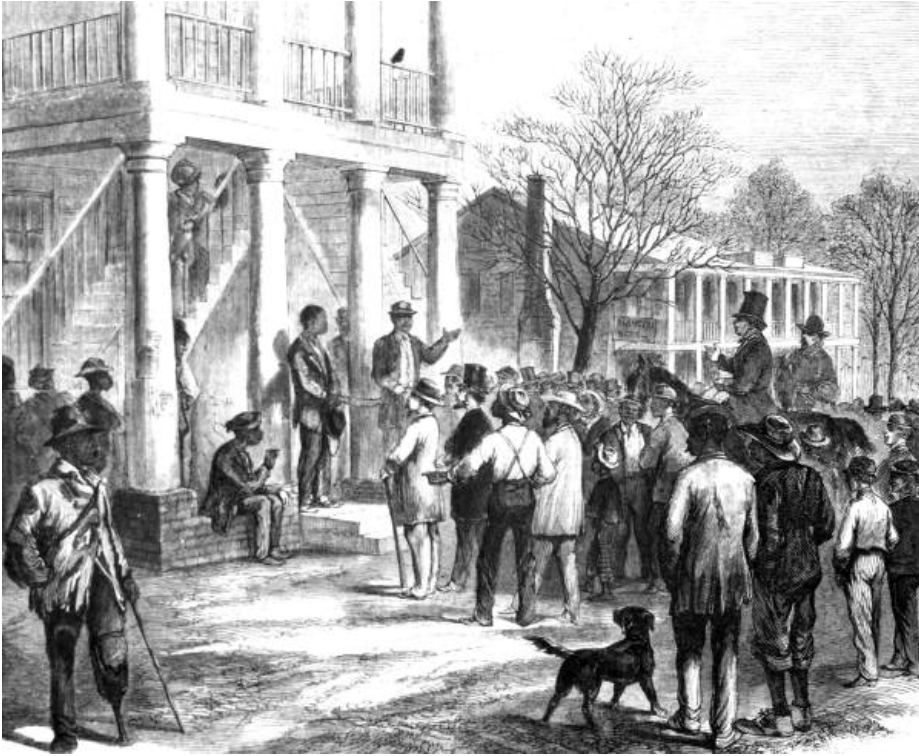
churches where they were certain to reach the greatest number of people and spoke to them of their mission. The Negro teachers were cordially received by the ex-slaves who were glad to welcome some "Yankee niggers" into their midst." **149**

Edward Lycurgas recalled after Emancipation: "Next to the preacher, the Negro school teacher was held in greatest respect." **150** Amanda McCray, a former slave from Madison County, held that the teacher was a respectable profession that every black female aspired to: "Later they had colored teachers who followed much the same routine as the whites had. They were held in awe by the other Negroes and every little girl yearned to be a teacher, as this was about the only professional field open to Negro women at that time." **151**

### **The Black Codes**

Florida's postwar legislature was comprised of the same wealthy slaveholders, secessionists, and Confederate officials who held power before and during the Civil War, as well as some moderate Republicans from the North. **152** The provisional governor William Marvin may have been a Republican and Unionist, but he also shared the Southern white belief of black subordination through a forced labor system. In 1866, this Florida legislature enacted a series of restrictions and regulations called the "black codes," with the assumption that blacks would only labor under white ownership, management, and supervision. The county criminal courts in Florida were organized to externalize the role of the slaveholder to the judicial system. The state took on the role of master and its courts accordingly took on the role of the plantation tribunals that had harshly punished slaves for trivial infractions. **153** The convention that formed the 1866 Florida constitution requested provision governor William Marvin to form a commission to create "suitable laws for the government of the freed men." The commission suggested new means of "crime control" in place of plantation tribunals:

"Heretofore there existed in each household a tribunal peculiarly adapted to the investigation and punishment of the great majority of the minor offenses to the commission of which this class of population was addicted. With the destruction of the institution of negro slavery that tribunal has become extinct, and hence the necessity of creating another in its stead, and of making such modifications in our legislation as shall give full efficiency to our criminal code." **154**



“Selling a freedman to pay his fine,” Monticello, Florida, ca. 1865. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

As the freemen sought to control their lives and labor following Emancipation, the black codes were implemented to assure that they had no right to either. Yet the rigid race-based legislation did not necessarily originate from Southern reaction to the end of slavery. Prior to the black codes, Federal military officials and Bureau agents were employed in returning “idle” blacks back to the plantations and imposing harsh sentences on those who didn’t find work, violated contract, or disobeyed employers. These acts and policies set the precedent for the Southern planters to legally enact a forced labor system. John Wallace, black Floridian and Leon County delegate, was one of the opinion that the Bureau was the “worst curse of the race” and that

“Before it was definitely known that the Congress of the United States could confer the right of suffrage upon the negro the great majority of the agents were more oppressive of the Freedmen than the local authorities, their former masters.” **155**

The black codes were primarily instilled to subordinate black labor to white capital. Blacks who refused to work or find employment at “reasonable wage rates,” disobeyed or were insubordinate to their employer, or violated their terms of contract were charged with vagrancy and sentenced to forced labor for twelve months. **156** The children of convicted vagrants were to become apprentices at the disposal of the state. **157** Freedmen’s Bureau Commissioner Oliver Howard, encouraging the use of vagrancy laws, felt that “a little wholesome constraint in many cases could not be avoided.” **158** Interracial marriage was prohibited. Black men who cohabited with white women were sentenced to three months in prison and a one thousand dollar fine. **159** The freemen were forbidden to carry firearms. In court, black testimony in white cases was deemed inadmissible and black witnesses in black cases were to be screened by all-white juries prior to testimony. All-white juries also determined black trials. If blacks couldn’t pay court costs and the exorbitant fines charged, they were sold off in a public auction for a year’s term of unpaid labor. Many sentences included a whipping of 39 lashes. The death penalty was ordained for multiple offenses, including the rape of a white woman. In turn, nothing was said for the rape of a black woman. **160**

F.E. Grossman, a Federal official in Florida, gave a notable example of how these laws operated through a particular instance in a Baker County case:

“A freedwomen, convicted of having assaulted another one whom she had discovered in the act of adultery with her husband,' was fined fifty dollars. Being unable to pay this fine, according to the law of the State, she is hired out to some one who gives security for the payment of the fine, and has to work probably twelve months before she is again permitted to work free of restrictions. I have been assured by an able lawyer that this woman would have been acquitted had she been defended by counsel, or, at any rate, would have received but a mere nominal punishment, and that the presiding judge did not inform her of her right to employ counsel. In this town of Lake City I have heard fines of hundreds of dollars imposed upon freedmen who will probably become old men before these fines are settled.” **161**



The “black codes” were unable to go on the books until 1866, following the withdrawal of Federal military forces. Until then, military tribunals replaced local and state courts in judicial decisions. Southern planters lamented the Federal military tribunals for protecting the freemen. In George F. Thompson’s travels through Central Florida in late 1865, he narrated the sorrow that a planter mistress felt now that their former slaves had a right to life under Federal military authorities:

“She informed us that the Emancipation of the negro had wrought a great change already and instanced the case of the killing of a negro by one of her neighbors as a case in point. It seems that Marion Paine, one of the family previously referred to, had an altercation with a negro boy and becoming exasperated threw a knot of wood at the boy striking him down senseless and shortly after expired. Under the old system Marion might have gone before a magistrate and made a statement of the case and been released, but now, knowing that under the new order of things the negro boy had a right to life and that he (Marion) was amenable to the military authorities for one of the worst of crimes he felt the cord chafing his neck and fled and I believe to this day has not been found to answer for his crime. Unquestionably his friends are knowing as to his whereabouts and provide him with the necessary means to evade detection. On inquiry of Miss Carman if there had ever been any cases where the owner had killed a slave without being molested by the civil authorities under the old system, she answered very readily, ‘yes, indeed.’” **162**

In 1871, a Jacksonville missionary summarized the postwar black codes passed by the pro-Confederate Florida government:

“But we tremble when we think what it will be, if the democrats get into power, which I hope the Lord will prevent. We know what they have done when in power & we have no reason to think they are any better now. It is only a few years since the whipping post was taken from the front of the courthouse in this place. The law- which is down in black & white-is that if a colored man steal a chicken he shall be whipped & one who has been whipped shall be disfranchised. In that way they would deprive the colored man of his vote. And if a colored man could not pay his taxes he would be sold for a year & his children till they were twenty one, & c.22 These one sided laws were made since the war when the democrats were in power, & there are men in this place who helped to get them up, & they pretend to be great friends to the

colored people, but let them get into power again and these laws would be enforced, then the colored man would find, to his sorrow who were his friends.” **163**

Following the legislation of the black codes, the Freedmen’s Bureau set up tribunals and separately tried cases for the freemen, attempting to offset but failing to fully compensate for Florida’s racially repressive judicial system. **164** When the Federal military occupied Florida in January 1867, the black codes were quickly overhauled. The 1868 constitution, while subtly apportioning districts to nullify the black franchise, lacked all of the race-based legislation passed by the ex-Confederate government in 1866. **165** But legislative reforms were still not reflected in the everyday reality of Florida’s court system. Blatant in imposing racial laws, the black codes were an easy target for black and white Republican activists. But a moderate system that didn’t enact openly racial laws but failed to make laws that offset the reality of white racism on the ground level, was even deadlier in some ways. It was much more difficult to inspire opposition against a government that appeared racially indifferent but still supported white supremacy by failing to recognize and challenge its reality.

Blacks felt little change in the judicial system following the election of the Reconstruction regimes. As the Ku Klux Klan assassinated blacks in broad daylight and were acquitted in court, black men were jailed for petty theft and leased out to white companies. The marauding Ku Klux bands intimidated juries, beat down judges and police, and subverted the judicial system through the general support of the white population. The judicial system could not operate against the heavy weight of a white population determined on maintaining its own legal superiority regardless of the laws on the books. During the height of Reconstruction, a missionary teacher in Jacksonville recounted:

“If a colored person commits a murder he is brought to justice just as he should be. There are three in this place under sentence of death for one murder. There has been 18 murders in this county & vicinity in six months, mostly Republicans. But a white murderer cannot be arrested, because he is protected and secreted by Southerners. There is one at large now who is known, and a white lady-shall I call her lady, she passes for one-has been heard to say ‘the Yankees cant get Mr. Bailey they would like to get him, & string him up, but we will protect him, & hide him from them.’”

**166**

State Senator Robert Meacham believed that Florida's Reconstruction judicial system unjustly targeted blacks for trivial infractions: "There is a great deal of trouble in that way. A great many justices of the peace have the jails full of colored people for the most frivolous and trilling things. When the charges are examined into they are found to amount to nothing." **167** A sort of unofficial version of the black codes worked in reality. As the Klan maneuvered beyond the bounds of the law, and often was the law, the laws continued to apply to the freemen. A Bureau official in Lake City gave a distinct picture of how the judicial system operated there:

"Most of the prisoners tried before the different courts in this section are freedmen, who are, inmost cases, guilty of some offence against the laws, but I think it undeniable that, though the acts committed are intrinsically wrong, and therefore ought to be punished, a white man would not be tried in this community for many minor offences for which I have seen freedmen sentenced.

To sentence a negro to several dollars' fine for carrying a revolver concealed upon his person, is in accordance with an ordinance of the town; but still the question naturally arises in my mind, "Why is this poor fellow fined for an offence which is committed hourly by every other white man I meet in the streets?"

Again, whenever the statute fails to provide a fixed punishment for a certain offence, leaving it optional with the court, for instance, to fine anywhere from five dollars to a hundred, it is my opinion that the freedmen will invariably be sentenced to a higher fine than white men would be, had they committed the same offence. Courts and juries, so far from making allowance for the fact that the freedmen are in many instances too ignorant to know that they are doing wrong, appear to act upon the principle that all the blacks are naturally bad, and undeserving of a liberal construction of the laws in their cases." **168**

The brutality of the convict-leasing system, contrary to popular belief, originated and became prevalent during the early years of Reconstruction. The 1868 Constitution was the first to establish a state prison. The institution of a renewed state penal system was characteristic of moderate Republican Reconstruction. It standardized white supremacy, was brutal in character, and failed to make any fundamental changes. The realities of the racial system were hidden under humanitarian rhetoric. Republican Governor Harrison Reed recommended the establishment of a state penitentiary as the

“best system of punishment ever devised.” It would accomplish “in measure, one of the first objects of punishment – the reformation, and inculcation of habits of industriousness and systematic labor with the criminal.” **169** That same year, the United States donated to Florida the Chattahoochee arsenal and this was soon put into use as the first State penitentiary. The 1871 legislature enacted the convict-leasing system. **170**

Although blacks were no longer directly auctioned off for vagrancy, they were now imprisoned for menial crimes and leased out to companies for bids. The Northern capitalist prison auction bid replaced the Southern white street corner auction block. Nothing could be more proof that a change in administration from ex-Confederates to Northern Republicans made few improvements in the justice system. J.C. Powell, a prison guard in the Florida state penitentiary system, documented the numerous horrors of the convict-leasing system. In his classic work *American Siberia*, he described the penal system in Chattahoochee as “one of almost unrelieved brutality.” Florida Freedmen’s Bureau agent Malachi Martin was named “commanding officer” over the Chattahoochee prison. Powell described Martin’s administration:

“A man named Martin was warden, and the place was a horror's den. He had been placed in charge of the building during the war, at a time when it was used as an arsenal. The state got rid of its criminals by turning them over bodily to him, and paid him bonuses amounting to over \$30,000 for accepting the charge. He had vast vineyards and worked the convicts in them, manufacturing all kinds of wine, at which he made a fortune.” **171**

Powell listed some of worst aspects of the convict-leasing system during the Reconstruction Era:

“At last, shortly before the close of Governor Stern's administration, a great scandal, growing out of these atrocities, became so imminent, that a sort of compromise between the prison and the lease systems was effected. The convicts were divided; about half were sent to build a railroad between St. John and Lake Eustace, and the balance were left under Martin. It was hardly an improvement.” **172**

The origins of Florida’s infamous convict-leasing system could be firmly placed during the period of Reconstruction, not in the conservative Democratic administrations that would follow. Nor did the vagrancy laws of the black codes

necessarily originate from the pro-Confederate politicians that remained in power following the Civil War, but in the Freedmen's Bureau that often implemented force in returning former slaves back to the plantations. Furthermore, the black codes originated out of the common sentiment that white supervision was necessary if black labor was to be successful. Moderate Republicans from the North had adopted this sentiment and were essential in reinforcing it through the legislative system. Blacks did not have the freedom to test the limits of their emancipation, and when they tried to they quickly found that their enemy in achieving self-managed labor was not solely in their former masters, but in their white moderate Republican "allies" as well.

## Chapter 13

# The End of Reconstruction: Reversing Democracy (1865-1876)

### Making “Slaves Freemen and Freemen Slaves”

Florida native Timothy Thomas Fortune, among the most radical black thinkers in the Reconstruction era, believed that class and racial hierarchy were inseparable structures. In his classic work *Black and White: Land, Labor, and Politics, in the South*, he intended to prove that “poverty and misfortune make no invidious distinctions of ‘race, color, or previous condition,’ but that wealth unduly centralized oppresses all alike.” He believed that the Republican Party was a parasite that indirectly prevented the actualization of black liberation. The party was interested in procuring black support to boost its own political power, while herding the flock of freemen into unquestioning allegiance. While former slaves sought political independence from their former owners, they gradually found themselves subjugated under a new class of opportunists and capitalist exploiters. White supremacy reigned in both parties. Fortune proposed that an independent political stance was the only way for blacks to attain independence:

“The loyal legislation which would be occasioned by dread of loss of power, and the administration of the government in the most economical form, are wanting, because of the absence of an honest, healthy opposing party. But it is not my purpose to dwell upon the mechanism of parties, but rather to show why colored Americans should be independent voters, independent citizens, independent men....

The Republican Party has degenerated into an ignoble scramble for place and power. It has forgotten the principles for which Sumner contended, and for which Lincoln died. It betrayed the cause for which Douglass, Garrison and others labored, in the blind policy it pursued in reconstructing the rebellious States. It made slaves freemen and freemen slaves in the same breath by conferring the franchise and withholding the guarantees to insure its exercise; it betrayed its trust in permitting thousands of innocent men to be slaughtered without declaring the South in rebellion, and in pardoning murderers, whom tardy justice had consigned to a felon's dungeon. It is even now powerless to insure an honest expression of the vote of the colored citizen.



T. THOMAS FORTUNE.

Engraved Portrait of Timothy Thomas Fortune, black Floridian activist, journalist, writer, editor, and publisher, ca. 1891. Source: *Florida Photographic Collection*.

For these things, I do not deem it binding upon colored men further to support the Republican Party when other more advantageous affiliations can be formed.” **1**

Fortune’s radical class analysis, formed from his experiences and observations in Florida, came at a time when most Republican politicians and activists wouldn’t outright challenge the class status and land monopoly of the Southern oligarchy. Beyond “unscrupulous contracts” and “abuses” that Northern activists criticized, there was something more fundamental than just the basic treatment that black workers received. At the heart of Fortune’s analysis was the black and white laboring class: “The producing agency...without which there could be no wealth.” As Florida’s landowner Democrats

claimed that blacks were “lazy idlers,” they really meant that the black laborers wouldn’t toil on their fields to create their profits – fields that blacks had improved, cultivated, and harvested by forced labor for centuries; fields that wealthy whites owned from unearned privilege and monopoly; fields that they owned because the racist, aristocratic state protected their claim to ownership. Fortune fired back at the capitalists, the “idlers and sharpers” who “add nothing to society but on the contrary constantly take from it,” and extract enough profit from their workers to “enable him to live in more than comfort but have a healthy bank account.” **2** Fortune’s stance was a continuation of the AME Church’s platform that “labor is the basis of all wealth.”

Black Floridians were well-aware that white supremacy and monopoly were intertwined, and even interdependent, systems. The all-black delegation elected from majority black Leon County opposed “the system of plunder which had been inaugurated in almost every county of the state.” **3** In 1872, the Republican caucus adopted a bill that authorized corporations to “change their names, consolidate their capital stock, and merge their corporate powers.” The Leon County delegates fired back: “We want no Tom Scotts, Jim Fisks, or Vanderbilts in this State to govern us, by means which they would influence legislation tending to advance personal interests.” **4** They attacked the consolidated power of Florida’s corporate oligarchy backed by the capital-friendly Republican regime:

“Capital needs no legislation in order to provide for its use. Capital is strong enough enough to take care and provide for itself, but corporations are a dangerous power, especially large or consolidated corporations, and the American people fear them with distrust...

The great curse of Florida has been dishonest corporations, rings and cliques, with an eye to their single interest, and if this bill is suffered to pass this Assembly, in my opinion we may look for a continuation of abuses and usurpation of the rights of citizens who may be opposed to the machinations such as are generally exerted by consolidated bodies.” **5**

An AME Church convention resolved to boycott corporations with racist policies:



“Those steamers, railroad companies, merchants, and others who treat our people so disgracefully from sheer hatred, malice, and prejudice, are not worthy of our support, only as serves the interests of our people, and our people as much as possible should be advised to ship their produce, etc., and make their purchases by and from those who treat them fairest.” 6

In Reconstruction Florida, the Republican Party was far from unified. This was mostly because the two factions, radicals and conservatives, represented two opposing interests. The radical politicians were Northern opportunists like the moderates, but sought to form a large coalition of blacks and radical whites under its wing to secure political power in the state. It sought to break the class system of the state and supported the interests of poor white laborers as well. The moderate faction were also Northern opportunists, but backed the interests of Northern capitalists and Southern planters who desired black and poor white subservience to forward economic growth.

For all the native white Southerners bashed the conservative Federal military occupation as “radical,” the moderate Republicans and Federal officials appeased the Southern planters and accepted their commonly held notion that blacks should labor under white supervision. They equivocally endeavored to main white domination as the central aspect of Florida society. As moderate Republicans sought to economically propel the state, they understood that white capitalists would be at the forefront and required a disciplined, educated, and subservient black laboring class to do so. Moderate Republicans never questioned basic assumptions of white power and land monopoly. They sought to make some minor concessions to the freemen, but were more interested in “reconciliation” with former slaveholders. They wished to establish a state constitution that would create equality on the surface, but would actually limit the franchise for blacks and do little for land reform or regulating the contract system.

Radical Republicans, under their careful political guidance of course, desired to create a revolution in Florida’s class structure. As blacks were organizing and arming themselves before the Republican Party came to Florida, the enlistment of rank-and-file blacks in the party effectively transitioned their disposition for independent direct action to support for white leaders to take action on their behalf. The positions that radicals held were unacceptable to the white elite, and Federal military officers formed a coalition with conservatives to undermine their rise to political dominance. If it couldn’t be done democratically, then Federal officers would have to take extralegal precautions to prevent the will of the majority. 7

White landholders would even compromise their own profits to politically weaken or undermine the growing black electoral base. While planters generally faulted their former slaves for ruining the cotton crop, the captain of a ship on the Oklawaha River told a Northern traveler that emancipation had greatly hindered the progress of hundreds of plantations along the river chiefly because “the planters did not wish to encourage more negroes to come into the country, as they were already so formidable a political element. Planters cannot work the broad acres without the very immigration which they dread, and so they suffer them to lie idle.”

The Northern traveler, Edward King, made several other observations that contradicted the notions of Southern planters: that the majority of the state debt had been procured from “faith bonds” during the Antebellum period, not the Reconstruction administrations; that Northern migrants to the state were not “radicals” but mostly adopted conservative views; that the property-owner could fix his own valuation for taxes; that the school tax was very minimal and the largest obstruction to better public school system was the anxiety felt by Southern planters that their children could be compelled to attend integrated schools. **8**

That blacks were highly organized on a grassroots basis, determined to set their own wage standard, aware of politics and current events, and defined their own concept of emancipation all seem to contradict the oft-repeated Southern notion that blacks were content with their position unless instigated by “agitators” and “outsiders.” A Bureau official in Lake City noted that the freemen were “imbued with very extravagant ideas about their freedom, consider themselves fully on a level with their former masters, and seldom fail to show by word or action that such is their opinion.” **9** A Federal official in Tallahassee believed in the “existence of a combination to prevent...work being done at reasonable and customary rates” The freemen there “exult over the change of condition that has taken place, and claim that they are now masters of the position, and declare that they will work only upon their terms.” **10**

A Northern booster observed that news of current events quickly spread among the ex-slaves, making their organization on political terms increasingly potent: “It is always something of an astonishment to find out how well posted these otherwise ignorant negroes are on political matters, local events, or any important occurrences; they seem to have a secret sort of freemasonry by which they learn everything going on.” There was a political culture among ex-slaves that ensured they were informed on current issues that pertained to them: “In all their camps were individuals who did the reading and writing; read the newspapers aloud, read the letters received by their less intelligent companions, and wrote the letter and postal-card replies.” Yet this did not worry the

Northern booster because he knew that their political viewpoints meant nothing if they weren't prepared to implement or resist violence: "Ignorant, but very cunning and unscrupulous, they would be a terribly dangerous element of society, were it not for their well-known fear of fire-arms, and their naturally peaceful disposition." **11**

While most Southern whites strongly opposed black enfranchisement, others recognized that the ballot was preferable to armed bands of freemen: "He was given the right off suffrage," a Northerner in Florida noted, "the only effective weapon that was safe to put into his hands for self-defense." **12** Were the ex-slaves really predisposed to peaceful resistance? Radical Republican delegate Daniel Richards believed that equal suffrage was the most effective weapon to prevent a full-out race war while recognizing that equal distribution of guns was just as important. **13** In response to Klan violence, Richards reported that blacks were secretly organizing and arming themselves throughout the state. **14** A Florida booster noted that "As a rule, all negroes go armed; razors are their characteristic and especially favorite weapon; but they are very fond of revolvers also, and many of them carry one." **15** The ballot and the bullet were both perceived as necessary tools for liberation.

"They have learned full well of the fiendish spirit that pursues them," Richards reported on black Floridians, "and were it not for the influence and control of the Union men over them they would, before this, have taken vengeance on these men who have deprived them of everything but life, and are now seeking to take that." **16** Blacks wanted to implement armed self-defense and retaliation against Klan attacks, but Federal officials, their supposed allies, often urged them against doing so. In fact, the Union military occupation and "carpetbaggers" did more to protect the prejudiced and short-sighted Southerners who couldn't see a potential insurrection if they continued to oppress the ex-slaves. Richards goes further to the point where he called the Union men the "true friends" of white Southerners for controlling the blacks and preventing a potential insurrection:

"They are seeking in all ways to take these creatures lives. A terrible retribution awaits them whenever the union people cease to be able to restrain these blacks. The Union men ought to be regarded as the true friends of the South for the blacks have confidence in them, and will be controlled by them. But if these rebels are allowed to control this state and administer the laws there is, pretty close ahead of us, serious trouble. Disenfranchisement, banishment, confiscation or almost anything would be merciful to these rebels themselves compared with giving them supreme controlling authority in all branches of the government here in the South." **17**

But while the Unionists strived to “restrain the blacks from taking vengeance on these infernal rascals,” the rebels made it difficult for them to “keep the blacks down and maintain order.” Richards believed that the blacks contained such strength and power that “at any time they can drive every rebel into the sea.” **18** Nevertheless, blacks often repelled the Klan in certain areas. Lucius Douglass, an ex-slave from Jefferson County, recalled how organized blacks broke up Ku Klux Klan meetings: “De Ku Klux wasn’t in our county much. Anyhow, it didn’t live long. De colored people soon broke dat up, ‘least dey thought dey did. When dey would know where dar meetings would be at de colored people would gather and go dar and soon have de Ku Klux on de go.” **19** There was little or no Klan violence in Jefferson County as a result. Organized black militant action often proved most effective at deterring Klan violence. But the Federals seemed more concerned of potential black unrest than the Klan terror afflicting their “allies.” The Federal military issued an order to discontinue the nightly secret meetings of armed blacks in Middle Florida counties. **20** As Southern whites and Northern officials pointed the finger at the radical Republicans for arming, organizing, and inciting the former slaves, radical Republican Daniel Richards argued that blacks were doing so on their own initiative:

“They tell Truman I am trying to organize and arm the blacks when the truth is they are nearly all armed, and I think pretty well organized, and were before I came here, and I have not spoken to more than half a dozen blacks since I came here nor have I spent half an hour in all, talking with them since I have been on this island.” **21**

The three radical Republican delegates, Daniel Richards, Liberty Billings, and William Saunders, organized the Union League in Florida simply to transfer the energy of black organization in support of the Republican Party. They developed the grassroots support for the Republican Party by enlisting the rebellious freemen into numerous chapters and binding them into one compact political organization. **22** Richards claimed that the radicals were responsible for three-fourths of the Republican Party in Florida. **23** Richards’ report that Republican officials were mostly responsible for restraining the black population was confirmed by other instances. Most blacks did not insist as much as their leaders on non-violent resistance and reliance on the state for protection.

While Southerners claimed that Republicans and Bureau agents were incendiaries, they were instrumental in controlling black militancy and channeling it

through legal means. Republican official James Montgomery of Madison County claimed: “The colored people will do pretty much what we tell them, because they believe we have done right.” He believed that his imposition and leadership had prevented his black followers from taking vengeance numerous times on the whites: “I think we have saved the town a half a dozen times from being destroyed.” **24** When Montgomery was hit by an assassin’s bullet one night, an armed band of his black allies scoured the town in a search party. When he was nowhere to be found, they prepared to burn down the town. But Republican official Dennis Eagan intervened and informed the black militia that he was still alive and that they should cease in their plans. **25** Nevertheless, Madison County had proven a hotbed of Klan terrorism and black displays of militancy could have possibly averted some of the white violence.

In 1867, mass meetings of former slaves were frequently held throughout the state after they were turned off the plantations with nothing to show for a year’s term of labor under plantation contracts. The freemen were quickly becoming impatient with the promises of freedom and the soothing rhetoric of Northern men who urged them to remain passive and compliant. **26** On July 11, three hundred freemen angrily marched on Brooksville in protest. They were told that they would not get to pick delegates for the upcoming Republican Convention. A Freedmen’s Bureau agent William Vance reported:

“I found the freedmen formed a company with armed with shot guns and muskets, they said they were told to come armed as the secessionists were not going to let them hold their meeting.” Vance told them to put their arms away, “and read to them the late orders of Col. Sprague in regard to the carrying of weapons.” **27**

The black speakers of a political rally on April 12<sup>th</sup> had supposedly “indulged” in “intemperate and offensive language” but the real concern was that “their tendency was to excite ill-feeling” which meant to instill “difference in ideas of political duty” in their black constituents. **28** On April 20<sup>th</sup>, one of these meetings was held in the capital square at Tallahassee. Following several speeches from former slaveholders espousing their desire that the freemen achieve success but kneel to the overwhelming power of whites, Green Davidson, a black orator, questioned their logic in this matter:

“The negroes had labored the last year under contracts, but when the year closed, instead of having hundreds of dollars in hand, they had nothing, but found themselves in debt... The white men may outnumber the negroes... but does it follow

that all the white men will vote together? Will not some vote with the black men?"

**29**

When Benjamin F. Tidwell, county judge of Madison County, was asked if the freemen in his region were generally well-armed, he simply responded: "a great many of them have guns." This was to protect their right to organize political rallies. A correspondent of a freemen's meeting in Madison County described the atmosphere of these rallies: "It mattered not after war and pestilence have desolated our land, and famine, the worst of the dreaded three, now staring us in the face, on this beautiful day and at this pressing time with planters, almost every farm in the county was deserted by the laborers who flocked in herds to the village...almost one hundred of whom were armed with double-barreled guns, old rifles, muskets, and swords." This was a far cry from the Southern misrepresentation of the slave following the war as a passive Sambo or the Northern misrepresentation that Reconstruction was simply in the hands of "carpetbagger" politicians. Green Davidson once again educated the conservative white speakers at the convention: "These men have come here with their guns to show you they will protect me and themselves." **30**

The former slaves not only desired to socially, politically, and economically identify themselves independent from their former master, but were prepared to protect themselves if ex-slaveholders attempted to forcefully stop them. On the other hand, the Freedmen's Bureau was willing to sacrifice mass black political involvement in order to ensure that blacks remained faithful laborers. At a large meeting of blacks in Lake City, the local Freedmen's Bureau agent advised them to send representative delegates to political rallies as it was "unprofitable" for them to attend in mass. **31**

In 1865, a Florida legislative committee had acknowledged that it was true that one of the results of the war was the abolition of African slavery

"But it will hardly be seriously argued that the simple act of emancipation of itself worked any change in the social, legal or political status of such of the African race as were already free. Nor will it be insisted, we presume, that the emancipated slave technically denominated a 'freedman,' occupied any higher position in the scale of rights and privileges than did the 'free negro.' If these inferences be correct, then it results, as a logical conclusion, that all the arguments going to sustain the authority of the General Assembly to discriminate in the case of 'free negroes' equally apply to that of 'freedmen,' or emancipated slaves. But it is insisted by a certain class of radical theorists that the act of emancipation did not stop in its effect in merely

severing the relation of master and slave, but that it extended further, and so operated as to exalt the entire race and placed them upon terms of perfect equality with the white man. These fanatics may be very sincere and honest in their convictions, but the result of the recent elections in Connecticut and Wisconsin shows very conclusively that such is not the sentiment of a majority of the so-called Free States.”

### 32

Moderate Republicans in Florida sought to impose “the sentiment of the majority of the so-called Free States” in opposition to the radical Republican and black demands for full social equality. The Federal military supported the conservative faction of Republicans who placed capitalist profits over black liberation. From the start, the Federal military in Florida, under command of General Pope, had tolerated the ex-slaveholders. Pope forcefully removed very few native white secessionists from their office. He even vetoed the plans of the Jacksonville Republican Club to remove Democratic Governor Walker from office. **33** The *New York Times* stated that some Northern bondholders in the states of Georgia and Florida might have organized a lobby to influence Pope’s moderate Reconstruction policy. **34** From this news report, it becomes apparent that Northern capitalists didn’t wish to upset their prospects for profitable relations with the Southern oligarchy.

The climax of radical and conservative struggle in Florida took place at the state Constitutional Convention in January 1868. On January 20, Florida’s Constitutional Convention organized in Tallahassee. Only thirty of the forty-six elected Florida delegates arrived at the beginning. Liberty Billings, Daniel Richards, and William Saunders were at the head of the radical faction. The radical delegates were in the vast majority and backed by a large militant black electorate. The radical majority of twenty-eight sought to form a constitution that granted full rights of education, housing, and political representation to the freemen. Nine-tenths of the black delegates sided with the radicals. A Northern reporter commented on the eighteen black delegates at the convention:

“In spite of all the whips and prisons, there were a few slaves who learned to read and write, as now is evidenced in this Convention. I do not see that one of the 18-and I believe 15 or 16 of them were formerly slaves-is destitute of this desirable accomplishment. Independent of that, their genial demeanor and address shows them

possessed of all the attributes of gentlemen-'niggers,' the Rebels call them-but eloquent speakers.” **35**

The convention was directly democratic, elected and approved from below. Outside of the convention, hundreds of freemen shouted “the bottom rail on top” in the excitement of having their political destiny in their hands for the first time ever. **36** The convention selected radical Daniel Richards for president and proceeded to select other radical delegates for officer positions in the convention as well. Richards pronounced to the convention:

“We should provide for a system by which all may obtain homes of their own and a comfortable living, and also provide for schools in which all may be educated free of expense; clothe honest industry with respectability; inaugurate a public sentiment that shall crown the man with honors as the benefactor of his race who makes two blades of grass grow where one grew before, and prohibit all laws that are not equal and just to all within our State.” **37**

The Florida Constitutional Convention attempted to place “the bottom rail on top,” issuing a revolutionary ordinance to nullify all tax-default property sales, suspend the collection of taxes, and release all those who had been imprisoned for the non-payment of taxes. The ordinance was clear that it would not prevent “the collection of debts due or to become due as wages for actual labor performed by any house, field, or other laborer.” **38** The moderates attempted to delay the Convention and build up their voting strength, but the radicals still maintained a majority of delegates by the end of January. By the 31<sup>st</sup>, the radicals were still ahead of the moderate/conservative coalition with twenty-two delegates to twenty.

For the first two weeks of convention, every effort to proceed with forming a constitution was resisted and inhibited by the moderate faction aided by a powerful organized lobby of Southern planters, Northern politicians, and capitalists. Richard and Saunders reported how the moderate “Osborn faction” collaborated with former Confederate leaders: “Conservative republicans, both in and out of the convention, began to caucus night and day, with the leading rebels freely admitted to their councils, to devise ways and means to overthrow the radicals.” **39** William H. Gleason, a South Florida Republican official, later recalled that the 1868 Constitution “was formed in consultation with leading Southern men. Colonel Dyke editor of the Floridian and Col.



McIntosh on the part of the Southern gentlemen and Col. Osborne who at that time was at the head of the Freedmen's Bureau and myself.” **40**

The moderates used money furnished by Johnson officer-holders to bribe some delegates over to their side and made concessions to Southern Democrats to procure their support. Harrison Reed, the future state governor, was instrumental in securing these concessions and believed it was necessary to protect the state from the “misrule through the ignorance of the newly enfranchised freedmen.” **41** He endeavored to give representation for the sparsely populated white counties equivalent to the heavily populated black counties, which would greatly offset the strength of the black franchise. **42** Captain John T. Sprague, Federal commander in Florida, supervised and actively influenced this “disorganizing faction.” Seeing no prospect of victory for a moderate constitution, the Osborn faction broke off from the Tallahassee Convention. Nineteen of the moderate delegates withdrew to the nearby city of Monticello to forge an alternative constitution.

The twenty-two radical delegates remained at the Tallahassee convention. The radical faction petitioned the Federal military to “seize fourteen of the leading seceders and bring them back by force if necessary to the state house.” **43** The military refused to act, permitting the moderates to form a rival constitution. The radical majority at the Tallahassee convention formed the initial and legitimate constitution, signed it, and adjourned for a week to hear back from General Meade.

On February 10, the 21 delegates of the moderate faction secretly returned to the convention hall in Tallahassee. With the aid of Democratic Governor and ex-Confederate General Walker, they quickly and quietly broke into the hall at midnight. In order to secure a “legitimate” majority, the military seized two of the radical delegates, dragging them out of bed and forcing them to the hall. Between twelve and two o’clock in the morning, the moderates formed a new convention protected by a guard of Federal soldiers outside of the hall. The military guard issued by General Walker protected the usurpers night and day. When the day came for the legal convention to form again, the bewildered radical faction confronted a guard of soldiers who prevented them from entering the hall with bayonets. Walker reportedly said that “he shall use all the power he possesses to prevent one party ejecting the other from the hall.” Walker of course meant that “he should protect the seceding revolutionary body, as he had helped them to the possession of the hall, and they were occupying it.” **44**

The radical Billings-Saunders-Richards faction held indignation meetings out in the public square, petitioning General Meade to rightfully return them to the convention. **45** Even Meade recognized that the new convention had no legality. On Walker’s orders,

Colonel John T. Sprague and his Federal soldiers protected the delegates who had taken possession of the hall. On February 18, the usurpers elected new officers for the Convention. Meade ordered Sprague to temporarily take hold of the presidential chair of the Convention and preside over its reorganization. They voted Horatio Jenkins as their president. They then formed a new constitution and sent a copy to General Meade. Compliantly, Meade sent both constitutions to the Committee on Reconstruction and recommended the adoption of the moderate one. The committee adopted the moderate constitution due to Meade's recommendation. **46**

The Federal military occupation of Florida had directly intervened to prevent democracy. The moderate Republican Constitution appeased Democrats, ex-Confederates, and wealthy Southern planters. Radical official Daniel Richards noted:

“While they were at work making this Constitution they were patting these rebels on the back and promising them that they would make a Constitution that would suit them. They deliberately pledged themselves to all the leading rebels in the State that the Constitution should be entirely satisfactory to him, and they in turn argued to support it.” **47**

The moderate constitution gave dictatorial powers to the state governor with the authority to commission officials in a laundry list of state and local positions. The “radicalism” of local Republican officials could be checked in this manner. Through the apportionment, less than a fourth of Florida's population could elect a majority of the State Senate. Less than a third could elect a majority of the Assembly. 6,700 voters in the rebel counties could elect the same number of state senators as 20,282 voters in Union counties. 8,330 voters in rebel counties could elect 27 members of the House Assembly while 18,652 voters in Union counties could only elect 26. By limiting the number of delegates for each county, the moderate Republican constitution effectively disenfranchised blacks who were largely concentrated within several counties. The Constitution imposed a maximum limit of four delegates per county, a huge advantage to the large number of sparsely populated white-majority counties.

On February 16, Harrison Reed wrote triumphantly to conservative Democratic Senator David Yulee, a former Confederate leader and railroad magnate, praising the military for preserving law, order, and property rights. He espoused the representation clause in the Constitution: “Under our Constitution the Judiciary & State officers will be appointed & the apportionment will prevent a negro legislature.” **48** An editorial

euphorically announced that the moderate faction of the Republican Party prevailed with the support of General Walker and other leading statesmen: “Radicalism has been sent howling from our midst.” **49** Freedmen’s Bureau agent William J. Purman later bragged that he had kept Florida from becoming “niggerized.” **50** In addition, the moderate Constitution did not require ex-Confederates take the oath of loyalty prescribed by Congress in order to hold political office. **51**

The Constitution was ratified by a landslide vote of 14,520 to 9,491. Moderate Republican Harrison Reed was elected State Governor, despite his disposition to appease wealthy Southern planters. So contrary to the standard historical perspective that the Federal military occupation oppressed native white Floridians, or the alternative liberal perspective that it was a force for progressive change, it went out of its way to appease ex-Confederates and protected the status quo. Governor Harrison Reed’s ability to appoint local officials meant that his fellow “carpetbaggers” would receive the majority of state offices, while blacks and Florida-born Republican Unionists were largely appointed to small, token political seats. To the surprise of his black supporters, Reed also commissioned a handful of ex-Confederates and secessionists to important state political offices. Rather than form a just government that would overturn the Southern oligarchy and hand real power to his black followers, Reed did just as he promised: “prevent a negro legislature.” In his classic work on the Reconstruction Era, W.E.B. Du Bois noted of Reed:

“His policy always was to favor the planters as much as possible, and then, when the Negroes or Northern whites revolted, to yield to them sufficiently so as to retain their support. In his cabinet, the more important places went to ex-slaveholders.” **52**

After learning that the Governor apportioned mostly carpetbaggers and ex-Confederates in important seats, a Tampa legislator spoke in outrage that Union men and blacks were mostly denied political office: “There are certain elements in the Republican Party whose interests have not been served – who have not been treated with proper consideration. I refer to the colored people and what is known as the Southern loyalists.” **53** In August 1868, Reed also vetoed a law guaranteeing blacks equal access to public transportation. Furthermore, he resisted the passage of a law that would open the door for integrated public school systems. While blacks were not necessarily eager to attend schools with white children, they understood it was in their best interest if they wanted Southern conservatives to consent to higher taxes for public schools. **54** With Reed’s

apparent disposition to oppose “equal rights” legislation, Senator Charles Peace charged: “Every appeal for my race has been voted down by the Conservatives, aided by these weak-kneed Republicans.” **55**

The largest obstruction to black political power in Florida was not the Southern oligarchs who had formerly been their masters, but the concerted effort of moderate Republicans to maintain white supremacy and capitalist domination as central to the social relations of the state. If the land of ex-slaveholders was distributed among their slaves following the war, then blacks would have had a socioeconomic base to confront the reign of terror that would now encompass the state. If the black-supported radicals could have held the reins of government, then former slaves could have procured the necessary arms and military protection to confront the Klan. Furthermore, they could have prevented the rampant exploitation, debt peonage, convict-leasing, violence, and racist legislation that they would endure in the latter years of Reconstruction and afterwards. The moderate Republicans contributed more than any other factor in preventing socioeconomic equality in Florida.

### **The Class Nature of the Klan: Reinserting the Dominance of the White Planter through Violence**

By 1867, an organized campaign of terrorism arose from the formation of “Young Democratic Men’s Clubs” throughout the state. This secret white organization became the basis for the Ku Klux Klan in Florida, which formed the paramilitary arm of the Southern white Democratic Party. Evidence and testimonies point out that the youth of wealthy planters were the main perpetrators of their terrorist campaign. Joseph Nelson told the Ku Klux Klan hearings:

“There are men right there now who I am morally certain are some of those who shot me and have shot others. Those men can get money and have the use of good horses, while they may be here this evening, tomorrow morning they go thirty miles away. There is a kind of Free-Masonry that exists among a certain class of men, and they will assist each other. That is so in everyday life, and it shows itself in the grand and petit juries every time they are called upon to act.” **56**

Bureau agent William J. Purman found that most of the threats against prominent Republicans had not emanated from the “poorer people by any means, but the better sort

of people, mostly the young men.” The “better sort of people” executing the terror campaign were the “young men” of the upper class, “contradistinguished from the poorer class – from those known as ‘crackers.’” **57** James P. Coker, an ex-slaveholder and one of the wealthiest men of Jackson County, was considered to be the “generalissimo of the Ku Klux there; and so considered in the whole country.” **58** Joseph J. Williams, a wealthy planter who owned three hundred slaves prior to the war, was the central chief of the Young Men’s Democratic Club in Leon County. **59** Most of the leading men of the Ku Klux Klan were acknowledged to be among the propertied class of ex-slaveholders. **60**

The main objective of Klan violence was to overthrow the Reconstruction government and restore the political and economic dominance of the Southern oligarchy. The targets of violence included Republican office-holders, black homesteaders, and insubordinate workers, as well as black churches, schools, and political organizations. The violence affected people of all classes but its single message was that they were prepared to eliminate any and everybody who asserted the “equal rights” of blacks in the state. “Radicals” were threatened, intimidated, barred from the voting polls, assassinated, disappeared, whipped, lynched, and at times exiled from the state or their respective county. Florida was the site of political cleansing, also known as “politicide,” as the white Southern Democratic Party wiped its homeland clean of black Republicans, Union men, “scalawags,” and Yankee “carpetbaggers.” Secretary of State Jonathan Gibbs made some conservative estimates of murders in a handful of counties:

“The following is a brief abstract of the number of murders committed in the several counties mentioned, from letters in the office of secretary of state of Florida, since reconstruction: Jackson County, 153; Madison County, 20; Columbia County, 16; Taylor County, 7; Suwannee County, 10; Alachua County, 16; Lafayette County, 4; Hamilton County, 9.” **61**

Klan violence was rooted in the class struggle over labor and land. The Klan attempted to protect land monopoly for the white oligarchy from the threat of black independence, enfranchisement, and grassroots organization. Wealthy planters actively organized, funded, harbored, and supported Klan assassins. Republican Governor Marcellus Stearns described one instance of this:

“James Yerty. He was shot while riding along the road; shot from an ambush and killed dead. The man who killed him was seen; he was killed by one Luke Lot, who

is now said to be in Jackson County. I am very reliably informed that he has been in Jackson County ever since this murder, the latter part of last March, soon after the legislature adjourned. He has been fitted out with arms and equipments, and rides a very fine horse around the county. There are continual expressions throughout Middle Florida by men who approve of these things to this extent: They say they would give him the 'best horse on their plantations, if he needed it, to aid him in his operations.” **62**

The Klan was determined to exterminate the Republican Party and this meant to deny socioeconomic empowerment and self-determination to the former slave – the base of the party. Most Klan operations intended to subordinate black labor. The most effective way to do this was to intimidate black homesteaders and deprive them of their right to land, giving them little alternative but to labor under whites. In August 1866, Freedmen’s Bureau agent James G. Foster reported that he had “some trouble carrying out the provisions of the ‘homestead law’” because “in some localities combinations have been formed to resist the settlement of the negroes, and to drive them off.” **63** State Senator Robert Meacham told his people only to enter contracts with white planters as a last resort “when they can do nothing else.” He instructed his fellow freemen to “get homes for themselves; that they never would be much as long as they labored under these contracts.” Meacham knew that no matter if the plantation system was reformed or not, white planters would continue to exploit the former slaves as long as they worked under contracts with them: “I believe that there is some understanding with them that they will manage, in some way, to keep the colored people from having what they have justly earned...of the full fruits of their labor.” **64** He testified to the Ku Klux Klan hearings that it was in the interest and general understanding of white planters to keep the ex-slaves from achieving political rights and self-sufficiency:

“Let me tell you one thing in the way of an answer; I have been told by gentlemen, by those that I call gentlemen, and I suppose that you or any of us would call them so, that there is a thorough understanding among them in the way of seeing that the colored people shall never have much; they are united one with another to see that that is done.” **65**

On a similar note, Freedmen’s Bureau agent Ansel E. Kinne observed:

“There is so wide a difference between employer and employee, in respect to their ability to transact ordinary business and to comprehend the force of a contract, and so great a desire rapidly to repair losses and regain fortunes, and withal is so little desire on the part of employers to see the freedmen rise in any respect, that unless an enlarged benevolence is to govern in the settlement at the close of the year, little will have been accomplished for the colored man except to arouse him from a not too trusting confidence to an unpleasant and unconquerable suspicion.” **66**

Blacks who managed to acquire land were major targets. Impoverished blacks had already been put in their place but those who would challenge their subordinate class status had to be set straight. In Jackson County, Bureau agent William J. Purman observed that the blacks targeted for assassination were “prominent men among their race...they were our best colored men both in intelligence and industry.” Ku Klux violence was often intended to prevent blacks from acquiring homesteads and establishing independent farms. In Madison County, it was generally believed that the violence was intended to prevent blacks “from farming for themselves; they are not allowed by this class to do so; they are told to go to some white person and hire out with him on his plantation.” **67** Any pretext served as a justification to dispossess black farmers. In Hamilton County, a black family by the name of Scarbord had rented some land and met difficulty from their neighbors after some hogs went missing. The wife and daughter were whipped and the family driven off of their property. **68**

A black man named Doc Rountree had migrated down from Georgia in 1868 and purchased a seven acre government homestead of good, fertile land in Live Oak, Suwannee County. In June 1869, somewhere between nine and ten o'clock one night, over fifteen Ku Klux members broke into his house, dragged him and his wife outside by their hands and feet, and flung four of his children out the door. They proceeded to brutally whip him, his wife, and four of the older children. Rountree recalled that the men shouted: “Didn't I know they didn't allow damned niggers to live on land of their own?” John Sellers, a local white landowner, was at the lead of the attack. He ordered Rountree and his children to work under him for the payment of food and clothing. They gave him orders “to go the next morning to my master, John Sellers, and go to work.” When Rountree refused, Sellers angrily replied that “if we did not leave Friday night he would kill every one of us,” Rountree recalled. His family fled by Sunday night. Rountree testified that Sellers later gave a man John McDonald a pistol and told him to go and kill him. Fortunately, McDonald missed the shot and Rountree came out unharmed. **69** But such was the terror commonly endured by black homesteaders in Florida.

In the spring of 1870, Hannah and Samuel Tutson were the victims of a similar attack by a band of disguised Klansmen in Clay County. They had purchased three acres of good, fertile land from a planter named Free Thompson and homesteaded an additional 160 acres from the government. But because his three acres of land “was the best on Number Eleven Pond” all the local planters attempted to cheat and dispossess them of their new property. Isaac Tire, the first cousin of Thompson, came to claim the land actually belonged to a local planter Jack Winn after Samuel had already purchased it and made the improvements. Samuel refused to leave. In the mean time, Winn and other whites began to harass his wife Hannah to give up the land. At that point, Hanna had harshly told them off: “In the red times, how many times have they took me and turned my clothes over my head and whipped me? I do not care what you do to me now if I can only save my land.” When they had threatened to whip her, she defiantly replied: “I am going to die on this land.” One of the men replied: “You had better give it up.” **70** Later on, Hannah said hello in passing to Mrs. Winn on her way to work, who was considerably surprised that she had not left the land and even forewarned her that she was going to be whipped. Hannah replied: “I wish they would whip me” and then went off. Winn and the local whites grew angry at her resolute defiance.

One night, a band of disguised men, led by Winn himself, broke into their home and dragged the Tutson family outside. Before dragging her off, they tore the baby from Hannah’s arms and flung him away by his foot. Four of the bandits dragged Hannah off a quarter mile, tied her to a pine tree, stripped her naked, and began to beat her with saddle-girths. The same was done to Samuel. They whipped Hannah from the “crown of her head to the sole of her feet.” “We came to dispossess you once before,” one of the Klansmen reminded her as they whipped her, “and you said you did not care if we did whip you.” When the rest of the men were off pillaging the house and stealing their livestock, George McCrea stayed behind and attempted to rape her. When she refused to let him have his way with her, McCrea shouted: “Old lady, if you don’t let me have to do with you, I will kill you.” Hannah only replied: “No; just do what you are going to do.” The men came back and continued whipping her relentlessly. “I was just raw,” Hannah recalled, “the blood oozed out through my frock all around my waist, clean out.” Samuel, Hannah, and their children managed to escape into the woods when the men became preoccupied with tearing down their house and stealing their property. They then vacated their land to safety in Jacksonville. **71**

Many modern historians continue the classical depiction of the Klan as an outlaw band of drunken rednecks and poor white ruffians who defied the law. This historical description has failed to take into count any class or systematic analysis and places the



blame solely on outlaw poor whites for the violence. It effectively took focus off the powerful men in the South, formerly the slaveholding oligarchy, who organized the Klan as a paramilitary organization to restore their power. To bring this in effect, they largely secured the loyalty of poor whites. While poor whites composed most of the armed groups, the emergence of pervasive Klan violence would have been impossible without the social and material support provided by the ex-slaveholders. Joseph Nelson of Jackson County told the Ku Klux Klan hearings that the principle men in charge of the Klan derived from the planter class:

Question: "Are these men, Coker, Barnes, and others, what you would call crackers?"

Answer: "They are as wealthy men as there are around there; they own a great deal of property."

Question: "You spoke of one of the Coker's having a clerk. What business was he in?"

Answer: "He had a very large building, nearly as large as this, almost, with a grocery store on one side, and then a store with nothing but whisky, and such things, in it then he had a large dry-goods store."

Question: "Those men were men who stood well in that community, as far as property and family were concerned?"

Answer: "Yes, sir; they had plantations and own several lots around town. Barnes had a large grocery store."

Question: "Did they own slaves before the war?"

Answer: "Yes, sir." **72**

Nelson witnessed how these wealthy planters hired poor whites for their own ends:

“The poor people who have got nothing. They come in and do the shooting, and get pay for it. They go down to Coker's store, and he tells them what to do, and we get it from the colored boys in the store.” **73**

As poor whites were hired as overseers and patrollers during the Antebellum era, Leon County delegate George Wallace recalled how poor whites were hired in Tallahassee as police to enforce the black codes:

“I was personally cognizant of one case in the city of Tallahassee in the latter part of the year 1866, by the police, under Francis Epps, mayor. The mayor had enlisted from outside the city a dozen of what are generally termed "crackers," as policemen, they were of the class who had never owned a slave or dared to interfere with one while under the protection of the master, and they seemed to cherish an old grudge against the negro. They sought every opportunity to interfere in his exercise of his freedom, and would order him off the streets; and when two or three were assembled in conversation, would arrest them and beat them as long as they would submit.” **74**

A letter from a Florida planter acknowledged that poor whites could do nothing politically against an overwhelmingly powerful aristocracy of Southern planters and Northern capitalists:

“Some men of wealth and good social standing in the North, have formed exceptions to this rule from the fact that the tendency of the South has been toward an aristocracy. Family connections and wealth have generally awed the poor whites into sullen allegiance and quasi respect.” **75**

Poor white crackers were just as destitute as the ex-slaves following the war, if not even more impoverished. One booster observed thirty or forty whites on the work gangs, noting that only four percent could sign their names, compared to the freemen who were nearly all literate. **76** Northern capitalist migrant John H. Abbot thought that the freemen were doing better than the poor whites in terms of material improvement and literacy gains:

“I think right here a good many of these colored people could read, and a good many white persons could not. These crackers are the most miserable white devils on the

face of the earth... these crackers come in here. They are below the negro every time. I would rather be a negro any time than one of them. You can see them for yourself, these low white trash. The very slaves used to look down upon them as half-starved wretches.” **77**

Secretary of State Jonathan Gibbs also believed many poor whites in Florida, especially those who had been Confederate deserters, conscript evaders, and Unionists during the Civil War, were worse off than the freemen:

“I think that so far as the whites are concerned, the poorer class of whites, I honestly believe to-day that there is a large class of whites who are in a more hopeless condition in Florida than the blacks are, and particularly in the counties of Taylor, Lafayette, Sumter, and counties of that description, in which there lived during the war a class of men known as Union men.” **78**

Bureau agent Ansel E. Kinne reported that while the clothing of freemen was not flattering it “compares not very unfavorably with that of poor whites.” As the “condition of the poorer class of whites is as deplorable as that of the blacks,” any advances for the former slave, “operate inversely to the white laborer and excite their jealousy if not hatred.” **79** An ex-slave from Florida compared “the relationship between the rich and poor whites during slavery with that of the white and Negro people of today.” **80** The majority of whites were unified in politically undermining the freemen. Yet while poor whites believed that blacks were their main enemy, the white elite sought to politically marginalize and exploit both.

Wealthier Democrats wanted to impose literacy requirements on voter applicants that would “cut as hard into these white crackers here as it would into the colored people.” **81** Northern capitalists adopted the sentiment of the Southern oligarchy that wealth should be in charge of government in place of the democratic majority. The white Democratic Party believed that “intelligence shall rule the country, instead of the majority.” Charles B. Wilder, a prominent Bostonian capitalist, Republican, and former abolitionist who migrated to Florida, expressed his belief to the Ku Klux Klan hearings that both poor whites and blacks were equally incapable of self-government and undeserving of the vote:

“Question: “I wish to get your opinion, whether they are fit for self-government.”

Answer: “No, sir; but I think they are as well qualified as one-half of the white people here are. I do not think they ought to have the control of this State, nor yet the whites. One is about as good as the other. I have seen as much meanness on the part of the whites as on the part of the colored people; they are as easily bought up”

Question: “You say there is a class of white people who are quite as unworthy as the blacks?”

Answer: “Yes, sir.”

Question: “Is that a large class in this State?”

Answer: “Quite a considerable class; what we call poor whites.”

Question: “Are they new comers or old residents?”

Answer: “Old residents.”

Question: “Then how many people do you think there are in the State of Florida what proportion of the people here are capable of being entrusted with self-government?”

Answer: “It would be mere guess-work. I do not think I could give a very intelligent answer to that question. But, my opinion is, that one-half of the colored and white are unfit, for they are ignorant, and do not know what is for their best interests.” **82**

This elite sentiment seems to be confirmed by some Northern capitalist boosters, snubbing their noses at the white crackers and hailing their decline in numbers and political influence. The Florida elite was hoping that poor whites and blacks would diminish in population, lose their political influence, and become faceless, obedient laborers to capital, Northern and Southern. These sentiments confirm that the Southern poll tax later following Reconstruction was intended to disenfranchise poor whites as well as poor blacks. One Florida booster called the bottom white class, “the cracker element,” “poor white trash,” and “merely white barbarians,” lauding their declining numbers and political power:

“The native Florida “crackers” are few in numbers, and rapidly becoming fewer. They have but little influence in the affairs of the counties or in the several communities; but, singularly enough, they have a preponderance in the State Legislature, owing to the manner in which the representatives are chosen, and their influence there is not very beneficial, to say the least.” 83

### **Intimidation, Coercion, and Violence in Florida’s Elections**

Throughout the early period of Reconstruction, several counties of Florida practically broke out into a state of war over questions of the franchise, labor, and land. In the elections of 1868 and 1870, violence was the primary method that the Southern Democratic Party used to bar blacks from the electoral poll and intimidate Republican politicians. A concerted effort of the Ku Klux Klan, controlled by planters and supported by the general white population, was executed in order to disrupt the black franchise. The Klan being the secret service committee of the Young Men’s Democratic Clubs, it would attempt to undermine the “black Republican” vote and restore “white home rule.” Equivocally, Federal officials and prominent Republican leaders were responsible for failing to protect the black electorate and local Union men. By not declaring martial law over numerous countries that were clearly in a state of revolt, the national Republican Party showed that it was willing to sacrifice its black base in order to “conciliate” with former slavers. The moderate Republicans had already showed their inclination to deny the complete franchise for the freemen and now they would fail to come through to protect their vote. Many showed that they feared armed black militias more than Klan terror. The black grassroots desired election day to be “a war with the ballot and with the tongue” in contrast to the white Southern Democratic Party that wanted “a day of war with cannon and musket, knife, and pistol.” In November of 1870, the election in Jefferson County exemplified the lengths that whites would take in order to prevent blacks from exercising their democratic rights.

When Robert Meacham, a State Senator of Florida, approached the ballot box at the window-sill outside the courthouse at Monticello, the county-seat of Jefferson County, he found four armed white men blocking the poll. A crowd of one hundred or more black men had already gathered outside waiting to vote. When some of the blacks in the crowd began to complain that the sun would go down and half of the men there would not have had a chance to vote, Meacham approached the ballot box only to be blocked by Col. William T. Bird. Bird declared: “No damn nigger shall vote here.” When

Meacham protested and insisted that none of the polls were segregated by race, Bird reiterated: “None of you niggers shall vote here.” Bird then claimed that Meacham had crowded all the blacks there to drive them away, a charge which Meacham denied. Bird called him “a damn liar” and a “damned son of a bitch.” Meacham told him to take back the insult and then Bird drew his ivory-handled white pistol on him. The poll quickly shut down and rumor spread that Meacham had been shot by Bird. Within fifteen minutes there were about “a thousand colored men on the ground with arms.” A group of whites also arrived, two hundred from Georgia, but were vastly outnumbered by the black gunmen. Meacham heard one of the whites exclaim: “We were prepared for you all with guns.” The black crowd fired a thousand shots into the air as warning and the whites quickly mounted themselves and retreated. Nobody was hurt in the process. After the hour and a half long disturbance, the polls soon reopened. But once the polls closed at the designated time, over five hundred black Republican voters went home unable to cast their ballot. **84** This was a clear example of the lengths that white Democrats would go to disrupt the black ballot in Florida. On the other hand, it also signified that blacks were sufficiently organized and armed to assert their rights, preventing outbreaks of violence through the threat of reprisal against white Klansmen.

Black Floridians showed that they were not scared to use self-defense against their former masters. In the 1870 elections in Key West, a riot of blacks broke out on election day after an ex-Confederate officer fired into a crowd of black voters. The blacks were celebrating their victory in the streets to the great annoyance of the local whites. An onlooker described the scene:

“When they discovered that the assailant was attacking them single-handed, they emerged from their hiding places, and made a rush for him. He had emptied his pistol, but fearlessly stood his ground, when he was struck down by a stone and would have been killed had not one of the negroes, who was greatly attached to him, dragged him to a place of safety, and concealed him until the authorities got the riotous negroes under control.” **85**

Deputy US Marshal J.W. Childs testified that a crowd of armed white men in Alachua County who drove blacks away from polls in the November 1870 elections. He had weapons drawn onto him when he attempted to arrest some of these men for violating the enforcement act. A party of white Union men from Wakulla County came to Governor Reed and told him they wished to cast their vote for the Republican Party but

were afraid of local whites. They had promised to meet Secretary of State Jonathan Gibbs down in Wakulla and hold a Republican meeting, but when he arrived there nobody would come near him. When the Union men arrived to Tallahassee several days later, they told Gibbs that no white man would dare attend his meeting out of fear.

David Montgomery, Republican sheriff of Madison County, was shot at two to three weeks before the 1870 elections. On the night before the elections, seven or eight companies of men rode into town mounted and armed, probably numbering somewhere around seven or eight hundred altogether: “a great many colored men were kept away from the polls by it.” The seventy-five to one hundred white Republicans in the county couldn’t vote: “public opinion is so strong they will not risk it.” Every black man in Madison County, “if they are not interfered with” could be expected to vote the Republican ticket. Altogether, an estimated two or three hundred Republicans in the district, white and black, were prevented from voting due to intimidation. Most blacks were forced to vote at the polls of the county seat as they faced intimidation elsewhere.

**86**

In Baker County, a white Republican, R.W. Cone, was targeted by the Klan for supporting black voting rights. Ten hooded men broke into Cone’s home in the middle of the night, beating both him and his pregnant wife down with clubs, then pulling his nightshirt over his head and dragging him out the door. They proceeded to beat Cone outside, tying his hands to a log and whipping him with a leather strap. The hooded men claimed that he was a witness in a court hearing against a white man and in favor of black voting rights. When he argued that he was merely on the jury, they replied that this was even worse as he had considered “negro evidence in preference to white men’s evidence” and then commenced beating him for a long period of time, threatening to kill him if he ever attempted to prosecute them in court. His back was cut in but one or two places and bruised from one end to the other. In regards to the Klan, Cone had “never seen anybody get justice in the State courts against them.” **87**

Previous to the attack, a man by the name of Gurganis, a registrar deputy, had come to Cone’s place the Friday before the election urging him to register. Instead Cone insisted that he register some of the black hands in the nearby fields. The clerk replied: “I will not get on my horse and ride over the country to register negroes.” The clerk refused and left Cone alone from that point. Baker County was three-fourths white and two-thirds majority Democrat. Cone was one of the few white men in the county who electioneered for the Republican ticket. Eight days after the election, he received a notice from the Ku Klux Klan ordering him to leave the county within 24 hours and that he was no longer safe there. **88**

In Lake City, Columbia County, a white riot drove off some 250 black men the night before the election. The armed posse of whites rode into town on horseback “in a very excited manner, hollering, yelling, cursing, and inquiring for radicals; they galloped on through the town, and rode all around through the town, and made a terrible noise; that excited the fears of a great many persons.” These men broke up and fired into a procession of black voters moving from a political meeting at a church to the town square. **89** Yet elections had to be held at the county seat for the protection of black voters. Black voters feared even more for their safety if the polling-places were on the outskirts of Lake City. The next day, Republican nominee for the State Senate seat Elisha G. Johnson found himself surrounded by a hundred armed white men as soon as he entered the public square. The whites claimed that he was the cause of the riot the night before and ordered him to return to his home if he expected to have a quiet day that day. From that point on, Johnson was the target of Klan harassment, constantly received threatening notices adorned with three K’s. On June 21, 1875, Johnson was cut down near his home by shotgun blasts from an unidentified person. **90**

In Quincy, Gadsden County, a large number of Democrats came armed at the courthouse square on the morning of election day. There were two separate polls for blacks and whites: “the blacks being much more numerous at that precinct than relatively in the whole county, they could not vote at their polls.” **91** The polling places created lists of men who were ineligible so that no illegal voting was to take place - men who had left the county, men who were under age, men who had registered twice, etc. Before the polls opened, a man named Gunn presented himself as the deputy marshal and attempted to seize the books. When the chief inspector tried to stop him, he seized one of the inspectors and took him away. The chief of inspectors Malachi Martin abdicated his post on the day of election, hearing that Gunn had threatened to shoot him once he left the polling place. **92**

By the afternoon, the whites had closed their poll and then proceeded over to the black polling booth to prevent black voters from casting their ballot. When a policeman attempted to break them up, he was struck with a cane across the head and chaos ensued. A general row began with pistols and bowie-knives drawn in every direction, from the black and white crowd alike. Republican officials Marcellus Stearns attempted to quiet both sides down but then found some pistols aimed directly towards him. A.K. Allison, president of the Florida Senate during the war and Acting-Governor after Governor Milton, ran out and attempted to incite the white gunmen to shoot him down. Fortunately, Colonel Davidson, the Democratic candidate for the senate seat, called out for the whites to listen to Stearns and prevented his assassination. By this time the sheriff had rushed in



with his police and succeeded in clearing the poll after awhile. But it was nearly sunset and only fifteen men had been able to vote at the black poll. As a result, two or three hundred blacks were still standing in line with tickets in their hand at the time the polls closed and the Republican majority in the country was reduced from sixteen hundred to fourteen hundred. **93**

### **Rampant Violence**

Columbia County had experienced a spectacle of violence. Mahoney, a Republican member of the legislature, had been assassinated. There was an attempt made to assassinate the Deputy Marshal of Lake City. The sheriff of Columbia County was driven from his town and forced to resign. A couple homes were burnt down. Two to three hundred black men had been forced to evacuate the county out of fear for their safety. Nobody had been charged with any crime. **94** Timothy Francis, a black Republican activist, was threatened and his home was visited at night by a group of disguised men while he was absent. He became alarmed and fled the county upon the news. He was employed for the railroad company to pump in Sanderson, Florida. Two weeks later he was murdered by masked men while pumping on the railroad just after dark. **95**

Republican Party meetings, conventions, and organized events were common targets of the violence. In Columbia County, Prince Weaver, a prominent black Republican, held a social party at his house attended by other prominent black Republicans. He had been warned against holding political meetings at his house. A band of five or six disguised men fired onto the meeting, killing Weaver's thirteen year old son Samson and wounding three others. Weaver was forced to leave the county for his personal safety. **96** James Greene, an avid black Republican, was taken from his home by a band of disguised men and then carried five miles away where he would be shot dead and thrown into a pond. His body would be found several weeks later with indications they had tortured him to extract information. A man suspected for the murder claimed that Greene was forced to tell the secrets of the Union League and the Republican Party. **97**

In the fall of 1868, Thomas Jacobs, a black Republican, was called to the door at night and shot dead on the spot. **98** In the spring of 1869, Lishur Johnson, a black Republican, was seized from at the house of a white man named Hugh Brown by a band of disguised men. He wouldn't be heard from again but some of his clothing items were

later found in the woods. **99** Ike Ispich, a black Republican, had come in for work, was standing at the door just at dark, and was shot dead by a notorious desperado named Hukenbottom. Hukenbottom was arrested and tried at a courthouse full of desperados and armed men, some being on the jury, and was acquitted. **100** Robert Jones, a black Republican and one of the most respected citizens of the county, was shot dead at his house by an unknown party just after dark after attending a Republican county nominating convention. On the way to the meeting he had gotten into a political argument with a Democrat who threatened him to give up his party affiliation or he would not be safe in that neighborhood any longer. **101**

In Alachua County, over eighteen had been killed between 1866 and 1871, along with a black man who was charged for committing a crime, taken out of his jail cell in the middle of the night, and hung by a gang of masked men. The Alachua County press was responsible for encouraging much of the violence. Republican Senator Leonard Dennis noted: "The sentiment of the Southern whites toward the General Government is decidedly hostile, and the press has not only encouraged this sentiment, but has invariably attempted to excuse crimes when committed against loyal men, by misrepresenting facts and endeavoring to make it appear as the result of some personal difficulty in which the loyal man was the aggressor." **102** There was no correct record or complete list of murders that occurred over the period of Klan violence in the county, except for a list of names of the eighteen people murdered devised by Leonard Dennis.

From 1866 to 1871, there were only one or two instances where white men were tried for murder, and even these were acquitted by an all-white jury. In cases when a black man was murdered in Alachua County "it is very seldom an arrest is made, and if one is made, the proceedings are very slim." **103** Even though the number of murders was widespread, Alachua was believed to be relatively quiet in comparison to some of its adjoining counties. But most of its neighbors could practically be considered under a state of warfare so this really said nothing. In this county, a secret service committee existed as the strong arm of the Young Men's Democratic Club to "remove any obstacle in the way of the success of the democratic party." **104** For these secret service clubs, it became necessary to "use force or violence to prevent certain parties from exerting too great an influence with the colored population in that county." **105** They made a failed assassination attempt against the life of William H. Birney, district attorney of the fifth judicial circuit of Florida, in broad daylight in the streets of Gainesville. **106** This same band was said to have been the group of armed men who seized the black man from his cell and hung him. **107**

In Gainesville, the Democrats assaulted a large Republican meeting. They gathered around the meeting, brandishing pistols and threatening to shoot the speakers. When they began circulating political documents, a white man snatched one from a black man and struck him with a knife. Some of the blacks chased after him and the crowd subsequently fired onto the meeting. The white Democrats threatened to burn the town down and would have probably carried it out if it weren't for the exertions of the Republican leaders. **108** Republican Senator Leonard G. Dennis had received almost a dozen threatening letters, including one adorned with three K's. A committee of three showed up to his house the day before the election and informed him that they had heard news of him planning to arm the blacks to come into town the next day and if there was any trouble he would be the person for them to "put out of the way." Later that night, about six armed men arrived at his house and stoned it, declaring that they intended on killing him. Fortunately, his black neighbor told the men that he was not in his house at the time.

About a week after the election, Dennis left Gainesville on a train to Savannah, fearful for his life. But at the town of Jasper, a party of armed men came onto the train demanding that they be allowed to search the passenger cars for an escaped man from Gainesville. It was believed that they intended on hanging Dennis but the train porter prevented them from entering the sleeping-car. Dennis successfully escaped but this form of intimidation was a common experience for many Republican officials. **109** Some men were even arrested and tried for holding a mock trial in the streets whereby they acted as if they were the Klansmen and had convicted and sentenced Dennis to be hung. These dozen or so men on trial were notorious desperados, the kind who boasted about killing two or three black men apiece. **110** The night that these men were acquitted in the county court, they attacked the mayor, kicked him, and cuffed him in the courthouse yard. **111**

In Lafayette and Taylor Counties, Republican Senator John N. Kreminger was shot and killed while sitting on his front porch. Kreminger was a Union man elected by the large population of deserters, conscript evaders, and Unionists in the two counties. During the war, he was conscripted and abandoned the service in Tallahassee to move to Lafayette County where most of the other deserters inhabited. **112** The regulators swore that no Union men would be allowed to live in those counties. Two weeks before his assassination, Kreminger wrote to his friend that he felt his life was in danger and contemplated hiding-out at Tallahassee for awhile. He had informed Secretary of State Gibbs that they had threatened to burn his house and shoot him as he ran out. **113** There were some eight assassinations of Republicans over the period of two years in Lafayette County and not one of the perpetrators had ever been brought to justice. **114** In Hernando

County, two black men held in custody by the sheriff were taken out of their cells and hung by the Ku Klux. **115** In Calhoun County, a member of the legislature was shot by a mounted man who was backed by the planters of Jackson County. **116** Another was Judge Carraway, a judge of the county court and one the registrars of the Reconstruction laws. **117**

In Madison County, over twenty had been killed between 1868 and 1871 “belonging invariably to the Republican party.” **118** Another estimate placed the number at thirty-seven deaths. This was the second most violent county in Florida although it was far from anything near the state of war in Jackson County. A white man killed a black man in broad daylight in the streets of Madison and was acquitted by an all-white jury although a witness claimed that there was strong evidence against him. **119** A white man named Allison was killed after getting into a bitter dispute with his landlord. He was called out of his house in the night and shot down by a party of armed men. Nobody witnessed his murder but a host of black witnesses claim that a party of three or four mounted whites rode from that direction after it was committed. **120** Richard Smith, an industrious laborer and mulatto Republican, was assassinated by a band of masked men as he was sleeping in the cotton-house on his employer’s plantation. **121**

A black man residing a short distance from Madison was harassed for two days by a party of whites who were constantly showing up in the neighborhood. Thinking that some mischief was up, he warned the others who lived with him and barricaded everybody in the house in preparation for an attack. That night, the party of whites rushed up to the door and shot him down. The other blacks returned fire, wounding one and successfully dispersing the attackers. **122** Another black man was shot down dead on the road outside of Mr. Drew’s mill by two white assailants. Benjamin F. Tidwell arrested them both, but the county judge released and discharged them. **123**

### **Jackson County: Satan’s Seat**

Throughout Reconstruction, Jackson County was the main site of political unrest and class struggle between planters and black laborers. The Republican Party and Florida’s government had nothing but nominal power in the county. The mob of armed whites had effective control. Although other sections of Florida suffered from Klan violence, Jackson County was “the only one entirely and effectually in the hands of a mob; it is virtually under the control of a lawless band of men.” **124** Republican Senator Marcellus Stearns reported:

“I do not think the State government, or the republican party, has any more control in Jackson County now than if they did not exist...the courts have no power there, from the best information I have. And, as a general thing, more than half of the jurors are men who do not seem disposed to check these things.” **125**

It was conservatively estimated that 153 blacks and Republican officials were killed throughout Reconstruction due to Klan violence. **126** Others estimated that two hundred leading Republicans were assassinated in Jackson County from 1869 to 1870 alone. **127** Florida Senator William J. Purman testified that “not a single one of these murderers has been arrested or brought to trial; not one of them, although most of them are well known.” **128** The sheriff of Jackson County, Thomas M. West, complained that public sentiment was so strongly opposed to him as sheriff that he did not feel safe to go outside of town and serve any legal process whatsoever. His life was constantly threatened. He was even openly assaulted in the streets of Marianna, severely beaten to the near-point of death. In March of 1871, West resigned from his position. His reasons for doing so were: “He could not be sheriff and execute legal process in that county with any safety to himself, as there was so much turbulence and lawlessness there, and so many threats were made against the officers of the law.” **129** Petit juries would not convict the Klan out of general sentiment and grand juries would fear the repercussions. If any attempt would have been made to prosecute some of the perpetrators, the Klan could raise 150 of the best armed men in the county at any moment to resist the process. **130**

The general content of the threats received by Republicans in the county was summarized by Purman: “That they were incendiaries, and that they ought to be killed; that they set the colored people against the white people, stirring up the country; that they were damned Yankees, damned radicals, and should be killed like dogs.” **131** Nine-tenths of the murder victims were prominent black men: “our best colored men both in intelligence and industry.” **132** Other than simply the escalated level of violence, Jackson County differed from most of the other counties as the violence was intended to eliminate the Republican Party rather than to make an example out of some so that the rest would fall in line. The whites of Jackson County sought to ethnically cleanse their district. Charles Pearce, minister for the African Methodist Episcopal Church and state senator, told the Ku Klux Klan hearings: “Satan has his seat; he reigns in Jackson County.” **133**

He spoke revealingly about the political situation in Jackson County: “All the leading prominent republicans there have either been shot by some person or driven away.” **134**

Blacks in Jackson County were taken out of their homes in the middle of the night, whipped, beaten, shot at, killed, and forcibly driven off of their property. **135** The conservative press of the county approved of the violence and was “extensively patronized by the Klan” according to one observer. **136** The newspapers would downplay the intention of the murders and typically shift blame to “carpetbaggers” and other “agitators”: “The press approved it in this way: they said it was done for money, and gave other excuses. The editor of the *Quincy Journal* stated, when the affair first occurred, that it was a political murder. Afterward, in his paper, he asserted most positively that it was not political.” **137** Dickinson described the complicity of Jackson County’s press to the numerous atrocities committed: “The press has been and is disgustingly uncandid, abusive of everything republican, and at times openly seditious. Human life is counted cheap when passion or politics call for its sacrifice, and the frequency and cold blood which have characterized our murders has not been to me so fearful a fact as the carelessness with which the public learn a new outrage.” **138**

What caused Jackson County to be so thoroughly dominated by the Klan at every institutional level as to render the county and state government completely powerless to stop them? For one, Jackson County faced the worst economic conditions after the Civil War. It was the most concentrated planter county of Antebellum Florida and relied heavily on a cotton crop that was practically non-existent by the time of Reconstruction. With the terrible economic conditions of the county, the large-scale defaults in tax payments were inevitable. Republican county officials divvied up thousands of acres to be sold for cheap in tax sales. **139** As planter power was based on slaves and land, the combined loss of both resulted in a desperate attempt to rid themselves of their supposed “oppressors.” As a Northern traveler in Jackson County observed: “It would seem marvelous to see a privileged class, a compact people with absolute authority, shorn in a day, as it were, of all power and reduced politically to a common level with their late slaves, and not expect a ripple of rebellion.” **140**

Any egalitarian attempts to place blacks on an equal level to whites were seen as “oppressive” and taking sides with the freemen to the detriment of the ex-slaveholder. Jackson County, along with several other counties of Middle Florida, controlled state politics prior to the Civil War and the violent backlash was undoubtedly due to some transfer of power to the black population. The blacks were successful at the polls and had triumphantly defied their former masters. The fact that Freedmen’s Bureau agents Charles M. Hamilton and William J. Purman were interfering with labor relations

supposedly on the side of the freemen caused widespread public backlash against them.

**141** The planters could scapegoat them for the repeated failure of the cotton crop to regenerate. The fact that the Freedmen's Bureau in the county effectively transferred the labor system from a work gang system to sharecropping was claimed to have been widely disputed. Hamilton on the other hand reported that the employers generally consented to sharecropping and the fact that the ruined agriculture economy left most planters unable to pay wages, it can be reasonably assumed otherwise. Perhaps the planters found themselves unable to tolerate the sharecropping system which forced them to relinquish a degree of control and provide more autonomy to their laborers than the work gang system.

The Bureau agents in the county also successfully enforced the terms of the contracts in contrast to the lax regulation in other counties, although they never abandoned the concept of blacks as laborers. Hamilton supposedly had some of the planters arrested on trumped-up charges with no evidence for any wrong-doing or violation of contract. This was supposedly for the double purpose of "demonstrating their power to the colored people and humiliating the whites". **142** In reality, the Bureau agents were doing their job and enforcing the labor rights of the former slaves to the severe opposition of Jackson County's planters. When questioned about this controversial move, Hamilton told a different story:

"These men who were arrested were planters, who had parceled their land among their laborers, under the usual contract. When the "crop was almost ready to lay by" these employers drove a laborer, with his wife and sister who had helped him in his crop, from his tenancy, upon the charge of "impudence." At the expiration of the contract, when a general settlement for the year was made, this discharged hand applied for his share of the crop, but was again driven away and refused. I directed a settlement to be made, and they still refusing, I sent a guard to protect the laborer. The guard observed preparation for resistance on the part of the employers, and they were then arrested." **143**

When Hamilton arrived to Jackson County, he found "instances where they would employ laborers, and for the least impudent word they would discharge them without paying them a cent, though they had worked all summer." **144** The Bureau agents broke the cycle of extreme black labor exploitation and this in itself was enough to generate white reprisal. The only substantial complaint against Purman and Hamilton during their period of officer in Jackson County was that they were Republicans and

urged the blacks to vote Republican as well. **145** The former masters of Jackson County were outraged that these Northern “carpetbaggers” commanded the allegiance of their former slaves rather than themselves.

Even though tension was accumulating over a period of time, a connected string of events resulted in the mass outbreak of violence in the county that lasted for two years. In the fall of 1868, an angry dispute between a white planter and his black laborers resulted in violence. The planter reported the instance to the Bureau agents but they took no immediate action to intervene. Several days later the blacks had shot him in his home in the middle of the night. He left for Alabama and a man named McDaniel was ordered to take charge of his place. Soon after, McDaniel was called to the door at night and shot dead on the spot. This instance was blamed on the blacks and the incendiary language of the Bureau that “agitated” them to acts of violence. **146** In February 1869, Bureau agent William Purman was walking to his home in Marianna accompanied by clerk of the circuit court Dr. John Finlayson, when they were both fired upon in an ambush. Finlayson was immediately killed but Purman only received a minor gunshot wound to his neck. **147**

As Purman recovered from his minor injury, a committee of about a dozen blacks arrived to his home the night after the assassination attempt. Purnam reported: “They were armed to the teeth, and said that they had there six or eight hundred men around the town, and that they were going to come in and sack the town that night, on account of the murder of their friends.” **148** Barely able to muster a word, Purman begged the party of blacks to do no such thing. He had the blacks swear to him that they would call the whole thing off and return home. As the former slaves tended to be loyal to their white allies, they obeyed his wishes. Purman did so to save the white population from sure destruction, although he recognized “that those very men whose lives I was sparing by that last act of mine would doubtless take the very first opportunity to kill me if they could.” **149** He didn’t even think that the blacks could have thought the same way in regards to themselves. Thus, rather than “incendiaries” or “demagogues,” the Freedmen’s Bureau agents prevented the entire destruction of Marianna at the hands of an army of blacks that outnumbered the whites. Several days after the assault, a man by the name of Colliter, a white Democrat and bitter critic of the Freedmen’s Bureau, was shot and killed in his house at night. Within several weeks, the first round of chaos had resulted in three or four murders and half a dozen wounded from failed assassination attempts. **150**

Two incidents in September of 1869 set the entire county into a state of warfare. On September 28, 1869, a picnic of twenty-five blacks was fired upon by an ambush, killing a man and a two year old boy. **151** Fourteen to fifteen shots were fired from



nearby bushes with a repeating rifle. **152** A shot had passed through the child in the arms of the man who was carrying him and killed them both. **153** The target of the assault was thought to be Calvin Rogers, the elected black constable of the county government. After the assault, Republic county court clerk John Q. Dickinson requested a first-class detective from Bureau agent Charles M. Hamilton and if he couldn't furnish them with that, then "a few Henry rifles would have an excellent moral effect here." **154** A white pro-Republican store merchant Samuel Fleishman had allegedly shouted amidst the excitement: "If the colored people are to be murdered in this way, for every black man that is murdered there should be three white people killed." **155**

After several days, the county had failed to form a reasonable inquiry into the event. By the afternoon of October 1<sup>st</sup>, the only verdict arrived at was "shot by unknown." Calvin Rogers, undoubtedly fed up with the fact that no justice would come from the county government, decided to take matters into his own hands. Later that night, he commanded an armed party of blacks who fired onto the porch of the Marianna Hotel, where sat James F. McClellan, his daughter Maggie, James Coker, and some others. McClellan was wounded and his daughter was accidentally killed. It was believed that the true target was James Coker, the wealthy planter and merchant who headed the Klan in Jackson County. **156** But McClellan was just as likely a target as he was also believed to be a Klan leader. **157** McClellan recognized the voice of Calvin Rogers who gave the order to fire. **158**

The next morning, the streets of Marianna were filled with fifty to sixty marauding armed men who practically put the city under martial law. Even before noon there was much danger of a riot: "drunkenness and misrule and excitement abounded." **159** Dickinson reported bluntly about the situation: "terror reigns." **160** Calvin entered into the town the next day, apparently unaware that anybody was searching for him and suspected him of involvement in the night's assassination. Some ten men made a charge for him but he managed to successfully slip away into an unknown direction. To show the immense strength and organization that the Klan carried in Jackson County, people began gathering from all parts of the county at the news of Calvin's escape. Most of the two hundred man mob that assembled were mounted and armed with double-barrel shotguns. **161** Some of the mob forced two of Rodgers' friends, Oscar Granberry and Matt Nickels, to assist them in the hunt for Calvin. At one point they ordered the two men to move forward and then immediately opened fire, killing Oscar as Nickels fled for his life. **162**

Later into the week, some of the Klansmen drove Nickels, his wife Maria, and his son Matt Jr. from their home, killed them, and threw their bodies into a lime sinkhole. **163** Over the month of October, the Klan rampaged throughout the county, drunkenly

murdering every political opponent they could lay their hands upon. A week into the civil conflict, Dickinson warned Bureau agents Purman and Hamilton not to come to the county for their own safety and desperately plead with Hamilton to send a sufficient force to quell the white revolt: "I am a mere plaything." **164** On October 5, white Republican merchant Samuel Fleishman was forced to leave the county to Alabama as a result of backlash against his alleged statements. **165** By October 11, seven blacks had been killed and two wounded. **166** Fleishman returned to Jackson County to attend to his home and business not longer than a week after he was forcefully exiled. He was assassinated in his home outside of Marianna the same day he returned. Dickinson reported seeing armed parties leave from Marianna that day. **167**

The scene of events that took place at a Republican meeting in Jackson County accurately depicted the threat that Republicans were under in the area. In August 1870, Charles Hamilton and William Purman returned to Jackson County to hold a political meeting. As soon as they returned, there were already reports of men cleaning out their pistols and shotguns and preparing for operations. When the two men stopped at the house of the sheriff and the county clerk, they were secretly informed that a raid was to be made on the house and all of them were to be murdered. They paid no attention to this report until they woke up the next morning to find three of the watchdogs poisoned dead. The next night Hamilton and Purman were on guard with a dozen men pointing a double barrel shotgun out of every window of the house. The town of Marianna was stirring with the running of horses and the blowing of tinhorns in preparation for the raid. A man on horseback approached the house, surveyed it, and supposedly reported back the information as there was no raid that night.

The political rally was held the next day but the threat of about fifty or sixty armed men in attendance caused it to be adjourned after only several speeches. Hamilton and Purman immediately retreated to the sheriff's house to reassemble the meeting and to prepare for the threat of reprisal. Parties of men had started out from Marianna immediately after the meeting and "blockaded every avenue of escape from that town." Finding that they would not be permitted to leave peacefully, they called in for some of the older, more respectable citizens of the town to explain the situation to them. After they had stayed four of five days past their allotted time, they now planned to call in an armed posse of five hundred men to escort them out. The older citizens pleaded for them not to do so as a war would certainly break out. So Hamilton and Purman selected ten of the oldest and best citizens as "hostages" to meet them the next morning and escort them out of the county. They wished to proceed en route to the nearest railroad depot at Quincy where they could escape in safety. Instead the "hostages," knowledgeable that any road

east was a certain death trap, led them north to safety in Georgia. **168** Purnam later claimed that they would have taken the lives of any attackers and the “hostages” along with them if it had been necessary. **169**

The Klan organized a campaign in Jackson County to prevent blacks and Republicans from voting in the 1870 elections. The disturbances in other counties could not be compared to Jackson County where the primary intention of local whites was to murder black Republican voters. A black resident Larry White recalled:

“I had to deny voting to save myself. I said I would not do it anywhere; and after I said that, they seemed to excuse me, and said : ‘Old Larry is a good nigger, they should all do like him; that the damned carpet-baggers should not come in that country anymore; that old Larry took the right track, and that is what cleared him.’”

**170**

When he went to go vote, he had to take two tickets, pretend as if he was going to throw the other one in, throw the Republican ticket in, and then tear the other one up before anybody realized what happened. White recalled some blacks who attempted to vote: “I saw so many stabbed and knocked down that day, and a great many shot at, that I thought I would take the easiest way I could. I recollect that there were one or two black men who were stabbed right in the thick part of the butt, and several were knocked over the head until the blood ran.” **171** Richard Pousser, the elected constable of Jackson County, described the inability of blacks to vote Republican: “A colored man dare not vote the republican ticket there, not now. If he will vote the democratic ticket ho can do it, but he cannot vote the republican ticket and say he is a living man.” **172** The Democrats would threaten to “put the light out” of anybody who planned on voting Republican, white or black. **173**

On the day of election, Klansmen leader James Coker attempted to intimidate John Q. Dickinson from his elected position as the Jackson County clerk of court. When Dickinson refused to leave his office, Coker shouted that “God-damned niggers gave him that office” but it was no longer his as they did what he wanted them to do. When Dickinson continued to refuse, Coker spit in his face and knocked his hat right off of his head. Richard Pousser recalled the incident:

“Mr. Dickinson said, ‘Coker you keep your hands off’ of me.’ Coker said, ‘I have a mind to put your eyes and mouth into one, you God damned nigger-loving son of a

bitch.’ Dickinson went right along, and did not say anything more to him. He said to Dickinson, ‘You are a God damned liar, and if you take that you are nothing but a God-damned cowardly son of a bitch.’” **174**

The violent intimidation campaign had substantially reduced the Republican vote from the returns in the prior election. While black voters outnumbered whites five-to-one, a Democratic representative was elected with a one vote majority over the black Republican candidate. **175** The Republican majority in Jackson County had diminished from eight hundred to only two or three hundred. While there were two hundred white men who voted Republican in the 1868 election, most of them had been driven out of the county and not even five were thought to have voted in the 1870 election. **176** The Klan had successfully diminished the Republican base of Jackson County as it had intended.

By April 1871, it was reported that seventy-five Republicans had been murdered since the start of the violence, nine-tenths of them black. **177** Once the sheriff resigned, the only Republican official left in the county was clerk of the circuit court John Q. Dickinson. **178** Dickinson was alleged to have accumulated a vast holding of two thousand acres as a result of his speculative dealings in purchasing cheap land sold in tax default payments. **179** As the planters of the county were distraught in the unprecedented loss of their land from the terrible economic conditions, Dickinson increasingly became a constant object for intimidation and threats: “Threats against him, both public and private, had been made against him for years.” **180** When Dickinson prepared to divvy up the lands of John R. Ely in a tax sale, Ely insisted that he had paid his taxes and constantly threatened Dickinson to enforce his point. Nonetheless, Dickinson refused to give in and had repeatedly shown Ely the papers as proof that he had not paid his taxes. He insisted that he would “sell the land at the risk of his life” and was well-aware of the threat he faced. **181**

When Leonard Dennis, the bailiff for Dickinson, was charged to ring the bell for the sale of Ely’s land outside the courthouse, Ely confronted him: “You God damned radical son of a bitch, put that bell down, or I will kill you.” **182** The black tax collector Homer Bryant was in charge of whether or not the land was to be sold. Ely threatened Bryant to take the advertisement of the land sale out of the newspaper or “he would kill him, that he would whip him first until he got satisfaction, and then blow his brains out.” **183** Dennis insisted that Dickinson give the land back to Ely rather than meaninglessly throw his life away. Nonetheless, Dickinson knew he was right about the land and claimed he would rather die than submit to Ely’s intimidation. **184**

One night, Dickinson was shot dead proceeding from his office to his house, within ten steps of where his predecessor, Dr. Finlayson, had also been assassinated several years before. Afterwards, the white Democrats of the county assembled and “dictated to the governor the appointment of certain democrats, and he made those appointments.” **185** The Republican opposition had been completely eliminated. William J. Purman recalled a jubilant letter he received from a Democratic friend in Jackson County after Dickinson’s death:

“Well, Dick writes to me from Jackson County that they have things in their own way there now that there is not a damned nigger that dares to speak in Jackson County; that Purman dare not go back again; and they are going to have peace and prosperity there; that Dickinson was the last leader among the republicans there, and he being away, there were no more damned niggers to make speeches; no more white republicans dare go there; and they are going to have a perfect asylum now.” **186**

### **Democracy Deterred**

The end result of the mass campaign of violence and intimidation in Florida from 1868 to 1871 was a severely diminished state Republican majority. The 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act brought a cease to mass white violence in Florida and throughout the rest of the South. But the Klan had already successfully demoralized and reduced the black electoral base of the Republican Party. Nevertheless, it failed to reverse the hard fought gains of the freemen in the area of politics, education, economics, and religion. After 1872, the violent strife between Democrats and Republicans ended and the leaders of both parties forged a tacit alliance. It became difficult to separate the platforms, ideas, and proposals of politicians in either party, who began acquiescing to the idea of Florida as an investor safe-haven for Northern capitalists built on a disenfranchised, subordinate black laboring class. Moderate Republicans had ensured that the party’s leadership would remain white and its base black. When the latter weakened, the party’s hold on power in the state became precarious. Finding it necessary to collaborate with Florida Democrats to maintain power, black rights, racial equality, and progressive legislation began to disappear from the Republican agenda after 1872. **187** In the 1876 election, the moderate Republicans and Democrats cooperatively ended Reconstruction throughout the South. John Willis Menard, a black grassroots political leader in Florida, was critical of both political parties and urged blacks to adopt a third party as means to achieve equality.

Announcing his candidacy for the Independent ticket, he criticized Republican attempts to control and direct the black vote for its own power: “If the intelligent and thinking colored men in the South have any aspiration and hopes in the future they will resist this outrage and fraud, and fight for equal representation and common justice.” **188** Rowland H. Rerick in his *Memoirs of Florida* documented the concerted effort of Southern conservatism and Northern wealth to reverse the democratic gains of Reconstruction:

“The substantial portion of the State, not only the whites of Southern birth, but a large portion of those from the North who had settled in Florida for other than political purposes and had aided in its material prosperity, feeling that the good of the State required the overthrow of the political elements in control since 1868, joined in a mighty effort to accomplish that end.” **189**

According to one Florida planter, Northern Republicans had begun to see “the folly of their ways. They see that no country can flourish under the dominion of an ignorant minority, and that their own best interests are to be gained only through an attempt to fix their own best security of lives and property.” **190** Capitalist migrants had found that professing allegiance to the tenants of white supremacy was good for business.

A campaign of fraud, intimidation, coercion, and violence was engineered against black voters in the 1876 elections in Florida. The Democratic Club passed resolutions to the effect that they would only associate with other Democrats. Many witnesses from various parts of Florida testified to “the existence of a bitter feeling on the part of the natives against republicans, which was manifested in social and in business ostracism, and in acts of persecution of various kinds, frequently leading to violence.” **191** It was general consensus among white employers, merchants and planters, to deny their black workers the right to suffrage unless they bowed to white political consensus. Since Democrats made up a disproportionate number of those who owned the means of production in Florida, this was their most effective method of coercion. Northern capitalist John H. Abbott noted the class inequality apparent between the bases of both parties: “The republican party, as a party here, are very poor. They are working people, colored people, and dependent upon their bread and butter for a living...As a rule, I think the people in business are democrats—those that employ men.” **192**

The planters agreed on the part of black Republicans not to “employ men who would not vote or act with them,” a policy that would prove effective in the 1876 elections. **193** Political conflict was apparently divided along class and racial lines. While

the 1868 and 1870 elections had been disrupted by paramilitary organizations, large corporations and landowners extended their political power in the 1876 elections through monopoly. G.W. Witherspoon reported that conservative planters generally threatened not to employ blacks who would vote Republican in the upcoming election:

“All persons, colored men, who voted the republican ticket were to be starved out next year. We colored people, you know, down here, have to go to the merchants and men, or farmers, to have advances made to us. What we call an advance is to let us have meat and corn, &c. The paper stated that the men who expected these favors from the democrats, or who had received these favors from the democrats, could not expect them any further without voting the democratic ticket; that next summer would pass over without a favor being granted by any of them, and the only way they could expect those favors was to come forward and vote the democratic ticket; and those men who voted the democratic ticket would have the preference, in a business way, such as work. All they had to do was to vote the democratic ticket.” **194**

Before the election, a planter named Manuel Gunn told a black worker who planned to vote the Republican ticket: “If you do, you cannot remain on my place any longer than the election.” Gunn stayed true to his word: “After the election, he threwed this man off his place, as he said he was going to do; drove him away without giving him an ear of corn or a hill of potatoes; not anything of the kind.” **195** The Railway and Navigation Company invested in the return of the Democratic Party to power to ensure white corporate dominance. Charles W. Yulee, son of the railroad magnate, handed out Democratic tickets to the mostly black employees of the Railway Company and threatened to fire those who didn’t submit them. William L. Apthorp told election investigators:

“He is a democrat and gave numbered tickets to their employe's on the road, and those numbers were copied in a book, so that when the ballots were inspected, the tickets were checked off with the numbers in the book, and they thus knew the names of those who voted the democratic ticket... The evidence before the board was that they were made to understand that their being kept in employ depended upon their voting those tickets.” **196**

After the election, Yulee examined the ballots of the clerk’s office in Nassau County and made a memorandum on the number of ballots marked and the number on

each ballot. **197** David Yulee denied the allegations to his company but believed it was in his right to discharge his workers for voting the Republican ticket:

“I will say further that if the company had done what is alleged, it would have done only what it had a right to do. If in its view of its own interest it was important to secure a certain governmental policy, as, for instance, to remedy oppressive taxation and unfit appointments to office, there is no reason in morals or law why it should not prefer in its service those who, sympathising in its views, would be disposed to promote and sustain its policy and its interest.” **198**

In Duval County, a number of black workers claimed to have been forced to vote Democrat or be discharged: “Colored men did lose their employment by a refusal to vote such numbered tickets.” **199** A planters meeting in Jefferson County following the election stipulated several resolutions vowing to disbar black workers who had voted Republican:

“1. That we pledge ourselves, each to the other, by our sacred honor, to give the first preference in all things to those men who vote for reform; and that we give the second preference in all things to those who do not vote at all.

2. That we affirm the principle that they who vote for high taxes should pay them, and that in employing or hiring or renting land to any such persons its vote for high taxes, in all such cases a distinction of 25 per cent., or one-fourth, be made against such persons. That merchants, lawyers, and doctors, in extending credit to such persons, make the same distinction.

3. That in the ensuing year we positively refuse to re-employ one out of every three who may then be upon our places and who voted against reform and low taxes; and that a list of all such persons be published in the Constitution, in order that we may know our friends from our enemies.” **200**

Although violence in the 1876 elections was comparatively mild to the previous ones, the black voter base had been severely weakened after years of relentless persecution. Yet in every county, the planters ensured that their class subordinates would submit to their political rule or starve. In Jefferson County,



“there seems to have been a systematic attempt to drive the colored people into the support of the democratic ticket, or not to vote at all, by threats to withhold employment or the customary advances from them, or to increase the rates which they are required to pay for the use of lands. Quite a number of persons, were proved to have been so influenced not to vote at all, while a few voted the democratic ticket. The democratic clubs of the county pledged their members to discharge all employe's who would not refrain from voting at all, or to vote the democratic ticket.” **201**

Shortly before the election, two armed white gunmen made a failed assassination attempt on Senator Robert Meacham. **202** Benjamin Dilworth testified to election investigators of the mass intimidation campaign in Jefferson County to prevent black Republicans from voting their ticket:

“There has been a great deal of threatening made by parties before the election if they voted or did not vote; either had to vote the democratic ticket or not vote; they would be turned off from employment. . . . It was a common thing, known by all in town there. During this summer, the livery-stable man, Mr. Simpkius, and others building there, Mr. Budd, who had his store burned down last July a year ago, was sifting them for voting the republican ticket. Also, two draymen, he tried to get them before he went to New York, to say whom they were going to vote for last fall. They would not do it, and he gave them to understand that they had, until his return from the North, to decide how they should vote if they wanted to keep his hauling. The men "inhibited" their vote, and told their friends. This was certainly spoken, and a common thing, understood through the town, and not privately.” **203**

In Jackson County, a number of armed Democrats went about the polls on election day, threatening black voters and election supervisors. One of them warned a black voter who attempted to warn the local US marshal: “God damn you, let the marshal start, and there will not be a piece of him found as big as a rag, and there will not be a piece of you found as big as my hat.” **204** In Lafayette County, a Republican meeting was violently broken up by some armed white Democrats. **205** In Columbia County, “by a number of outrages on colored men before the election, and a systematic course of denying the right of others to vote on election day, many republicans were compelled to vote the democratic ticket, and others to refrain from voting at all.” **206** A party of black Republicans was accosted by an armed body of white Democrats in Lake City shortly before the election. The whites put a rope around the neck of one of these men and

casually discussed the proper method by which to hang him. They only agreed to spare their lives if every one of them joined the Democratic Party and would actively recruit other blacks as members. **207** In Sumter County, some election investigators

“were stopped by a man named Clark, backed by armed men...and forbidden to go farther unless they took at their expense a guide or spy, to be selected for them, and agreed to stop at only such places and communicate with only such persons as the guide should direct. They were told that the road was picketed by armed men, and they could not get through with their lives; that the democratic party had got large majorities up there, and would not have them inquired into. They were told, however, that if they could show any papers from the democratic State committee they could proceed. Fearful of the danger of proceeding, they turned back. The committee had no information in reference to the election in Sumter County; but it may be inferred that the shot guns ready to prevent republicans from obtaining affidavits which might affect democratic majorities in another county would have exercised equal influence in the canvass at home.” **208**

In Levy County:

“Samuel B. Hurlbnt, a white man, who taught a colored school in Otter Creek precinct, Levy County, had his house fired into, and frequent threats were made against his life if he should persist in voting the republican ticket at the election. He did vote, however, casting the only republican vote at the precinct. The crowd about the polls cursed and threatened to take the ballot out of the box, and, later in the day, to kill him. Fearing for his life, he fled from the place. Although the term of his school was within two days of completion, he did not dare go back to complete it. He and his family were refugees because he had insisted on exercising his right to vote his principles.” **209**

In the Presidential elections of 1876, Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes narrowly defeated Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden through the disputed electoral votes of Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina. While the state votes were under dispute, Hayes had only secured 166 electoral votes. In turn, Tilden had won the popular vote and secured 184 electoral votes. The three disputed states made up a total of nineteen electoral votes and the Republican Party claimed victory from the returns. The heated dispute turned to be a real threat as political violence looked inevitable. Looking to

maintain Republican supremacy through appeasing Southern white conservatives, Hayes came to an agreement with a group of Democratic legislatures known as the “Great Compromise” to withdraw further Federal support for Reconstruction in the South in return for his presidency.

George F. Drew had won the Governor seat in Florida. The Democratic claimants for Louisiana and South Carolina were now to be granted their seats in return for the peaceful inauguration of Hayes. As one historian put it, “In effect, the Southerners were abandoning the cause of Tilden in exchange for control over two states, and the Republicans were abandoning the cause of the Negro in exchange for the peaceful possession of the Presidency.” **210** While thousands of blacks in Florida, along with the other two states, had braved violent threats and intimidation to vote in the 1876 election, the Republican Party was more than willing to abandon them in turn for the seat of national power. The Compromise of 1877 revealed

“the party of Radical Reconstruction in alliance with ex-Rebels and ex-slaveholders. It revealed the party of Carpetbaggers repudiating the Carpetbaggers, the party of emancipation and freedmen’s rights abandoning the Negro to his former master. The compromise did not mean that the Republicans had given up hope of controlling the voting strength of the freedman for party advantage. It only meant that the Carpetbagger had proved an ineffective means of controlling those votes and that it was hoped that the old masters might be more resourceful in accomplishing the same end.” **211**

The white capitalists of the North and the South had put behind their differences to effectively minimize black political involvement. In turn, they would cooperatively monopolize the resources of the South. Montgomery Blair, a former abolitionist, painted an accurate picture of the open collaboration between Republican and Democratic elements: “The jobbers and monopolists of the North made common cause with the Southern oligarchy.” **212**

As a result of the fraudulent elections, George “Millionaire” Drew became Florida’s first post-Reconstruction Democratic governor in 1877. Drew was a New Hampshire native who migrated to Florida after the Civil War and amassed wealth from the saw mill and lumbering industries. He came from a rising class of Northern white capitalists who adopted Southern views of black labor subservience. Drew told the *New York Tribune*:

“The curse of this section is the thieving propensity of the blacks...Only a few save any money. Out of the two hundred in my employ I do not believe more than half a dozen have laid up anything. They are great spendthrifts, and the worst thing is to pay them regularly.” **213**

This was Drew’s justification for paying his black lumber workers in scrip that could only be used to purchase items at the company store he owned. His election could be attributed to the high degree of respect that Northern migrants held for men of wealth who would run the state of Florida according to powerful corporate interests. Planter Susan B. Eppes described Drew in warm terms: “a man of considerable wealth, of spotless character and business ability.” **214** As Timothy Fortune put it, the whites of Florida “knew how to go down upon their knees to the golden calf” of wealth. Fortune recalled an election in Jacksonville that exemplified this:

“A few years ago I was a resident of Jacksonville, the metropolis of Florida. Florida is a great Winter resort. The wealthy people of the country go there for a few months or weeks in the Winter. It is fashionable to do so. A great many wealthy Northern men have acquired valuable landed interests in Jacksonville, among them the Astors of New York, who have a knack for pinning their interests in the soil. The people of Jacksonville were very proud to have as a resident and property holder, Mr. Wm. B. Astor. And Mr. Astor appeared to enjoy immensely the worship bestowed upon his money. He built one or two very fine buildings there, which must net him a handsome return for his investment by this time. Mr. Astor had with him a very shrewd "Man Friday," and this Man Friday got it into his head that he would like to be Mayor of Jacksonville, and he sought and obtained the support of his very powerful patron. It leaked out that Mr. Astor favored his Man Friday for Mayor. The "business interests" of the city took the matter "under advisement." After much "consultation" and preliminary skirmishing, it was decided that it would be unwise to antagonize Mr. Astor's Man Friday; and so he was placed in nomination as the "Citizens' Candidate." He was elected by a handsome majority. I believe it is a disputed question to-day, whether Mr. Astor's Man Friday was, or was not, a citizen of the place at the time he was elected Mayor.” **215**

White Floridians breathed a collective sigh of relief with the “new beginning,” describing the results of the election in almost apocalyptic terms with white “redemption”

coming through the “supermen” who had successfully destroyed the “black Republican serpent.” **216** On Inauguration Day, blacks filled the streets of Tallahassee expecting to inaugurate Marcellus Stearns to the Governor seat, apparently aware that the election was fraudulent. Bodies of armed white men broke up the parade to permit Drew to take his position at the capitol square. **217** George Wallace reported:

“The whites had stationed in an old cotton storehouse close by the capital, between three and five hundred men, armed with repeating rifles, with the intention of slaughtering the men who might attempt to inaugurate the defeated candidate.” **218**

Susan B. Eppes depicted the white men of “Herculean strength” who had turned Florida back to “Our Florida” – a state controlled by the white and wealthy. **219** After ten years, they had finally snatched the scepter of power that was supposedly in the hands of the black Republican Party. Eppes also recalled the scene of Drew’s inauguration:

“The white men had filled capitol square by this time and nearly every black face had disappeared... Suddenly the air was rent with cheers and yells, coming from the direction of the depot. Louder and louder they grew, nearer and nearer they came. Some of these new-comers wearing red shirts, some waved red flags. Yelling like demons, they rushed into the square car-load after car-load of men, eager to help with the inauguration. Armed men they were, no idle threats, and the Carpetbaggers and negroes recognized this fact and the inauguration proceeded quietly... When all was over and these men, who for ten years had been working for this end, realized that they had succeeded, that once again they had Home Rule-the famous “Rebel Yell” went up like incense to Heaven.” **220**

A black observer of Drew’s Inauguration came to a different conclusion: “Well, we niggers is done.” **221** The end of black political involvement and the rise of Northern business dominance meant that white capitalists could now shape the future of the state according to their desire. In the mean time, investors constructed the Reconstruction myth that Florida’s economy was destroyed by the blacks who had abandoned the plantations and made endeavors in politics. This myth was comprised to ensure that the “New South” following Reconstruction would comprise of low wage black labor and political deference. David Yulee’s Railway and Navigation Company had invested in the return of

the Democratic Party to power to ensure white corporate dominance. Yulee and Naylor Thompson, two of the company's top officials, had been accused of coercing their black employees into voting for the Democratic ticket. **222** In fact, most railways were involved in a widespread effort to coerce their black workers into adopting the Democratic ticket:

“A large number were polled in Nassau County, at Fernandina, and other points, and a number of employes of the A. G. and W. I. Transportation Company railroad made affidavit to the fact that they had been furnished with such numbered tickets and notified that they would be discharged if they did not vote them. The tickets were all democratic tickets and the workmen colored republicans.” **223**

The Railway and Navigation Company's guidebook concluded that the Florida's economy was ruined from black tenancy and the successful cultivation of Florida's crops could only prevail with the dispossession of blacks from their lands:

“Methods of cultivation which have prevailed among the freedmen tenants of these lands since the war have reduced the annual product, but not the producing capacity of the lands, and when they are subjected to the better methods known and practiced by the best farmers of the North and West, their fertility and variety of products will be almost beyond the power of belief.” **224**

The guide gave its interpretation of the events of Reconstruction:

“The "fortunes of war" worked a disastrous change in the conditions here, as elsewhere. The slaves were suddenly converted into " free American citizens," and lost no time in deserting from the great army of producers to engage almost en masse in the more congenial avocation of politics; the production of the staple crops ceased almost entirely; the plantation was deserted for the town and the crossroads rendezvous, and its owner was left helpless and despairing, without an income, without capital, and without credit, but with a family to be supported, and a new future to carve out for himself under the most trying, disastrous and depressing circumstances which ever befell a prosperous and happy people.” **225**

After Reconstruction, a Florida newspaper editorial concurred with this viewpoint: “Don’t you remember, sir, how railroads and numberless other corporations were almost daily ground out by the carpet-bagger and negro Legislatures?” **226** C.B. Wilder, a Bostonian capitalist migrant to Florida, self-professed to be an avid abolitionist before Emancipation and was dedicated to the cause of the Republican Party in Florida at the start of Reconstruction. However, he soon converted to the Democratic Party because “capitalists who had invested here...are almost taxed out of the State.” Wilder’s conversion from a Northern activist for the Republican Party to leading a “tax-payer’s convention” for the “white owners of real estate” suggests that Reconstruction was as grounded out by Southern reactionaries as it was by Northern capitalists. Wilder proposed a poll tax and the disenfranchisement of both poor blacks and whites, arguing that it was necessary to create a more attractive economic environment for Northern capital investment. **227** Numerous Northerners who followed the same pattern as Wilder point to “redemption” specifying the resurgence of corporate profits through both the overhaul of democracy and the subordination of black labor. Social equality would be defeated by the combined efforts of moderate Republicans, Northern capitalists, and Southern oligarchs. Examining Florida’s Reconstruction through a different lens, we can construct a vastly different story than what has been accepted by generations of white historians:

After the war, the newly free slaves abandoned the plantations seeking the protection of the Federal military from the retribution of their former masters, testing out their new freedom, and seeking out lands to take up and farm on their own. The Union turned back on its promise to distribute out forty acres of plantation land that the slaves had improved and cultivated under bondage for generations, forcing blacks to labor under exploitative contracts with their former masters or be imprisoned for vagrancy. The Freedmen’s Bureau was the primary agency in informing assemblies of former slaves that they would not receive the forty acres of promised land and threatening those who failed to turn back to the plantations. The Confederate leaders reclaimed control of the government, instituted the oppressive “black codes,” and sought to recreate the pre-war conditions of the Antebellum South. By the end of 1866, planters failed to heed to the terms of labor contracts and enslaved the blacks under a ruthless system of debt peonage. Disillusioned with the promises of Union officials that their former masters would treat them justly, the blacks abandoned the plantations and began organizing and arming themselves to assert their rights. Realizing the implications of a renewed black revolt in the South, the Federal

military intervened to divert the blacks to electoral energy in favor of the Republican Party and make some concessions for blacks while appeasing Southern whites. As blacks politically organized, established an independent education system, and obtained homesteads, the planters organized the Ku Klux Klan and implemented a systematic campaign of violence to turn back the reforms of the 1868 Constitution and restore black subordination. By 1872, after a long campaign of terror that wiped out the black grassroots electoral base, the Republican Party was silently collaborating with the Democratic Party to maintain white supremacy. Blacks continued to turn out for the ballot, braving threats from white planters to turn them off from their employment if they remained politically independent. Nonetheless, the Republican Party was more than willing to concede power to white Southerners. As a result, the Democratic Party was back in power by 1876 and white supremacy was fully reinstalled throughout the South.

The consolidation of the urban-industrial elite on a national level placed the question of racial politics in the South to the back-burner. To the capitalist elite of the Republican Party, sound relations with the Southern oligarchy were necessary for sound business. The expansion of Northern capital and necessary access to cheap raw materials and labor in the South not only required cooperation with the Democrats, but the subordination of blacks as well. The elites in both parties could cooperate and collaborate in their similar interests, putting behind their differences in the pursuit of wealth and power. Not only was the Republican Party willing to let white Southern oligarchs restore a system of racial oppression, but in many ways benefited, supported, and contributed to the new system of racial oppression. The black voter chose the party of Lincoln and placed their hopes in achieving full-scale liberation, but the party of Lincoln had developed into the party of large corporations, who exploited white workers and used people of color to undermine wages and unions. The new system of racial prejudice divided the work force, created separate wage scales, undermined the black franchise, weakened black and white unionization, and significantly lowered wages and conditions for blacks. This not only allowed for Northern companies to make record profits, but gave them a safe-haven from unionized whites in the North. It required coercive measures and disenfranchisement to subvert the freemen in their quest for political and economic independence. Wealthy elites attributed black labor unrest to their political power and perceived the reversal of electoral gains as necessary to create a docile, productive labor force.



The Republican Party manipulated the black vote, expecting the black electorate to profess their allegiance to the party of emancipation, while failing to destroy or weaken the South's white power structure. Northern officials channeled the black revolt into electoral politics for their own benefit, while simultaneously collaborating with ex-slaveholders. In fact, it was black economic subservience, first imposed by moderate Republicans and the Freedmen's Bureau, which allowed for the reemergence of political elements favoring black disenfranchisement and a separate code of repressive laws for blacks. The Klan, the "black codes," the Freedmen's Bureau, and the sharecropping contracts in Reconstruction Florida had effectively undermined black political and economic power, ushered in through the combined initiatives of Northern white capitalists and Southern planters.

It was the Republican Party's allegiance to white supremacy that laid the seeds for the eventual collapse of Reconstruction in the South. Black religious, educational, and economic independence grew out of a mass grassroots campaign to overthrow white supremacy as a system. Most of these Reconstruction successes could be attributed to the organized direct action and agitation from the black community, not benign charity from the Republican Party. As both parties grew increasingly unified in purpose and strayed from making effective gains for the freemen, the electoral system no longer offered a real outlet for change. Neither party offered a true alternative for the black electorate.

Acknowledging this, Florida native Timothy Fortune proposed that "the colored man" should be "an Independent Force in our Politics":

"The Independent colored man, like the Independent white man, is an American citizen who does his own thinking. When some one else thinks for him he ceases to be an intelligent citizen and becomes a dangerous dupe—dangerous to himself, dangerous to the State... The hour has arrived when thoughtful colored men should cease to put their faith upon broken straws; when they should cease to be the willing tools of a treacherous and corrupt party; when they should cease to support men and measures which do not benefit them or the race; when they should cease to be duped by one faction and shot by the other. The time has fully arrived when they should have their position in parties more fully denned, and when, by the ballot which they hold, they should force more respect for the rights of life and property." **228**

When the Florida Independent Party emerged as a political power following Reconstruction, with a black and white electoral base, Black Floridian grassroots leader J. Willis Menard elated: "I need not tell you that the success of the Independent Movement

is the only salvation for the Negroes of the South, and that those Republican leaders who are opposed to this movement are acting in the direct interest of hide-bound Bourbonism and the continued solidity of the South.” **229** Black leaders recognized that the two-party establishment was united in undermining social equality in the South.

Nonetheless, blacks made huge advances during the era that would never be fully reversed by the reactionary Democratic regimes that followed. The homesteads, public schools, independent churches, unions, and political groups that blacks established and organized were fundamental aspects of black social and economic independence that failed to wither away. Sharecropping became the primary labor system as a result of class struggle. In this renewed state of slavery, blacks were not free but the planter was not master. Changes in the South’s economic set-up were produced by class conflict, a clash of interests between the ex-slaves and ex-masters. Although sharecropping could in no way qualify as liberation, the widespread black agitation for autonomy and self-management had successfully overturned the near-slavery “work gang” system put in place following the war. The degree of self-management in the sharecropping system can be attributed to their spontaneous, organized action against employer abuses and exploitation. In the immediate years following Reconstruction, black Floridians rejected their inferior social status through growing enlistment to the Independent Party, sporadic revolts in the phosphate mines, lumber mills, and turpentine camps, and unionization. As they became increasingly barred from electoral politics, collective action on the ground level became more important to assert their dignity and rights. Both blacks and poor whites would attempt to better their conditions through the Farmers’ Alliance. The growing population of Cuban migrants in Tampa Bay and Key West brought a strong anarchist movement and its insurrectionary tactics to the shop floors of cigar manufacturing companies. Working class black, Latino, and white Floridians was far from done combating the privileged minority interests that had seized control of the state during Reconstruction. Their struggles would not only reflect the different patterns of social change in the South, but unique in the many ways that Florida’s history had been for centuries.

## Introduction

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## Chapter 1

### Spanish Colonialism and Indigenous Uprisings (1513-1704)

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## Chapter 2

# Spanish Florida: A Refuge of Freedom (1687-1803)

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## Chapter 12

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## Chapter 13

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