

A Haven for Slaves

By The Florida Humanities Council

Long before the Revolutionary War, freedom-hungry African Americans fled slavery and created thriving settlements on Florida's frontier.

This phenomenon, which went unrecorded for years, may have begun in the late 1600s. But the first community to be officially recognized was Gracia Real de Santa Terese de Mose, near Spanish St. Augustine. Florida's Spanish governor chartered it in 1738 to shelter slaves who had escaped the British Carolinas.

Usually called Fort Mose (pronounced Mo-SAY), this first free black town became a farming community that also served as St. Augustine's northern defense perimeter. More slaves soon followed, making Florida the first destination for what later became known as the Underground Railroad for slaves escaping to freedom.

In the mid-1700s, Indians from Georgia and Alabama moved down to Florida and became known as Seminoles. They settled and developed friendly relationships with slaves who escaped from northern plantations. The Indians gave the newcomers tools to raise crops and build shelters. The groups also intermarried.

Some Seminoles established alliances with their new allies that resembled the vassal-lord relationships of feudal times. The Black Seminoles, as they were called, owned cattle and property and lived on their own, but they gave part of their harvests to their "masters." When needed, they also became warriors who fought on the side of the Seminoles.

During the American Revolution, many African American slaves fought for England, which promised them liberty. After England lost the war, hundreds of these

slaves fled to Florida. Sometimes known as “maroons,” originally a West Indian term for fugitive slaves, these and other escapees lived apart from both the Seminoles and Black Seminoles.

By 1800, Black Seminoles and maroons had established several villages between the Apalachicola River and Tampa Bay. Many villages sprouted near Indian settlements in what became Hernando, Alachua, Levy, and Leon counties. Others became established in present-day Sumter County and around the Tampa Bay area near Bartow and Sarasota.

One such village, known as Angola, is believed to have developed along the Manatee River in Manatee County. It was home to an estimated 750 people between 1812 and 1821. Archaeologists are attempting to pinpoint its exact location.

Among other villages cited are Abraham’s Old Town in Sumter County, New Eufala near Brooksville, Wahoo Swamp above the Withlacoochee River bend in Sumter County, and Minatti north of Bartow.

Such free black communities played a major role in Florida as the fledgling United States contended with European powers for dominion in America and Indians struggled to live the way they wanted. The first Seminole War (1817-18) began partly because of U.S. government attempts to recapture runaway slaves. Andrew Jackson, who later became president, is believed to have encouraged the Lower Creek Indian raid that eventually destroyed Angola.

The legacy of the free black communities speaks to American ideals.

Historian Canter Brown Jr., of Fort Valley State University, said, “It illustrates the role Florida played as a refuge of freedom for slaves.”

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