

The BLACK SEMINOLES OF FLORIDA

by Brian Insolo

*The Black Seminole Legacy and
North American Politics,
1693-1845*
Bruce Edward Twyman

The Black Seminoles
Kenneth W. Porter
Revised and edited by
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People of diverse backgrounds have shaped, and continue to shape, Florida's history. Through the centuries, the Native American, African American, Spanish, and British cultures formed Florida and laid the foundation for the vibrant, multicultural character of the state and nation. The concise, well-researched books of Bruce Edward Twyman, *The Black Seminole Legacy and North American Politics, 1693-1845*, and Kenneth W. Porter, *The Black Seminoles*, systematically explore this crucible that created Florida's history and helped shape the United States.

In 1693 Spain issued an edict promising freedom to escaped slaves. In *The Black Seminole Legacy*, Twyman explores the history of the thousands who responded to this edict by fleeing from South Carolina and Georgia to the Spanish colony of Florida. Spain's aim was to destabilize Britain, her rival in the New World. Spain also wanted to strengthen her already powerful military forces with both local Native Americans—the Seminoles—and with Black Seminoles—escaped slaves who had joined them. By 1740, the role of the Black Seminoles was crucial in Spain's maintaining control of Florida, when they helped defeat the British who declared war on St. Augustine, the

capital of Spanish Florida, and in 1812 when they stopped U.S. forces from capturing Florida.

Porter's history *The Black Seminoles* begins in 1812 when U.S. forces were once again facing the British, and Congress backed President Madison in seizing Florida. General Andrew Jackson stated in 1816 that his aim in Florida was to remove "banditti" and "return to our citizens and friendly Indians inhabiting our territory those Negroes now in said fort..." The fort that Jackson referred to was captured that same year by U.S. forces, and surviving Black Seminoles were handed over to the citizens of Georgia. According to Twyman, this event is often seen as the



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An 1826 Springfield flintlock rifle of the type used during the Second Seminole War

beginning of the First Seminole War that lasted from 1817 to 1818 and which eliminated the British and Spanish presence in Florida. The end of the First Seminole War ushered in the period from 1821 to 1835 in which national policy was dictated by the slave industry.

The social relationship between Native American Seminoles and Black Seminoles is explored in both books, although in more depth in Twyman's *The Seminole Legacy*. Porter states in *The Black Seminoles* that Native Americans supplied blacks with tools and received tribute in crops and livestock. The blacks were also helpful to the Native Americans as interpreters since all spoke either English or Spanish and Seminole languages. Twyman's investigation of this relationship describes how some Native Americans held Africans as slaves. In addition, the author presents U.S. congressional documents from 1821 and 1842 in which the Black Seminoles, previously slaves, were said to have "govern(ed) the Seminole Indians." Joshua Giddings, an abolitionist Ohio Congressman from 1838 to 1859, explains this contradiction by claiming that, from 1788 to 1840, runaway slaves are portrayed as controlling the Native Americans to justify military action in Florida.

Investigation of the social relationship of Native Americans and Black Seminoles is made more complicated by their very different kinship systems. A child born to a Native American Seminole mother and a black father would be considered a Seminole since Seminole kinship is matrilineal, or follows the mother's line. In the case of a child born to a black mother and a Native Seminole father, the Seminole would consider the child black. This means a man could have had black and Seminole children by different women. The blacks did not practice matrilineal descent and it is not apparent whether the children of these unions were automatically accepted into Seminole kinship groups.

In 1832 the Seminole tribe was forced to negotiate the Treaty of Payne's Landing that required them to move to Arkansas. The Black Seminoles at this time felt their only choices were either to fight to remain in Florida or be captured and returned to slavery if the Seminole tribe was moved. Native American Seminoles resisted the move, stating their desire to remain near ancestor's graves. But U.S. Seminole Indian agent General Wiley Thompson claimed the potential loss of slaves was the real reason the Native Americans did not want to move. The result of this impasse was the "Great Seminole War", or the Second Seminole War, of 1835 to 1842.

Abraham, a former slave who was nicknamed "the Prophet" because of his religious fervor, served as an interpreter at negotiations. Here he unsuccessfully asked that blacks be granted land separate from the Creeks who were bound by treaty to return escaped slaves. But on March 6, 1837, the Articles of Capitulation were signed asking that slaves be allowed to accompany Native American Seminoles in their move West. President Van Buren, who never formally accepted the articles

"A woman named Mary Godfrey, fleeing with her four young daughters from her home late one evening, was confronted by a black with an upraised ax. He hesitated a moment, then lowered his weapon and bade them not to fear, leading them to where they could see the lights of a military camp. The black said that he had two children still enslaved by the whites. He hoped God would protect them wherever they were, just as he had preserved his enemies when they were within his power. Then he quickly slipped into the night to rejoin his comrades."

An incident from the Second Seminole War described in Kenneth W. Porter's *The Black Seminoles*.



Peter Daniel Davis

The daily outfit of a small boy made in the fashion of his grandfather's.

because of opposition from plantation owners, had General Thomas Jesup negotiate with Abraham and Seminole leaders. Though he fought against them, Jesup worked to appease the fears of Native Americans, offering freedom to the “bona fide property” of Indians, but returning recently escaped slaves to their owners. As Jesup prepared to retire, Abraham, along with 90 other Black Seminoles and many Native Seminoles, moved to Arkansas according to Congressman Giddings because of “Money...offered certain influential men of the Seminole and Exiles [blacks].” As a way of disguising these payments, which would not have been a popular idea among white slave owners, the provisions of the bill made it appear that these funds were being used to purchase from “certain white men...individual exiles whom they claimed as property.” According to Twyman, without these expenditures it is possible the Second Seminole War would have extended into the Civil War. Until the Vietnam conflict, the Second Seminole War was the longest war ever fought by the U.S.

But problems continued through 1848 for the Black Seminoles and their new leaders, John Horse, who was also known as John Cavallo, Juan Caballo, John Cowaya, Juan Vidaurri, and Gopher John, and his ally Wild Cat, who is also known by the Native American name Coacoochee. U.S. Attorney General John Y. Mason wanted Black Seminoles, who thought they had been free for the last decade, held until Spring when they were to be returned to Native American owners. John Horse responded in April 1849 by leading his followers to Oklahoma and then Texas where plans were made for the exodus to Mexico, since slavery no longer existed there. According to official Mexican documents, the Black Seminoles crossed the Rio Grande and were well received as they entered the country, on or about July 12, 1850. On October 16, 1850, the President of Mexico

approved a request for land and tools from the Black Seminoles who had risked Indian attacks and capture by slavers to enter the country. In Mexico, the Black Seminoles assisted in keeping order along the border, and runaway slaves were always allowed to join them. The Seminole maintained their independence by playing U.S. and Mexican demands on the tribe against each other as they had often done. In 1821, after the U.S. acquired Florida, the tribe used this strategy to balance the interests of the British and Americans against those of Spanish Cuba. In 1855 the Third Seminole War erupted when Seminoles remaining in Florida clashed with whites over land. This war of attrition lasted until 1858.

On March 23, 1859, local Mexican officials politely ordered John Horse's people to leave their settlement in Nacimiento for lands to the South in Laguna de Parras where they would presumably be safe from marauders and slavers. But the assaults continued on Black Seminoles in Laguna de Parras, and prior to the American Civil War the fiercely independent tribe was an important topic in the debate on slavery. On July 4, 1870, after slavery had been abolished in the U.S. following the Civil War, a group of Black Seminoles crossed the Rio Grande back into the U.S. where they successfully served as the Detachment of Seminole Negro Indian Scouts. The tribe claims a “treaty” was created at the time granting them land when their services were no longer needed, but this treaty was never found.

On August 10, 1882, the great Black Seminole leader John Horse passed away in a Mexico City hospital, and many years later, on July 10, 1914, the Scouts were officially dissolved. The Black Seminole reservation, Fort Clark in Brackettville, Texas, was then closed and over the next few months the U.S. government ejected all the Black Seminoles from their homes on the reservation. The Black Seminoles in 1938 were finally granted property in Nacimiento, Mexico where they had originally settled in 1850.

The courageous and resilient Black Seminoles are a very important chapter in our history as they prove that great injustices can be conquered by perseverance and the teamwork of diverse cultures. To learn more about the history of Florida, the U.S., and the many cultures that shaped it, please visit GSA Schedule 76, Publication Media, where you may purchase Bruce Edward Twyman's, *The Black Seminole Legacy and North American Politics*, 1693-1845, and Kenneth W. Porter's, *The Black Seminoles*.

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