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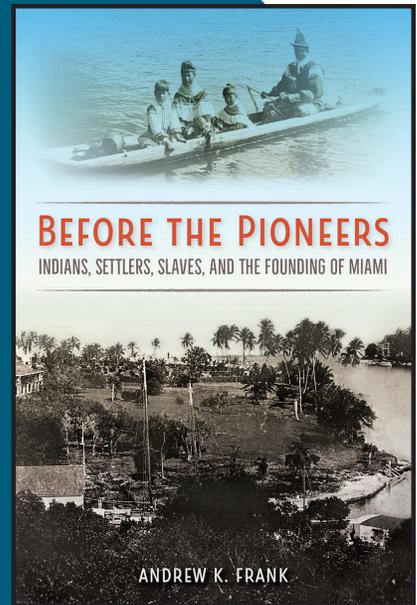
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BEFORE THE PIONEERS

Indians, Settlers, Slaves, and the Founding of Miami

ANDREW K. FRANK

978-0-8130-5451-3 • Original Paper \$16.95 • 160 pages, 6 x 9
UNIVERSITY PRESS OF FLORIDA • SEPTEMBER 2017

For more information, contact the UPF Marketing Department:

(352) 392-1351 x 232 | marketing@upress.ufl.edu

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Q&A

with
ANDREW FRANK
author of
BEFORE THE PIONEERS

What sparked your fascination with Florida's early history?

Being raised in South Florida, I truly thought my family was the first to live in my "neighborhood." When I started studying history, I became fascinated with why South Floridians imagine their history as being so recent. How could I have grown up surrounded by Tequesta mounds, Seminole Indians, and slave plantations without knowing anything about them?

What inspired you to write about Miami's ancient roots in particular?

Connecting the ancient and modern worlds has been a holy grail for scholars for many years, so this particular site was too amazing to ignore. I was fascinated by ancient Tequesta homes sitting alongside a nineteenth-century well and the steps of the modern Royal Palm Hotel. It was an extra bonus that my wife's grandfather shared his memories of the hotel and the Miami River for years.

What were you surprised to discover that many people may not know?

There were so many big and small surprises in my research. I am still surprised

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by the number of famous people (Ponce de León, William Augustus Bowles, Abner Doubleday, and John Breckinridge) who were at the site before Henry Flagler or Julia Tuttle. I was even more surprised by the continuous stretch of occupants who creatively imagined that they were the first ones to occupy it. A lot of energy went into their acts of forgetting, and their decisions have made it very hard to imagine Miami as Florida's oldest city.

What do you think about the preservation plans for the north bank site?

I am thrilled with the decision to let HistoryMiami create a permanent historic exhibit at the site. Rather than bury the past like earlier generations have done, the current occupants of the north bank will acknowledge that they are neither the first nor the last ones to do so. Preservationists, developers, and city officials should be commended for finding a way for the ancient and modern world to coexist.

Remnants of a prehistoric Tequesta Indian village were discovered by archaeologists in downtown Miami during the development of a high rise building. As someone who has dedicated his career to studying the history of Florida, what was this discovery of this site like for you?

The discovery was awesome on many levels. We have known about the Tequesta presence in Miami for many years, but the archaeological discovery challenges our sense of space and scale. With dozens of buildings spread across the area, the physical evidence makes it very hard to overlook our Tequesta founders. The controversy about what to do with the site sparked conversations about history, preservation, and development that were desperately needed. Intellectually, it was great to see South Florida get attention from scholars who normally locate early American history elsewhere.

How might one look for and find the influences of Miami's ancient roots while in the Magic City today?

As much as the city has grown, the geography of Miami still retains the influences of the ancient Tequesta. The largest Tequesta village still sits at the center of the city, and the area is filled with their mounds and middens. We cannot know what would have occurred if the Tequesta did not establish

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a foothold at the mouth of the river, but it is clear that we are living with the effects of that choice.

Why do you think people living in or visiting Miami today could benefit from knowing its early history?

So much of what we associate with modern Miami is older than we imagine. Its cosmopolitanism, connections to the Caribbean and water, and multiculturalism all have roots in its early history. These deep roots are equally evident in some of Miami's modern struggles—the modern city inherited a history of racial inequality, environmental destruction, as well as tensions between development and preservation.

What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

I hope that readers embrace the idea that Miami is an ancient place and that other cities and towns across America may have similarly ancient roots. History is as much about our collective memory as it is about collective forgetting. Americans, Floridians in particular, have tended to forget or ignore our ancient past. I hope this book will lead them to change that tendency.

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GATEWAY TO THE CARIBBEAN

IN 1783 a few dozen British loyalists, fugitive African American slaves, and despondent Native Americans took refuge at the North Bank. This group of “banditti”—as both the Americans and Spaniards called them—anchored their boats slightly upstream and camped at the abandoned Tequesta village. They were not the first ones to take advantage of the buildings, natural resources, and remote location, and the site showed significant signs of use since the Tequestas had left. Mariners, mostly Bahamians, had spent the past two decades extracting natural resources from the area and otherwise treating south Florida as the eastern edge of the Caribbean. They mended and took shelter in the Tequesta homes, gathered timber, produced tar to make their ships watertight, fished, planted and then picked limes from trees growing wild near the water, and otherwise gathered whatever food could be found.¹

Led by William Augustus Bowles, the group used the North Bank as a staging area for a paramilitary campaign designed to undermine both the Spanish Empire and the United States. While at the North Bank the men fixed their boats and stocked up on water, meat, fruits, and other provisions. They built a small wooden structure on the site, a physical statement of ownership that would ultimately succumb to the elements. Years later remains of the roughly twelve-foot wooden structure were still there. It may have been part of a stockade or small



Figure 3. William Augustus Bowles and several dozen other refugees established temporary homes at the North Bank during their campaign to reassert British control of Florida. This portrait of Bowles reveals the blending of material cultures that characterized his supporters as well as his own persona. *Painting of William Augustus Bowles* (17—). Black & white photoprint, 10 × 8 in. Printed with permission of the State Archives of Florida, *Florida Memory*, <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/29727>.

building that could keep a small quantity of supplies safe from the elements. Whatever its use, seafarers could see the structure from offshore for many years and used it to guide their boats into the mouth of the Miami River.²

Before coming to the North Bank, Bowles had fought as an ensign in the British army during the American Revolution, worked as

an Indian trader in north Florida, married both a Cherokee woman and a Creek woman, and spent significant time in the British Bahamas. He would not make the North Bank his permanent home, but he frequently used it to avoid detection by the Spanish and others who were intent on tracking him down. From this temporary hideout, Bowles attracted supporters who traveled with him on his campaigns throughout Florida, unsuccessfully sought trade goods and diplomatic backing for his campaign to retake Florida, and otherwise exploited the riches of Biscayne Bay. In 1788 Bowles proclaimed himself to be “Director General of the State of Muscogee,” a position that he created for an independent government of Indians and other dispossessed residents of Florida. Most of his energy focused less on issues of Muscogee governance than on his desire to help Great Britain retake Florida. In particular, Bowles hoped to undermine Creek chief Alexander McGillivray and the trading monopoly of his allied Panton, Leslie and Forbes Company. This company had resident traders throughout Creek Indian society and quickly became an important part of the Spanish regime when Florida returned to its control in 1783.³

Bowles ultimately failed to overthrow Spanish rule or end the monopoly of the Panton Company, but it was not for lack of effort. He traveled between the North Bank and the Bahamian ports of Nassau and New Providence on several occasions, but he could never muster the support from the British crown that he believed he deserved. Bowles did not let this lack of support deter his efforts. In 1788 he left the North Bank and destroyed one of the Panton Company’s trading posts in central Florida. In 1791, when Bowles returned to the North Bank from Nassau, he used it as a staging area as he tried to capture St. Marks in north Florida and cripple Spain’s control of the ports between Biscayne Bay’s Cape Florida and Apalachicola far to the north in the Gulf of Mexico. Bowles’s grandiose plan failed. Although he captured Panton’s central trading post in Apalachee in north Florida, Bahamian merchants could not fill the commercial void and the Spanish control of the trade remained.⁴

Bowles’s actions outraged the Spanish, who put a lucrative price

on his head. When Spanish governor Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada learned that Bowles was hiding at the North Bank in 1792, he tried to take direct action. Quesada and other Spanish officials in St. Augustine did not want to expend significant resources in order to settle south Florida, but they could not let the British obtain a foothold in Spanish territory. The issue was tricky for the cash-strapped and somewhat isolated colony. Even though Bowles was technically on Spanish terrain, Quesada did not think that he could send in a military force to capture him. The region was widely known as an extension of the Bahamas and was routinely patrolled by British sailors. Sending a small armada would be expensive and would be deemed an act of war—something that the limited diplomatic importance of south Florida hardly justified. Quesada resolved the issue by sending an unarmed ship to the region under the ruse of carrying official communication with Havana. This type of trip occurred with some frequency, with most boats staying clear of the coastline. Quesada's vessel anchored off shore on March 2, 1793, and the captain "went on shore while the people were filling water." Although Bowles and his known associates were nowhere to be found, the Spaniards were in the right place. They "saw Bowles's old camp where stands two large lightwood posts at about 12 feet distance and about 14 feet high—Seems to have had a piece mortized in on the top and appears to have been the entrance of some old fortification." The captain also found "In the pine barren . . . 2 old tarr kilns" that he believed were used by British soldiers "during the last war." Intent on preventing Bowles from making use of the site again, the Spanish soldiers "set the woods on fire and came on board." The destruction of the site may have convinced Bowles not to return to the Miami River—his whereabouts at this time remain largely unknown—but his paramilitary campaign continued until he was captured in 1804.⁵

Bowles's presence at the North Bank illuminates the major themes that shaped the site's history between 1763 and the early nineteenth century. This period spanned the British occupation (1763–1783) and the Spanish reoccupation (1783–1821) of Florida and witnessed the tumults created by the American Revolution. As these rather well

known stories took place, a different but connected history unfolded at the North Bank. During this era, south Florida was more an informal colony of local Bahamians than it was a formal colony of the British or Spanish Empires. Ad hoc rather than officially sanctioned leaders and settlers controlled the site. As the story of Bowles reveals, life there was largely hidden from outsiders and was more connected to runaway slaves, fugitive whites, and Seminole and Creek Indians than to traditional colonists. With a few exceptions, most of the North Bank's inhabitants were squatters or visitors who stayed too briefly to be described as residents. During the period, the North Bank retained the natural advantages that had earlier lured the Tequestas to the area, but this generation of occupants made a virtue of its isolation from the Americans to the north. They came to the edge of the empire in order to be left alone, which for the most part historians have continued to do.⁶

This lost Bahamian history in Florida began just as the Tequestas evacuated the region in 1763, if not before. As south Florida's Spanish and Tequesta population left, other individuals moved into the structures that they left behind. These newcomers included privateers, pirates, fishers, turtlers, wreckers, loyalists, debtors, and various other fugitives from the Atlantic world. Many of the newcomers fit in more than one of these categories, which were more descriptions of activities than formal occupations. For example, pirates fished, salvaged wrecks, hunted turtles, and lost political fortunes during the revolutionary era. Like Bowles and his supporters, the visitors to the North Bank included Europeans, Indians, and Africans. Most of them were more connected to the Bahamas than they were to mainland North America or northern Florida.⁷

Bahamians and other visitors primarily came to the North Bank for a short time, and sometimes repeatedly, in order to extract resources for use in their journeys or in their home markets. For starters, the seafarers would make their way through the bay in order to get access to lumber, a resource that was in short supply in the Bahamas. They also gathered fresh water from the river and perhaps from a local spring; harvested limes, other fruits, and coontie; hunted

turtles, deer, and other small mammals for meat; fished and gathered various shellfish; and took advantage of the generally secure location to repair their ships. Such was the case for one early nineteenth-century visitor, Andrew Ellicott. On his journey through the bay, Ellicott stopped for a couple of days on the Miami River—which he called “Fresh Water River.” His crew gathered fresh water and limes from the shore area and hunted for deer and turkey. Ellicott’s experiences paralleled those of other seafarers who used the mouth of the river to hide their privateering from colonial officials and to salvage shipwrecks. Some stayed for a few hours, while others stayed for weeks on end. As a group, they formed a continuous presence that colonial officials repeatedly decried as a threat to their respective empires.⁸

The constant presence of the Bahamians turned the North Bank and south Florida into what one observer described “as another island of the Bahamas.” This influence has been widely acknowledged in the Keys, but the North Bank’s location on the mainland may have camouflaged its connections to the islands. Bahamians did more than just visit and extract goods from the site. They introduced and cultivated various plants, including Barbados cherries, soursops, sapodillas, Spanish limes, and sugar apples. These plants made the North Bank seem more “Bahamian” and further attracted later generations of islanders to come take advantage of the bay’s wild resources. These influences convinced historian Helen Muir that “south Florida might as well have been an island joined to the Bahamas by sailboat and custom.”⁹

The shipwrecks that the coral reefs attracted proved to be the most lucrative attraction for the part-time Bahamian residents of the North Bank. Throughout the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, captains traveled the perilous shorelines only to lose their boats and cargo to storms, coral reefs, and sandbars. As one surveyor later explained: “many vessels . . . were lost in fair weather: unacquainted with the stream’s eddy, and of foundings being under blue water, they were swept insensibly by the eddy to the westward; and . . . run strait upon a reef.” Small and sometimes large fortunes awaited those who were willing to dive into the waters or troll the shores. Greater fortunes

could be had by those willing to extort rewards from captains who ran aground and needed a tow to safety or assistance unloading their cargo. Although popular imagery and modern news focus on the lost gold and silver from the Mexican mines, the wreckers and salvagers frequently obtained more mundane booty and fees for rescuing those in need. Salvagers capitalized on everything from the various parts of the ship (anchors, wood, rope, sails, and so forth) to the trade goods (cotton, corn, rice, tobacco, guns, ammunition) and other supplies that often got thrown overboard to lighten loads. This experience continued into the nineteenth century, as the changing of European dominion had little effect. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Ellicott observed that Key Biscayne and the surrounding areas were “much frequented by the privateers, wreckers, and turtlers from the Bahama Islands.” A few years later, in 1807, John Aikin explained that Bahamian wreckers took full advantage of “the channels between the Bahamas and the coast of Florida.” In some instances, wreckers would burn the ships after the cargo that “they may not serve as a beacon to guide other ships clear of those dangerous shoals.”¹⁰

Although wrecking was not legal in the eighteenth century and captains retained the rights to their flotsam, Bahamians and others skirted the law to make it a part-time profession at the North Bank. When they were in control, British and Spanish naval officers frequently tried to curtail the practice, but they had little luck regulating the coastline. Wreckers typically hid themselves and their booty up the Miami River, waiting out any patrolling naval ships that might visit. Other wreckers proclaimed that they were in the region “turtle hunting,” a convenient cover for their illegal operations. Although the actions were deemed illegal, the small but constant community of wreckers did little to chase away visitors. When Ellicott “found several of those privateers, wreckers and turtlers,” for example, he was “politely treated.” Their interaction proved to be rather commonplace; they talked and traded for salt pork and other goods. Shortly after, Pedro Fornells had a similar meeting with the wreckers and others who squatted at the North Bank and made a living on the bay.¹¹

The Bahamians also came to the North Bank to trade with

Seminole Indians who occupied the inland wetlands of south Florida. Native Americans had been migrating into the southern interior for several decades before the Tequestas and other Indians abandoned their ancestral homes on the coast. Some of these newcomers may have learned about the area as slave raiders, and others likely arrived during extended hunting trips. Most of the migrating Indians came from the ethnically diverse and decentralized Creek Confederacy in north Florida, Georgia, and Alabama and created new Seminole communities in and near Lake Okeechobee. After they arrived, the Indians incorporated and allied themselves with remnants and survivors of various communities of diverse ethnic backgrounds. Their villages contained some Calusas from the west coast who chose not to evacuate to Havana as well as hundreds of African Americans who had escaped from slavery. Some Tequestas may also have joined the Seminole villages in the seemingly remote interior.¹²

During these often ignored decades of eighteenth-century south Florida history, Seminoles routinely came to the mouth of the Miami River to obtain the same resources that drew the Bahamians to the shores. They traveled on dugout cypress canoes that could often fit a few dozen adults and transport various supplies up the river. They typically poled their way down the Miami River or hugged the coastline. At the mouth of the Miami River, they fished for manatee and shark, harvested the rare materials that shipwrecks left behind, and traded for Bahamian goods. Although the Panton, Leslie and Forbes Company officially monopolized the trade, Seminoles pursued clandestine options at the North Bank and elsewhere. They traded deer-skins, honey, beeswax, dried fish, and various fruits to fishers who offered guns, metal goods, rum, cloth, coffee, and other items that the Seminoles could not produce for themselves. Although the North Bank never became the preferred location for trade, it allowed Seminole hunters and families to play trading firms off of one another and otherwise obtain the best trade goods, prices, and opportunities.¹³

Seminoles also traveled to the North Bank and Biscayne Bay to avail themselves of the wild coontie plants in the region. It is unclear how these Seminoles and other migrants learned to grind and



Figure 4. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, Seminole Indians traveled to the North Bank in dugout canoes in order to trade with its residents, gather supplies, and harvest coontie. *Seminole Indians in a Canoe on the Miami River—Miami, Florida* (1912). Black & white photograph, 8 x 10 in. Printed with permission of the State Archives of Florida, *Florida Memory*, <https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/28066>.