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Red, Black, and Seminole

Community Convergence
on the Florida Borderlands, 1780–1840

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In 1836, near the onset of the Second Seminole War, U.S. Army Lieut. George McCall marched his men into the interior of Florida, an isolated region Governor William DuVal once called “God-forsaken country.” McCall soon discovered that his enemy included hundreds of African Americans who lived near and accompanied the Seminole Indians he expected to see and fight. “We found these negroes in possession of large fields of the finest land, producing large crops of corn, beans, melons, pumpkins, and other succulent vegetables,” he wrote. He “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.” Complaints about the harboring and theft of runaway slaves helped rally support for the war in Florida, but even McCall was surprised by what pivotal roles African American soldiers played in the Indian campaign. McCall and others concluded that the well-armed and highly motivated African Americans soldiers served as interpreters or advisors to every prominent Seminole leader. The omnipresence of African American resistance in an Indian war may have startled McCall, but American officers and soldiers quickly embraced the biracial nature of their enemy and concluded, as Col. Thomas Jesup did, that the Seminole War was a “Negro, not an Indian war.”¹

Believing that Africans and Indians constituted two distinct communities, the U.S. government pursued policies of divide and conquer in the Second Seminole War. United States officials tried to buy Africans from their Seminole “owners,” promised Seminoles the right to transport their slave property to Indian Territory, and then offered freedom to the African slaves who left the battlefield. Although these policies frequently failed to account for the shifting complexity on the ground, one of them proved effective in fighting the war and became influential in shaping modern interpretations of the Black-Seminole relationship. In 1838, Col. Jesup secured a truce with many African American soldiers who agreed to emigrate west as free men rather than fight and risk reenslavement by white southerners or continued enslavement by their Seminole masters. Over several months, approximately five hundred African Americans took this offer and relocated to Indian Territory. As it did for hundreds of non-African Seminoles before and after, the lure of ending the war proved attractive to many Africans, even if it meant relocating to a distant and unknown territory. For modern scholars, the decision of hundreds of Africans to abandon their Florida homes spoke volumes about the African relationship with Seminole Indians. In short, it confirmed the isolation rather than incorporation of Africans within Seminole society.²

Encouraged by the military and diplomatic records that reflected the racial assumptions of the early nineteenth century—that a natural and inevitable distinction existed between Indians and Africans—many modern scholars have cast 1838 as a turning point in the war. Encapsulating the conclusions of most scholars, Jeff Gunn writes, “At this point, Seminole Negro opposition to the Americans was essentially over.” Another recent study concludes that the success of the policy resulted in a changed meaning of the war; now “the Seminoles had to be removed because they were Indians, not because blacks were living among them.”³ White contemporaries may have certainly believed that the war had changed, but a generation of ethnohistorical scholars has demonstrated the limited utility of relying exclusively on the observations of outsiders to determine the complexity of Indian and African identities and behavior. A closer examination of 1838 and the relationship between African Americans and Seminoles reveals a similarly complex landscape on the Florida borderlands.

Despite widespread skepticism about the documentary record for Seminole Indians and African Americans, in the past few years a new consensus has emerged regarding their relationship in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Florida. Whereas Kenneth Porter and other scholars once emphasized that Black Seminoles were central parts of Seminole society, either as slaves or as fully incorporated kin, most recent scholars emphasize the autonomy of African communities in Florida and have concluded that most Africans lived independently as members of maroon communities. This new argument, most associated with the pioneering work of Kevin Mulroy, is largely based on exhaustive research on Seminole freedmen in postremoval Indian Territory, where a large community of “Black Seminoles” is the center of a modern controversy regarding sovereignty and Indian identity. The presence of another autonomous group of “Black Seminoles” in the Bahamas furthers the impression that Africans never became part of the Seminole Indian community. Both groups have their origins in the decisions of 1838 and a desire to secure freedom, and as a result the response to Jesup’s offer has obtained a central place in scholars’ understanding of the people often called Black Seminoles.⁴

A different view of the African-Seminole relationship emerges when scholars eschew the benefits and burdens of hindsight and assess the relationship in the context of the slow ethnogenesis of the Seminoles on the Florida borderlands. In this context, a fluid and historically contingent understanding of the relationship emerges, one where Seminoles and Africans followed converging and coalescing paths. Rather than treating Africans as occupying fixed categories—slaves, free, runaways, intermarried, descendents, or Seminoles—this interpretation recognizes both the temporal component to all these terms and the diversity of experiences within both the Seminole and the African communities. Runaways married and had children; independent communities formed social, economic, and political alliances; and emancipation freed many Seminoles. Trade, marriage, sustained communication, and political needs gradually connected the autonomous villages of the Florida interior, while other Africans remained relatively unconnected to their Seminole neighbors. As Col. Jesup concluded after several years of dealing with the Africans and Seminoles in Florida, “the two races . . . are identified in interests and feelings.”⁵