

INTRODUCTION

Currently there are many shades of black in Miami: ethnic shades, economic shades, religious shades, and political shades, among others. There is, therefore, no such thing as *the* black community of Dade County; there are many black communities in Dade County. Indeed, we comprise groups with quite different historical experiences, priorities, and perceptions. Now, after a century on Biscayne Bay, blacks in Dade County face a watershed. In the search for answers to what lies ahead, a look back might be helpful—perhaps even inspiring.

Four historical events brought black people to Miami. The first, in the early 1880s, was the collapse of the Bahamian economy, which forced thousands of black workers to leave their homeland in search of employment. Some came to the Florida Keys, particularly to Key West. By the 1890s, the migration had extended north up the chain of islands to Biscayne Bay. There the emigrants found seasonal work on the scattered, white-owned farms that existed in the area before the city of Miami was established in 1896. A few settled permanently in a small farming community called Lemon City, north of the Miami River. By the early 1890s many had also settled in Coconut Grove, which maintains a distinctly Bahamian flavor even today.

The second historical event that brought blacks to Miami was the Great Freeze which struck the southeastern United States, particularly Florida, in the winter of 1894–1895. Temperatures plunged to fourteen degrees in Jacksonville for four days. Virtually all crops north of Lake Worth were destroyed; the Florida citrus industry, then in its infancy, was decimated. In the aftermath of the freeze, thousands of white farmers and black field workers headed south from north and central Florida and from southern states such as Georgia and South Carolina, hoping to capitalize on the expansion of agriculture in Florida. By the turn of the century, thousands of blacks had settled in Miami and in small farming communities to the south, such as South Miami, Goulds, Homestead, and Florida City.

The third historical event was the arrival of Henry M. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railroad at Biscayne Bay in July 1896. This rail-

road had been chiefly responsible for the expansion of agriculture and tourism in Florida as far south as West Palm Beach by the time of the Great Freeze of 1894–1895. Flagler had no definite plans to extend his system further south, but the urging of a white woman named Julia Tuttle (later recognized as the mother of Miami) caused Flagler to agree to bring the railroad to the bay in 1896. The city of Miami was established in that year. The building of the railroad and the city required hard physical labor, and thousands of blacks were glad to get the work. Thus, Miami has been populated by a significant number of blacks from its very beginning. Indeed, when the vote to establish the city of Miami was taken, 162 of the 367 voters were black.

The fourth and most recent factor influencing the presence of blacks in Dade County has been the economic and political turmoil in Haiti and Cuba. This unrest has resulted in the arrival of untold numbers of immigrants, legal and otherwise, in south Florida since the 1970s. Many of these newcomers are black.

Massive immigration has caused some African Americans to feel increasingly isolated and angry because they believe the immigrants from Haiti and Cuba have displaced them in the job market. Many blacks also feel that immigration has negatively impacted public facilities such as hospitals and schools. Consequently, among the African-American, Cuban, and Haitian communities exist low-level tension and strong competition for dwindling public resources.

Ethnic tensions in Miami extend beyond the immigration issue. Like most big cities, Miami has not solved its policing problem. The result has been a decade of deadly race riots which have shaken the city to its core and earned Miami the title of the most ethnically divided city in America. Today, multiethnic black Miami has slowly climbed into the mainstream with help from many people in the white and Hispanic communities. From the city's earliest days, there were whites who spoke out against injustices committed upon blacks; whites were a key element in Miami's civil rights struggle. More recently, Hispanics have begun to offer blacks access to the opportunities created by the phenomenal growth of the Latino community.

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive history of black people in Dade County. Nor is it intended to describe every significant event and individual in Miami's one hundred years of black history. Rather, the book represents a look back at Miami's first century through

black eyes. It tells the story of black Miami through events in the lives of some of the black people who lived through that century of struggle and triumph. If these pages reveal cause for both agony and celebration, it is because blacks in Miami have had ample reason for both. Personally, I see triumph more than anything else. As this book reveals, blacks ultimately prevailed over the wilderness itself and over those who oppressed them.

proof

proof

PART 1

THE PRE-FLAGLER ERA

proof

proof

From the infamous pirate Black Caesar's arrival on Biscayne Bay (probably in the late 1600s), to the coming of the Stirrups and Dorseys centuries later, blacks have had an influence on south Florida history and development. With the settlement of the Bahama Islands in the late eighteenth century, blacks were but a day's sailing from the crystal-blue waters of Biscayne Bay. Farm workers from the Bahamas were moving up the Florida Keys in considerable numbers by the mid-1900s as the economy of the Bahamas collapsed.

During this time before the birth of Miami, blacks and Seminole Indians in Florida formed an alliance that lasted nearly a century. In 1804 the first black slaves were brought to Key Biscayne. Later others would be brought to plantations built on the site of present-day downtown Miami. In post-Civil War Dade County black settlements sprang up in Lemon City, a few miles north of what would become Miami and in Coconut Grove to the south. All this, before the arrival of the railroad and the founding of Miami in 1896.

Black Pirates on Biscayne Bay

The first black presence on Biscayne Bay was probably a pirate. According to the legend, before the establishment of Miami, Coconut Grove, or Lemon City—indeed, over a century before the Cape Florida lighthouse was built on Key Biscayne in 1825—a black pirate called Black Caesar took a toll on ships sailing off the Great Florida Reef near present-day Miami. His presence on the bay is mired in tales of violence, enforced prostitution, ingenious feats of seamanship, and still-undiscovered treasure beneath the white sands of south Florida.

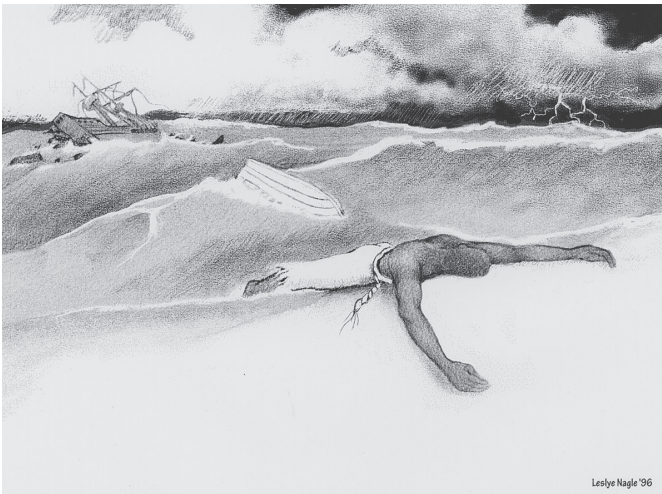
There are several conflicting accounts of Black Caesar and his murderous henchmen, leading to the conclusion there were probably two Black Caesars, with more than a century separating their exploits. The tales that persist may be more myth than truth.

According to one version, in the late seventeenth century a ship laden with hundreds of slaves was fatally driven against the Great Florida Reef. A giant black man, having reached dry land alive and alone, set

himself adrift in the Gulf Stream in a tiny open boat that had washed ashore. A sloop spotted the small craft and rescued the exhausted traveler. Once aboard, however, the huge slave attacked the captain and disposed of the crew members who refused to join him. In the next few years he brazenly parlayed this sloop into larger craft and became known as Black Caesar. His lair was Elliot Key, the first large island south of Key Biscayne; a channel there still bears the name Caesar's Creek.¹

The area around Cape Florida was ideal for Black Caesar. The Florida Straits provided an unending parade of prizes, and when necessary, the bay granted a magnificent avenue of escape. Biscayne Bay's tricky mud flats and shoals were deadly to the uninitiated, and beyond the bay were mangroves and blind-mouthed channels known only to Caesar. On those rare occasions when he was closely pursued, Caesar headed for the maze of mangrove channels where condominiums stand today. He would quickly disappear in the marshy swamp, dismast his vessel, and sink it in shallow water. With his ship thus underwater and his men hidden, Caesar could vanish from the most determined enemy.

Another tactic Black Caesar favored was the use of a large metal ring imbedded deeply in a rock on a particular small island, possibly near Caesar's Creek. With a sturdy line through the ring, Caesar could heel his ship (tilt the vessel onto its side) and hide its mast from pass-



1. Black Caesar, a huge African slave who, according to one legend, alone survived a ship-wreck off the coast of Florida. It is believed that he later pirated ships near Biscayne Bay in the late 1600s. Courtesy Leslye Nagle.

ing vessels. When a prize came within striking distance, a lookout signaled, the ship was quickly righted, and Caesar soon appeared on the forecandle of his startled prey.

According to Florida historian Jim Woodman, as Black Caesar became infamous throughout the region, fantastic tales were told of him. These old yarns form the current legends. Most versions agree that Black Caesar was exceptionally cruel and that he had a lust for jewels along with a passion for luxury. One report claims that at one time he held more than one hundred white women captive at a prison camp on Elliot Key. He incarcerated his prisoners in stone huts, leaving them to starve when he abandoned the camp. Reportedly, a few small children escaped the death camp and survived to wander about the key, subsisting on berries and shellfish and, in time, developing a primitive language of their own. This may account for the Seminole legend that the key was haunted.

In the early 1700s Black Caesar left Biscayne Bay to join the arch-pirate Captain Edward Teach, alias Blackbeard, who was operating from the west coast of Florida near Tampa. Black Caesar became Black Beard's trusted lieutenant; together in the forty-gun *Queen Anne's Revenge*, they plagued the American coast. Their partnership ended abruptly when the British navy killed Teach off the coast of North Carolina in 1718. Black Caesar was reportedly captured, taken to Virginia for trial, and hanged the same year in Williamsburg.

Nearly a century after the death of the first Black Caesar, there were reports of another black pirate operating in the Biscayne Bay area. This pirate was an American-born slave who had an African mother and a Scottish father. He learned the local channels and was attacking ships in the Florida Straits in the early 1800s. This second black pirate soon adopted his predecessor's name, also becoming known as Black Caesar.

The new Black Caesar ventured far into the Caribbean. He was said to have captured a treasure ship eight hundred miles east of Cuba, carrying twenty-six tons of silver. The pirate sailed the galleon to Biscayne Bay, where it is believed he unloaded his prize. What he did with his mountainous fortune remains a mystery.

By 1828 this Black Caesar had become such a nuisance to shipping that President Andrew Jackson's new administration organized a naval expedition to end the buccaneer's Biscayne Bay operations. Black