Tragedy and Survival: Bicentennial of the Southward Movement of Black Seminoles on the Gulf Coast

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Virtual Reconstructions by

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The goals of the virtual reconstructions: to inspire further interest, study, and research. The programs are available through the New College Public Archaeology Lab.

The Virtual Worlds are available from the New College Public Archaeology Lab
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Commemorating the July 1816 Destruction at Prospect Bluff and Consequential History of Maroons on the Florida Gulf Coast through Digital Archaeology: Virtual Worlds for the Early 19th-century Landscapes at Prospect Bluff and Angola
Maroons of Second Spanish Period Florida: Rivers of Freedom, Landscapes of Liberty

In 1693, King Charles II proclaims those enslaved could find a haven in Spanish St. Augustine. Peoples of African descent lived in and fought for their freedom at Fort Mosé (1738 to 1740 and 1752 to 1763). Maroon, coming from the Spanish *cimarrón*, is used to describe the diversity of people seeking freedom and liberty; Seminole becomes the term in Florida. In the Second Spanish Period (starting in 1783), maroons come to a new haven for freedom, one established by Edward Nicolls on the Apalachicola River. Self-emancipated people, those born in freedom, and other maroons establish communities first on the Apalachicola River, then by the Suwannee River, and finally on the Manatee River. The Spanish Empire released Florida to the United States of America in 1821, under the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819. A punishing raid down the Florida Gulf Coast destroyed Native American and maroon communities; some escaped to the British Bahamas and others to the Florida interior. Red Bays on Andros Island sustained the descendants through the generations. In Florida, maroons and Seminole peoples would rise up, starting in 1835 as the Second Seminole War. This past has tragedies but the history is one of survival: a heritage of freedom across Gulf Coast Florida.

Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River

The borderlands between Spanish imperial control and the United States offered a haven for those escaping slavery and fighting for freedom. In 1814 Royal Marines under the leadership of Captain George Woodbine began training at the Apalachicola River. Edward Nicolls proclaimed those fighting with Britain would be British subjects; he organized a fort below the confluence of the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers, and then another at Prospect Bluff. As hundreds rallied to the British fort, known to those in the USA as the Negro Fort, the US Navy entered the river. On July 27, 1816 the schooners *Semilante* and *General Pike* and gunboats No. 149 and 154 commanded by Sailing Master Jarius Loomis blew up the magazine and the fort; Garçon and an unnamed Choctaw leader were captured and killed. Survivors fled to the Suwannee River and the temporary safety of Bowlegs Town. In March 1818 Andrew Jackson orders a fort built over the ruins, known as Fort Gadsden.

The landscape is reconstructed to envision a maroon perspective on the fort, the Apalachicola River, and the community’s material culture.

Manatee Mineral Spring on the Manatee River

The community on the Manatee River first recognized as a maroon community by Canter Brown Jr.’s archival research led Vickie Oldham to create Looking for Angola as an interdisciplinary community-based public anthropology program. In 2013, traces of Angola were uncovered by the Manatee Mineral Spring on the south side of the Manatee River. Maroons might have started the community in the late 18th century; after the Battle of Suwannee hundreds came to Angola seeking freedom. For several years, maroons built homes, tended fields, and traded with Cuban fishermen on the coast and Seminoles in the interior. In 1821, a military raid destroyed the community, capturing hundreds while others escaped to the Florida interior or to Cape Florida and ultimately to Andros Island in the British Bahamas.

Reconstructing this landscape required piecing together fragments from several sources, offering a view of what the area by the Manatee Mineral spring might have been like in the early 19th century.