



By Richard Procyk

12/3/2012



## Indians and Black Cowboys

Unknown until a few years ago, Fort Mose lay hidden in swampy coastal land for over 200 years. When the property owner found artifacts he advised university archeologist, who uncovered remnants of the all black town. Archival investigations revealed that the Spanish used Fort Mose and its settlement as a fortification to buffer and warn the City of St. Augustine of any imminent attack by the British. In 1740, under General James Oglethorpe, the Georgians did attack and the fort was abandoned. A new fort was built on the site in 1752, and the black settlers returned. The community prospered and the free slaves were now permitted to work as blacksmiths, shopkeepers, carpenters and cattlemen as long as they served in the black militia.

The fort was finally abandoned in 1763, when Spain ceded Florida to Britain. The people of St. Augustine and Fort Mose moved to Cuba along with the last of the remaining indigenous Native Americans. When Fort Mose was vacated, many of the horses and cattle that the Spaniards could not take with them to Cuba or the Bahamas were released into the countryside. The horses and cattle on the loose did well in Florida's lush grass and soon the wild herds multiplied. These were rounded up by the Indians, who soon raised large herds of cattle and ponies in the Alachua area and learned to become expert horsemen from the African Americans who had joined them. Some of the African Americans living in or around St. Augustine ran off and joined Maroon villages located further inland rather than be sent to a foreign country – Cuba.

A few of the black militiamen, who had learned to ride and handle the herds with the Spanish colonists took this knowledge back to the Maroon and Seminole Villages where they taught others horsemanship and herding. An interesting sidelight of history is the first American cowboys (vaqueros) were not a John Wayne or Jimmy Stewart type, white and "tall in the saddle," but were Indians, black men –slave or free – or descendants of the Spanish. Two famous early Florida Indians who raised cattle were Chief Billy Bowlegs and Chief Cowkeeper. Some of these herds of cattle numbered over 1000 head. The Indian cowboys rode beautiful ponies and were considered quite wealthy as they also owned huge herds of cattle and owned black slaves who became the first "black cowboys." Twenty years later, in 1783, the



By Richard Procyk

12/3/2012

province of Florida with its Indian population was returned to Spain and the word once again was spread that Florida was a sanctuary for all runaways.

By this time all the various tribes people (Ocones, Yamasees, Creeks, Yuchis, and runaway blacks) became known as "istisemole" – wild men or runaways. The Spanish referred to them as Cimarron's, which also means runaways or fugitives. In time, the word was corrupted to "Seminole" – the name they bear today. When the Seminoles became a nation in 1775, they became the only Indian group in North America to be named from without and not with their own sense of identity. Many of the African Americans that escaped into Florida were taken as slaves by the Seminoles, but they were permitted to live and work under a relatively moderate type of servitude, similar to modern sharecropping.



The Seminole's permitted their slaves to live apart in separate villages, where they could raise their own crops, select their own leaders, carry guns, hunt and fish, and for the most part live free. In exchange for providing the blacks protection against white slave catchers, the Seminoles required that they pay a tribute each year of about a third of their crop. This would soon end. In August 1813, the Red Stick Creek Indians attacked frontier settlements and overran Fort Mims, Alabama, killing everyone there. The War Department sent three columns of troops, one column led by General Andrew Jackson, into the heart of the Creek nation. Jackson attacked the Creeks stronghold at Tohopeka or Horseshoe Bend crushing all Creek resistance and ending the Creek War. With this victory Andrew Jackson pushed a thousand or more Creeks South into Florida, where they would later join the Seminoles to fight under the Spanish and British flags.

Meanwhile the slave holding states pressured the US Government to move the Seminoles west and return their runaway slaves to the plantations. The First Seminole War began when Florida was still Spanish territory, a haven for those escaping war and slavery on the southern plantations. The US Army sent Brigadier General Edmund P. Gaines to arrest Seminole Mikasuki Chief Nemathla, who had given refuge to black slaves at his village, Fowltown, near the Florida border. Gunfire exchanged on November 21, 1817, marked the beginning of the First Seminole War.