

Black Seminoles vs. Red Seminoles



Indian tribes across the country are reaping windfall profits these days, usually from gambling operations. But some, like the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, are getting rich from belated government payouts for lands taken hundreds of years ago.

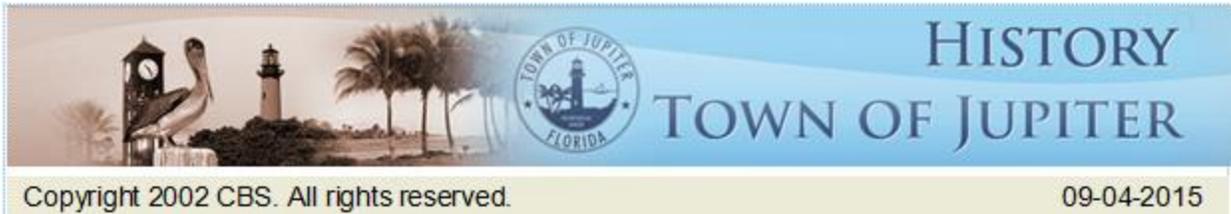
What makes the Seminoles unique is that this tribe, unlike any other, has existed for nearly three centuries as a mixture of Indians and blacks, runaway slaves who joined the Indians as warriors in Florida. Together, they fought government troops in some of the bloodiest wars in U.S. history. In the late 1830s, they lost their land, and were forced to a new Indian home in present-day Oklahoma.

Over the years, some tribe members have intermarried, blurring the color lines even further.

Now the government is paying the tribe \$56 million for those lost Florida lands, and the money is threatening to divide a nation.

Seminole Chief Jerry Haney says the black members of the tribe are no longer welcome. After 300 years together, the chief says the tribe wants them to either prove they're Indian, or get out.

Harsh words from the Seminole chief for the 2,000 black members of this mixed Indian tribe. In response, the black members say they're just as much a Seminole as Haney is.



On any given Sunday, go with Loretta Guess to the Indian Baptist church in Seminole County, Okla., and you'll find red and black Seminoles praying together, singing hymns in Seminole, sharing meals, and catching up on tribal news. Walk with her through the Indian cemetery out back, and you'll find their ancestors are buried together as well.

Loretta claims that there was never any distinction made between the two groups of Seminoles. "We've always been treated as one to another. No difference at all," she says.

It was an alliance that began more than 300 years ago in Florida, when runaway slaves and different Indian tribes sought refuge together and later fought the white man. Joe Opala, a history professor at James Madison University in Virginia, says that from the beginning, it was a melting pot tribe. "In fact, the word Seminole is not even an Indian word. It is derived from the Spanish word, Cimarron, meaning runaway slave. And so, from the beginning, you don't have an Indian tribe. It was a multi-ethnic coalition," he says.

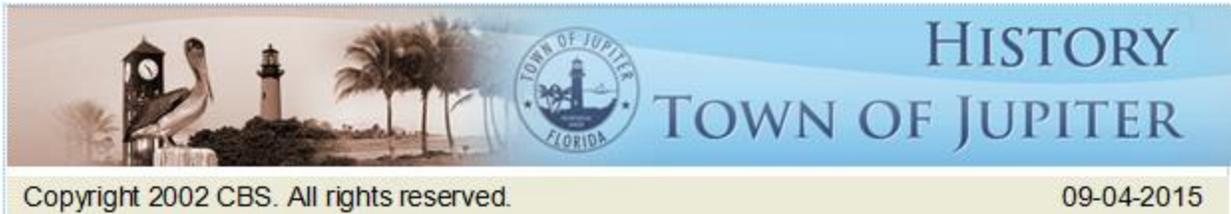
Historical evidence documents their close relationship; blacks became chiefs, signed treaties, and served on the tribal council. They intermarried. They were equals, Opala says, and the Indians depended on them as warriors and interpreters. "There's a lot of intelligence information that passes back to Washington – for instance, General Jessup, the commanding general, writes back at one point to the war department and says, 'The Negroes rule the Indians.' What he was referring to was the fact that no significant decision was ever taken in the Seminole Councils unless the black members agreed to it," he says.

When the black and red Seminoles were forced out of Florida in the 1830s, they traveled together, hundreds and hundreds of miles, by boat and on foot. It was a long and difficult journey, referred to as their "trail of tears" for the many that died along the way.

Now, nearly 200 years later, comes the \$56 million payment from the federal government to compensate for lost Florida lands. But the black Seminoles can't share in it, because the government and the tribe say they were slaves of the red Seminoles back then. As slaves, they could not have owned land.

Joe Opala, who has worked to preserve their legacy, says that's wrong. "The Black Seminoles fought side by side, died, bled, for those lands in Florida. They've been together; they've been good brothers and good neighbors for three centuries. It makes no sense now, to say they're not Indians," he says.

Budd Rockett and his sister, Polly Gentry, trace their Seminole roots back to their great-grandmother, Dora Davis, who came to Oklahoma on the trail of tears. "Our ancestors



were some of the fiercest fighters during the war," Budd says.

But family legend and physical resemblance aren't enough. Today, you have to be able to prove your Indian heritage, which is hard for most black Seminoles because of something called the Dawes Rolls. This is a government census of sorts created in the late 1800s, which separated the tribe into the "blood," or red Seminoles, and the "freedmen," or black Seminoles. Intermarriage made no difference, as Polly and Budd discovered with their ancestors. "If you had any black blood in you whatsoever, you were a 'freedman'," he says.

Putting aside the history of togetherness, the blood Seminoles are going by the book, that is, the government's book. They're relying on that 100-year-old census, which separated the black Seminoles from the rest of the tribe in determining just who gets government money today.

For Seminole leaders like Haney, what it now comes down to is proof. "If they don't have any Indian blood, or prove it, then they're not looked at as Indians," he says. "It's up to the individual to prove they are Indians. And this is where the problem is: they can't prove it with the Dawes Commission rolls."

Polly Gentry has lived her entire life on land her grandmother received 100 years ago as a full member of the tribe. All Seminoles, red and black, were given land in Oklahoma. Polly says she could use some of the \$56 million judgment fund to repair her house.

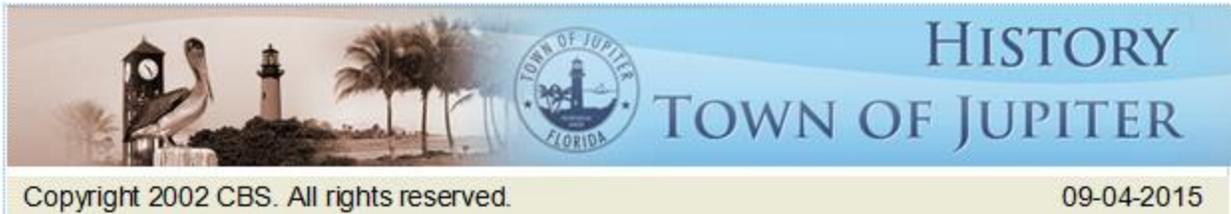
"My husband decided he was gonna put some bricks around it, and he got as far as you see them bricks is now, and he had a heart attack," she says. "And it's been like this, cause I couldn't get anybody to fix it. I want enough (money) that I can get a house built where I can live comfortably, cause it isn't comfortable here."

Opala calls it a "concoction."

"It's just an excuse now that's been dreamed up of late in order to exclude the blacks from membership in this tribe. I can tell you this: 100 years ago, or 150 years ago, the Seminole Indians would not have been talking about whether or not this black person has Indian blood. It simply wouldn't have mattered. They were Seminoles," says Opala.

For more than 100 of those years, black Seminoles held four of the 28 seats on the tribal council. But that ended at a meeting in the summer of 2000, when the red Seminoles voted the blacks out.

Sylvia Davis, who was one of the four black council members at the time, says it was humiliating. "It's been hard for me to sit there and—listen to the way they talk to the Freedmen. It's been very hard for me," she says. "The racist names that they are using



toward them, calling them animal names, cows, stomping feet, roaring at them, telling them to get out."

Haney says many of the black Seminoles, and even some of the blood Seminoles, weren't interested in being part of the tribe until it included benefits: namely, a piece of that \$56 million from the government.

He also says the red and black Seminoles have just grown apart over the years and have little in common today.

But that's not how Sylvia Davis sees it. She's hired Will and Jon Velie, two young attorneys who specialize in Indian law. They're suing the government on behalf of the black Seminoles.

"The entire tribe received a county in exchange for a state. When it was individually allotted, all Seminoles, including the Black Seminoles, received their individual allotments. When the United States awarded \$56 million, shouldn't the same people that received the land before also receive the money? The tribe's the same," says Jon Velie.

The Bureau of Indian affairs chose not to speak, citing the pending lawsuit. However, in a letter, it said these kinds of issues are up to the tribe. Eligibility for the judgment funds, the letter says, "may depend upon whether a current member is descended from a member of the tribe as the tribe existed in 1823." However, the letter says, deciding who's in and who's out is "solely within the purview of the tribe."

But the black Seminoles say they won't go quietly. They continue trying to cast votes and participate in tribal meetings, without success.

Budd Crockett says he won't be denied his heritage, but he won't beg for it either.

"It's not all about the money. It's about setting the history records straight about our ancestry and our history. And what legacy we intend to leave for our kids," he says.

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