

The Forgotten Seminoles

THE PALM BEACH POST Copyright (c) 2001

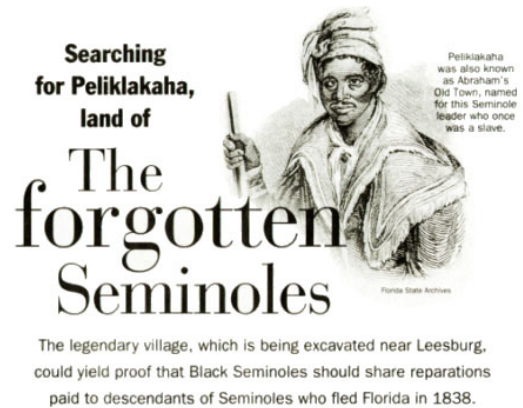
Used with permission

Monday, August 20, 2001

By Scott McCabe

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Forty-five minutes west of Walt Disney's make-believe history, archaeologists dig for real artifacts. Hunched over a shallow, square excavation, they search for Peliklakaha, the largest Black Seminole village known to historians, a place where different cultures joined in a fight for freedom more than 200 years ago. Until now, say University of Florida archaeologists, Peliklakaha existed only in the writings of military leaders and a painting commissioned by the U.S. general who had burned it down. Archaeologists hope to unearth clues that documents can't provide, secrets about the life of a hidden people. They hope Peliklakaha will reveal whether the inhabitants developed a unique lifestyle with their new status as free people in Florida. "The story of the Black Seminoles is a tremendous story about a successful effort by slaves gaining their freedom before the Civil War," said Delray Beach archaeologist Bill Steele, who discovered the site in 1993. "That's why Peliklakaha is so significant." The dig could establish a new focus in archaeology on cultures that combine African and Native American influences, said Terry Weik, the UF graduate student heading the excavation. It could also bolster the Black Seminoles' lawsuit that seeks a share of the \$56 million the United States government paid the Seminoles for reparations. To win their suit against the U.S. government, the Black Seminoles must prove they owned land in Florida. The story of the Black Seminoles is complex and controversial. Often it's misunderstood. The Seminoles themselves were a distillation of as many as 36 tribes. Osceola, the bold and dashing Seminole leader for whom the Florida State University mascot was named, was half Scottish and half Creek Indian, and married a Black Seminole.



2,500 registered blacks

Historian Kenneth W. Porter, the grandfather of the study of these people, designates as Black Seminoles those people of African origin who joined the tribe voluntarily or were bought as

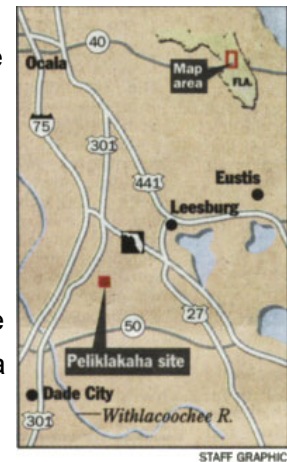


By Scott McCabe, Palm Beach Post

08/20/2001

slaves. Today, there are two black bands and 2,500 registered black members in the Great Seminole Nation of Oklahoma. Seventy-five percent of the tribe, of both races, were moved there after the Second Seminole War in 1838. The black bands, known as Freedmen or Estulusti, have been part of the 14-band tribe since its formation. They are federally recognized as members of the Oklahoma tribe. The 19-year-old son of a Black Seminole leader is suing the United States for denying him federal benefits afforded all Indians and a part of the \$56 million that the government finally agreed in 1991 to pay the tribe for taking Florida. A federal appeals court has ruled the Black Seminoles can sue the federal government, which maintains they were slaves and did not own land. A new trial date has not been set in the case, which was filed in 1996. In Florida, the tribe has ignored its black brothers from Oklahoma until recently. Now, for \$24.99, the tribe's Web site will help trace Black Seminole roots. At the same time, historians are examining the Second Seminole War more closely. Although not as known as the Indian campaigns out West, the Second Seminole War has always been considered the bloodiest and most brutal of all U.S.-Indian wars. Now, some historians are also calling the seven-year struggle the largest slave rebellion in United States history. "You cannot understand the history of Florida without understanding Black Seminole and Red Seminole history. They are the core," said historian William Loren Katz, author of *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage*.

Slaves escaped to Florida Blacks were in Florida before the Seminoles. In the late 1600s, African slaves who escaped Carolina plantations and dodged slave hunters through dangerous Indian country gained freedom by crossing the St. Mary's River, an international border that divided Spanish and British colonial territory. This was the first Underground Railroad. So many fled here that, in 1693, the Spanish settlement at St. Augustine began freeing the runaway slaves if they agreed to convert to Catholicism and protect the northern border from the British, according to Jane Landers, author of *Black Society in Spanish Florida*. By 1738, these former slaves formed the first free black community in North America - Gracia Real de Santo Teresa de Mose - better known as Fort Mose. Soon, the Indians followed. They were the remnants of the most resistant tribes, the Creek, Hitichi, Yamasee and Miccosukee, Indians who had been fighting the Europeans for centuries. Together they became known as the Seminoles. The term first appears in the mid-1700s and is believed to come from the Spanish word meaning "runaway" or "secede." Like the Spanish, the Seminoles harbored runaway slaves. Although most blacks were technically governed by Seminole chiefs, they were free in every other way. They were armed. Most lived in their own villages and, as a kind of tax, gave corn to the tribe. They taught the Indians to build homes,





By Scott McCabe, Palm Beach Post

08/20/2001

tend livestock and speak English and Spanish. "I don't think some modern U.S. audiences can get that neither the Spaniards nor the Seminoles nor the blacks themselves considered them slaves - only the Americans did," Landers said. They became farmers, ranchers, cowboys, interpreters, hunters, traders and warriors. Some lived short, brutish lives as outlaws, raiding plantations, recruiting blacks, and trading in contraband. Others farmed and traded, building peaceful relations with Indians, slaves, and former masters. Intermarriages were common.

All Indians ordered out

Up the Apalachicola River, 25 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico, more than 300 blacks and Indians manned a fort that the British built for them in the War of 1812. It was called Negro Fort. When the war ended, the black and Indian militia stayed. From bastions 15 feet high and 18 feet thick, they'd fire at what few ships came down the river. That all ended right before the Seminole War in 1816. A single shot from an American ship hit the fort's ammunition dump, killing 270 of the 320 inside. Later, the United States bought Florida from Spain. President Andrew Jackson ordered all American Indians to move west of the Mississippi River. Although the North-South debate over slavery was in full swing at the outset of the Second Seminole War, the public at first was oblivious to the connection between the slavery of blacks and the removal of Indians from Florida. The military were well aware of the connection. The Seminoles struck first on Dec. 28, 1835. Less than 10 miles due east of Peliklakaha, 180 warriors surprised a troop of 108 U.S. soldiers in what is known as The Dade Massacre. The soldiers hastily built a triangular barricade and held off the aggressors for nearly six hours until they were startled by the sound of pounding hooves. Fifty black warriors on horseback swarmed the barricade, stabbing and axing the wounded, taunting them with cries of "What do you got to sell?" - A question soldiers often asked of blacks when they visited military posts. Only three whites survived. At first the Seminoles were appalled by their black allies and their European, to-the-death style of battle, said Steele, the archaeologist. For years, he wondered where these black warriors came from. It was only after discovering Peliklakaha, and its proximity to the battle, that Steele came up with this theory: The black horsemen must have heard the battle in the distance and came riding in. "Black history is covered in layers," he said. "You have to think your way through." Peliklakaha, sometimes called Abraham's Old Town, is named for a full-black former slave, once owned by a Pensacola doctor. British soldiers recruited him to the Negro Fort, where he survived the explosion. In the first Seminole War, Abraham fought against then-Gen. Andrew Jackson's troops. Afterward he recruited blacks into the tribe, became an interpreter and attained the status of "sense bearer," or lawyer, for Chief Micanopy on his trip to Washington in 1826. Abraham stood tall and slender. He had a courtly manner and a clear, fluent, genteel speech. His face was distinguished by a badly crossed right eye. He governed Peliklakaha and married



By Scott McCabe, Palm Beach Post

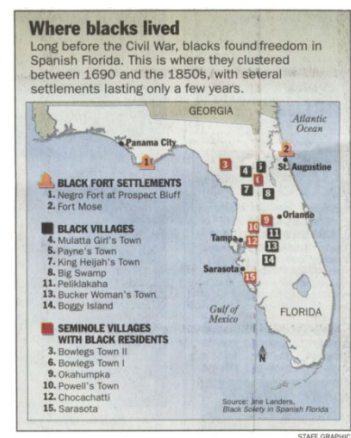
08/20/2001

the widow of Chief Bowlegs. Three months after the Dade Massacre, with U.S. forces moving in, Abraham abandoned Peliklakaha. Brig. General Abraham Eustis torched the town and commissioned a drawing of the burning homes. It shows dense smoke billowing above sturdy structures. In the distance, cattle graze near yellow crops.

As a sense bearer for the Seminole nation, Abraham influenced both sides of the war. He always kept his people's freedom in mind. Blacks had more to lose. A U.S. victory would move the Indians to Oklahoma, but probably send blacks into slavery no matter how much Indian blood they had. As the war intensified, blacks rapidly rose through the ranks, wielding political clout within the tribe. Their military prowess impressed both white opponents and Seminole leaders. Many warriors had come from the fiercest tribes of Africa: the Ibo, Egba, Senegal and Ashanti. "Throughout my operations, I found the Negroes the most active and determined warriors; and during my conference with Indian chiefs I ascertained that they exercised an almost controlling influence over them," wrote Maj. Gen. Thomas Sidney Jesup, who assumed command in Florida in 1836. "This, you may be assured, is a Negro and not an Indian War." His statement that this was a Negro war was an exaggeration; it was both, according to Katz. But Jesup's point was that the Seminoles would not move west unless the blacks were allowed to go with them. "Although the U.S. government tried to disrupt this interracial alliance, Indian loyalty to black Seminoles remained unshaken as Seminole warriors, including chiefs, continued to marry black women and rely on black advisors," Richard Procyk wrote in *Guns across the Loxahatchee*. "This steadfastness may well have contributed to the ultimate downfall of the Seminole nation."

Early version of Vietnam

Historians often compare the Second Seminole War to the Vietnam War. Many Americans called the Seminole war unwinnable and immoral. Newspapers of the day questioned why American boys were dying in a worthless piece of Florida swamp. The Seminole struggle grew into the longest and costliest of all American Indian wars. It was also the deadliest, with more than 1,500 regular soldiers and sailors lost. The beginning of the end came at the Battle of Okeechobee, which President Lincoln noted as "one of the most desperate struggles known to the annals of Indian Warfare," and the Battle of Loxahatchee on the Loxahatchee River in northern Palm Beach County. With the assurance that his people would not be sold back into slavery, Abraham helped negotiate peace, ending his 20-year





By Scott McCabe, Palm Beach Post

08/20/2001

fight. From 1838 to 1843, the U.S. moved more than 500 Black Seminoles west. More were stolen by slave runners.

Today, 30 minutes off the northern end of Florida's Turnpike, about 5 miles west of Bushnell, Peliklakaha rests quietly. It's difficult to stand there and not imagine what it used to be. Giant live oaks hang with gray Spanish moss like strands of an old woman's hair. From the shade, sunny, green savannas roll away into blue pools. Brown and white cattle still graze, just as they did 170 years ago. Weik, the UF grad student, has been making the 1 1/2-hour trek from Gainesville for three years now. A cursory search has turned up 1,000 artifacts, but most are in pieces: green, clear and blue glass beads, iron stone China pottery, spirits bottles and rusted nail fragments. Seminole influence shows in the Chattahoochee-brushed pottery, white metal earbobs, and the primitive pink fire-stoned tools that might have been used to scrape hides, Weik said. One pottery rim has a triangular print that could be unique to Peliklakaha. Glass shards were used to do things like remove splinters. The most promising find was discovered last month. When Weik squirted the earth with mists of water, three gray, chalky spots appeared. Weik believes they could be the posts that held a corner of one of the homes that burned down. The artifacts help tell an untold story. "These people weren't simply runaway, plantation slaves or Native Americans," Weik said. "They were distinct groups that created new cultures under stressful conditions."