

Runaway Masters Indians, Blacks and Whites two centuries ago in Florida Joseph Cotto

The complex interplay among Indians, Blacks and Whites two centuries ago in Florida

This history of the Seminole people in Florida centers on the three Seminole wars in the second through fourth decades of the 1800s. The Seminoles were a branch of the Creek Indians who, under pressure from the white man, split off and headed south into the impenetrable tropical murk of Florida.

The Indians simply wanted to be left alone, to live as Indians. They wanted the freedom to hunt and fish as they pleased, and roam wherever they wanted, as Indians had done in the Americas since time immemorial. However, the white man had a different use for the land. He wanted to dominate it, tame it, and farm it. The Indians quite naturally resisted, and the national government of the newly-formed United States came to regard them as a nuisance to be gotten rid of. Andrew Jackson, one of the major antagonists in Cotto's story, was committed to push every Indian in the country west of the Mississippi, primarily towards Oklahoma.

Florida was a Spanish possession at that time, though the Spanish simply did not have the resources to exploit it. They had their hands full with more lucrative colonies in South and Central America. The resulting laissez-faire policy allowed the Indians free access and free reign once they got to Florida. In addition to their customary hunter/gatherer way of living, the Seminoles took to farming.

The farming enterprise was helped by American Blacks. Fleeing their masters in the United States, the Blacks found refuge among the Seminoles. The Seminoles were not averse to the slavery – it had been a part of Indian culture since the beginning – but they offered the fleeing Blacks a better deal than their former masters. Living as slaves among the Seminoles, the Blacks were free to operate their own farms, own weapons, and live more or less independently as long as they gave a portion of what they raised to their Indian masters.

Adding spice to the mixture, the British also had interests in Florida. The Spanish didn't exactly welcome them, but they didn't have the strength to shoo them away.

This unstable balance was under constant pressure from an expanding United States in the north. Americans pushed south to establish plantations in Florida. The American government sent troops to round up the runaway slaves. Nobody wanted a reprise of the Haitian slave revolt of 1804 which had deposed the French.

As an aside, Alexandre de Tocqueville has an excellent, long chapter in which he projects the futures of the three major peoples of the United States, whites, Blacks and Indians, in his "Democracy in America" written in this timeframe. He predicted nothing but trouble, and the substance of this book demonstrates the nature of that trouble.

The Americans concluded treaty after treaty with the Seminoles. However, the two parties never seemed to have exactly the same understanding of the terms and conditions, and the Americans in particular did not have control over the actions of individual American people who often acted in bad faith. The Indians would get mad and take their revenge Indian style which would lead to the appearance of American soldiers.

The Black runaways among the Seminoles came to see themselves as Indians as much as anything else. They had left their common cultures behind in their tribal homelands and had not formed too much of a common culture as slaves to the whites. The Seminoles, however, never came to regard the Blacks as

their Indian brothers. They were useful allies in fighting the white man, but were quickly disowned when their interests conflicted with those of the tribe.

This is a long, sad story of disenfranchisement as the Indians were under continuous pressure from American settlers and American troops. The Americans eventually forced almost all of them to leave for reservations in Oklahoma or thereabouts. There were some very notable rearguard battles, in which the Seminoles earned a reputation as ferocious warriors and jealous defenders of their rights before finally giving in to the better armed and more numerous invaders.

The black Seminoles were doubly disadvantaged. The Seminoles received benefits and remuneration from the Americans as part of their resettlement, but were very reluctant to share the proceeds with the black Seminoles. The black Seminoles could be captured and lucratively sold back into slavery in the antebellum South. Cotto's history comes right up to the present day, in which the Seminoles have been reluctant to share their COVID-19 benefits with the descendents of the black Seminoles.

Cotto writes in his afterword that this is a story without a moral. The history of the Seminoles is the history of the highly tribal human animal. Recognizing our differences, and sticking together as tribes, is as old as all of humanity. This is a story of the way diversity worked out two centuries ago. Is it different today?