Florida’s Working-Class Past

Current Perspectives on Labor, Race, and Gender from Spanish Florida to the New Immigration

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Labor and Survival among the Black Seminoles of Florida

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On March 30, 1836, the first of General Abraham Eustis's 1,400 troops slogged across a wet prairie and pushed up to the top of a low rise into the town of Pilaklikaha. Weary after days of wading through the watery wilderness of central Florida, the men had to have been relieved to find the settlement abandoned. When the rest of the soldiers arrived, and with practiced precision, Pilaklikaha was put to the torch.1 As the bark-covered, board-walled cabins quickly turned to flames, some of the soldiers shot glances inside to the rooms and darkened corners (see fig. 3.1). One noted seeing a type of stick that was used in the Indian ball game, a flute, and a turtle shell rattle filled with palmetto seeds.2 Archaeologists now tell us that many other things were left in the cabins and around the village for the soldiers to see, the mundane material of everyday life, so ordinary as not to be worth mentioning but so important for our understanding of the world in which the people of Pilaklikaha lived. "Small things forgotten" is how the archaeologist James Deetz famously characterized these objects of everyday life, and at Pilaklikaha they included locally made pottery bowls and jars, imported English plates and saucers, white clay smoking pipes, and heavy dark green wine or ale bottles.3 For the archaeologist, objects often contain more questions than answers, but these artifacts tell us one thing for sure. The U.S. Army may have had difficulty in coming to Pilaklikaha, but Pilaklikaha had not been cut off from the outside world. Who were these people who once lived among the "many ponds" of central Florida? And how were they able to get the goods then available in the trade economy of the early nineteenth century?

Eustis's army was the left wing of General Winfield Scott's grand but flawed design to choke the Seminole Indian resistance in the early months of the Second Seminole War. The plan called for three columns of soldiers to converge in a pinchers movement on the Seminole stronghold in the so-called Cove of the Withlacoochee, a trackless, 100-square-mile swamp across the Withlacoochee River, near Lake Tsala Apopka, just west of Pilaklikaha. Pilaklikaha was squarely in the path of the left wing and was a key target in the offensive. In sending Eustis to Pilaklikaha, Scott was pitting one Abraham against another, for Pilaklikaha was also known as "Abraham's Town," after its most distinguished resident, a stripping middle-aged former slave of African descent.4 Abraham was a Black Seminole. To modern historians, Abraham, his people, and hundreds of others like them were "freedom seekers" who fled the slavery of the American South and deliberately forged symbiotic alliances with the more numerous and established Seminole Indians.5 To the Seminoles, Abraham and his people were property, not to be given up without financial compensation and worth fighting to keep. To the Americans in Georgia and other southern states, Abraham's people were a threat to national security, poised to pour across the border under cover of darkness or to filter up through the swamps to pillage at will (see fig. 3.2).

Before Americans took control in 1811, the Spaniards who ruled Florida had yet another perspective. To them, men and women who fled slavery were potential citizens and able allies who were worth arming and supporting for their value in protecting St. Augustine's back door. Black Seminoles were also considered vital contributors to the colonial economy.6 To the
U.S. government after 1831, they were to be counted, watched, placed on a map, identified, and separated from the other Seminoles at all costs. To be a Black Seminole meant living in multiple worlds simultaneously. The central features of Black Seminole life were ambiguity and insecurity. Who was identified as a Black Seminole depended on who was asking, and conditions affecting their liberty could change with the wind and were often outside of their control. Survival depended on Black Seminoles’ ability to meet new opportunities with flexible responses, to develop and use specialized skills, therefore becoming indispensable. It also required an intense pragmatism deeply grounded in the will to live. Black Seminoles’ use of labor as a means of meeting the challenge of survival cannot be separated from the issue of how they defined what they did as capital, in the sense of controlling something that could be used to underwrite other gains. Labor must thus include knowledge work as well as the physical energy demanded by a particular task. For Black Seminoles, knowledge became an important calling card and was used with great effectiveness by Abrahim and his associates to demonstrate their indispensability in a turbulent, uncertain world.

If labor in the modern world is looked upon as a decision-making process in which an individual chooses how to define his efforts to achieve a perceived gain, then we can begin to see how the Black Seminoles divided up their time and effort in the face of certain constraints. We can also see how their own historical traditions conditioned the range of their response. I use the term modern world deliberately because the Black Seminoles were very much a part of the global commercial economy that by the late eighteenth century had undeniably engulfed Florida. 7 In the most direct sense, the dominant Black Seminole way of life was a variant of the southern plantation system. 8 The key relationship was not between Anglo American landowners and African-derived slaves, but between Native American agricultural society and the groups of people who had freed themselves from bondage. Theirs was a largely voluntary association rather than coerced labor. Although some were captured in Seminole raids on Florida plantations, for the most part the Black Seminoles came to the Seminoles on their own terms. The Seminoles, of course, operated from their own model of the relationship, one based on identifying themselves as being similar to southern plantation owners, as well as reflecting their long exposure to commercial and mercantile economies in Georgia and Alabama.

The relationship between Seminoles and Black Seminoles was one of negotiated autonomy, with a sliding scale of control over labor and production. In this sense, it is difficult to understand why the Seminoles felt that they owned Black Seminoles. But they did so when they were forced to think of them as real property. This did not mean that the Seminoles wanted to exert control over the Black Seminoles, manage them daily, or keep them close by, as would have been the case in the Anglo-American system. Rather, this meant that the Black Seminoles were largely free to go about their business: farming, herding, hunting, and, in time of war, going off on raiding parties or to the battlefield. The questions one might ask, or the assumptions one might have, about how Seminoles and Black Seminoles related to one another are thus different from those generated by the southern plantation model. Were there issues of social inequality? How did the Seminoles and Black Seminoles relate to each other socially and culturally? What specific historical traditions and expectations did both groups bring to the relationship? Ultimately, how did Black Seminoles define their own labor, and how did their perceptions of work and labor map out as strategies of survival? To begin to answer these questions, we first must have some understanding of who the Black Seminoles and Seminoles were and where they came from.

History and Cultural Origins of the Black Seminoles

Nomenclature is a serious issue that deserves discussion. The term Black Seminole was created and used by contemporary historians to describe
the specific group of people of African origin who became associated with the Florida Seminoles in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. "Black Seminole" was a descriptive term, focused on a small subset of "blacks" in the Southeast, the rest of whom were slaves or were free as a result of various circumstances. The term Black Muscogulge also was introduced by scholars and refers to African peoples who were associated with Creek Indians or other native groups throughout the region. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents, however, referred to all persons of African descent as "Negroes" and then described the status of these individuals in the context of their relationship with whites. Historians who coined and used the terms Black Seminole and Black Muscogulge stopped short of implying that they were essentially Seminoles or Muscogulges who happened to be black. Rather, most scholars believed these individuals were blacks who were uniquely associated with Seminoles or Creeks.

For the most part, the term Black Seminole was relatively uncontroversial until more recent years when it became increasingly laden with political meaning. Much of the current controversy stems from the issue of tribal standing. Pointing to the fact that Black Seminoles were not fully integrated into the clan system, some historians have argued that Black Seminoles should not be entitled to standing through the federal recognition process. This has proved to be a flashpoint between the living descendants of the Black Seminoles and the political leadership of the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes in Florida and the Seminole Nation in Oklahoma. Seminole interlocutors argue that the Black Seminoles are not culturally Seminole; Black Seminoles, federally unrecognized but historically distinct, hold that they are. The history of litigation on this issue, now being played out in federal courts, will certainly provide new inspirations for scholarship. For their part, anthropologists have introduced the term maroon into the literature, noting that it shares a root with Seminole in the Spanish word *cinamaron* meaning "runaway" or "wild one," and emphasizing the autonomous, freedom-seeking qualities of these blacks rather than the particular nature of their relationship with the Seminoles or other native peoples. Maroons can apply to a wider range of groups than those traditionally defined as Black Seminoles, like those communities in the remote swamps of the American Southeast or mountain hideaways in the Caribbean or South America who were largely isolated and functionally independent. Describing the Black Seminoles as "maroons" locates them within a larger spectrum of experience in the Americas, as a specific population of African descent who saw themselves as able to achieve their goal of independence by associating with the Seminoles. This does bring a different perspective to the flow of power in the relationship and, however awkward, does have merit.

In light of these recent sensitivities, to continue to use the term Black Seminole, as I will do here, requires some justification, I use it for the following reasons. First, it is a recognizable term and is widely present in the literature. Because the usage narrows the scope to that smaller group of all the African peoples in the hemisphere that became associated with the Seminoles, the reader will know what group of blacks is being described. The story of the Black Seminoles also need not be written from the Seminole point of view, and their believed dominance in the relationship need not be perpetuated by scholarly practice. Finally, there is a small but significant body of historical literature by people who describe themselves as "Black Seminoles." So to at least some of the people whose ancestors are the subjects of study, the term does have meaning and is an accepted ethnonym. For these reasons I continue to use the term Black Seminole here.

Black Seminoles' origins as slaves have been widely described. The first runaway slaves came into Florida when the peninsula was a Spanish colony but the rest of the Atlantic seaboard was under British rule. Always tense, the relationship between the two colonial powers was strained even further by Spanish overtures toward southern slaves to seek their freedom in Florida. As citizens of the Spanish crown, slaves could find a new life in Florida if they accepted Christianity. This was required of all new Spanish citizens. They also had to agree to serve a term in the Spanish militia. The nucleus of this movement formed at the famous Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, commonly known as Fort Mose, the site of which is now a designated National Historic Landmark owned and managed by the Florida Park Service. Located on a marsh island north of St. Augustine, Fort Mose formed a first line of defense against Georgia-based British attacks on the Spanish capital at St. Augustine. The archaelogy of Fort Mose indicates that life in this frontier outpost was self-sufficient. Residents relied on hunting and fishing in the tidal estuary and maritime environment to feed themselves. Founded in 1738, the fort was attacked and burned on several occasions, until it was finally abandoned in 1763 when Britain gained control of Florida. Most of the Mose residents moved to Cuba along with the Spanish Floridians. But some decided to stay on. The presence of these blacks in British Florida presented an in-the-flesh reminder to those still living in slavery that freedom might still be possible just across the border.

By the eve of the American Revolution in 1775, trickles of runways had been wending their way through the Florida wilderness, skirting Seminole
towns, exploring what life with the Seminoles might be like. By the Revolution's close in 1783, the relationship between black and Seminole was well on its way to being worked out. William Bartram observed Yamassee Indian slaves among the Seminoles. But he did not record seeing any blacks when he visited Cowkeeper's town on the Alachua Prairie in 1774. In the same area by 1793, however, Cowkeeper's nephew and successor, King Payne, owned at least 20 blacks as slaves. A modern descendant of Black Seminoles also places her own family roots in a group of Gullah runaways who fled a coastal Georgia cotton plantation seeking the protection of King Payne.

For escaped slaves, safety and shelter were powerful needs. Protection certainly has been one of the most historically persistent reasons given for why blacks sought out the Seminole. From the Seminole point of view, it was paid for by tribute, extracted in agricultural produce or livestock.

Slavery, meaning the condition in which one person had absolute control over the labor of other people, was the closest equivalent this kind of relationship had in the conceptual framework of the time. That those enslaved people could also be property was, of course, a concept known to both blacks and to the Seminoles, as the wealthiest of the Creeks had also become slave owners and operated plantations in Georgia and Alabama. By the 1810s, and almost certainly earlier, the relationship between blacks and Seminole that would later be described by Americans in Florida after 1811 and would help precipitate the Second Seminole War was largely cemented. During the last several decades of the eighteenth century, the cultural identity of "Black Seminole" emerged and took full form. Thus by 1836, when Abraham's Village was ransacked by blue-jacketed men led by the other Abraham, the Black Seminoles had existed for close to 50 years.

By the 1820s, most Black Seminoles lived in towns across a broad arc in west central Florida, anchored on the northwest by the wetlands of Lake Tsala Apopka, the Witchasooche River, and Lake Panasoffkee, bowing out to the east to include the hammock-pond-prairie region of Pilikikaha, then swinging back to the southwest, skirting the vast Green Swamp, and tailing out around the margins of Tampa Bay to the Manatee River on the south. Most Black Seminoles arrived in central Florida after fighting attacks by the Georgia and Tennessee militias on the Alachua Seminole region of north central Florida between 1811 and 1814 and Andrew Jackson's strikes against the Miccosukee and Suwannee settlements during his 1818 invasion of Spanish Florida. Their movement accompanied a similar relocation by their Seminole owners. Settling across the landscape, Black Seminoles established themselves on hammocks or high ground so that both agricultural soils and pasturage land were accessible.

Horatio Dexter was one of very few outsiders to visit a functioning Black Seminole village in peacetime. In 1834, at the request of Governor William P. DuVal, he set off west across the peninsula from his base at Volusia on the St. Johns River, to spread the word among the Seminoles of upcoming treaty negotiations to be held at Moultrie Creek, south of St. Augustine. The approach to Pilikikaha, Dexter wrote, "appears like islands." He continued:

The hambrocks are very numerous and contain from 20 to 300 acres each, all of which are surrounded by savannahs, which afford cover-age and sufficient range for innumerable cattle. These savannahs run in a S.E. direction. At this settlement there are about 100 negroes belonging to Micanopy. Their families of different ages and sex and their lands sufficient for a population of 2000 persons. There is not to exceed 120 acres planted thereon. The principal crop is rice and ground nuts. I have no doubt the corn planted at this place will yield ten bushels to the acre. The rice, indeed everything they plant here is equal to any I have seen in Florida.

Navigable waterways were also within easy reach of Black Seminole settlements. For most of the year, with the exception of times of extreme drought, Black Seminoles traveled by canoe from town to town on a network of streams, creeks, and rivers. Largely concealed from view while moving back and forth, they could transport produce, meat, or skins in bulk quantities. These same corridors also provided a quick means of escape in the event of a threat. At one end of Jumper Creek, for instance, was Pilikikaha. At the other end was Boggy Island on the east bank of the Withlacoochee River, where blacks "mostly concealed themselves in time of war," according to one military diarist writing in 1837.

A system of trails and roads also connected Black Seminole towns to Seminole villages and to the outside world. It was likely, however, that the traveler could only gain passage to a Black Seminole town after first checking in at the main Seminole town, as Dexter had done by going through Micanopy's Ogahumpka on his way to Pilikikaha. This system maintained the Seminole's position as middlemen in the economic exchange between Black Seminoles and the commercial interests of the outside world. It also shielded the numerically few Black Seminoles from predation by slave catchers and other hostile or retaliatory actions from a variety of groups for whom the Black Seminoles were lucrative and ready-made targets. When
traveler William Simmons visited a Black Seminole town in 1823, he observed:

We at length arrived at a small Indian town, where we found only one family, the rest having gone hunting. We here got directions to the Negro settlement, which we reached at about 11 o'clock at night. The Negroes said they were apprized of our approach by the crowing of fowls; which we had also noticed, as being unusual at that hour.

At the house of Cadjoe, one of the principal characters of the place, I took up my lodging for the night, on a bunk by the fire-side. The smoke, however, and the conversation of the Negroes, who sat up till a late hour, prevented me from getting much rest.

These people were in the greatest poverty, and had nothing to offer me; having, not long before, fled from a settlement further west, and left their crop ungathered, from an apprehension of being seized by the Cowetas, who had recently carried off a body of Negroes residing near the Suwaney.

There was, also, a general impression among them, that the Americans would seize upon all the Negro property of the Indians; and the latter were also induced to believe, by designating persons, that the Americans would rob and treat them with every degree of injustice and oppression.\(^3\)

To live outside of this system was to risk great peril, as these descriptions of Black Seminole life make clear.

In looking at issues of Black Seminole labor, we can start by comparing the working relationships of blacks as Black Seminoles to what most had known previously as slaves. To some extent, we can look to the many variations of the slave experience as settling the diversity and range of the Black Seminole experience. Abraham, for example, had not been a field slave but the personal servant of a well-to-do Pensacola physician.\(^3\) This gave him unique access to the dominantly white world and provided crucial opportunities for building his intellectual capital. Other Black Seminoles at Bilikika clearly had strong agricultural backgrounds, productively cultivating what were often thin and either poorly or excessively drained soils. They coaxed yields of rice, corn, beans, peanuts, and melons from these plots. Their knowledge of animal husbandry could have come from their slave past or may have been picked up from their Seminole masters. In any event, practically everything that slaves did in their many roles and various forms of servitude, Black Seminoles also did. There were, of course, far fewer Black Seminoles than there were plantation slaves, but the technological world of the Black Seminoles was a microcosm of the larger slave experience and built upon its base.

Equality and Inequalities: The Relationship between Seminolos and Black Seminolos

Their social world was even more complex, as the underlying assumptions of equality or inequality that structured the relationships among Black Seminolos and Seminolos make clear. Many Seminolos had been long exposed to colonial and American conceptions of slavery. As Creeks, they had themselves either descended from slave-owning families or known of other Creek Indians who owned slaves. To be wealthy and powerful in the colonial Southeast meant that you made your living as a merchant or plantation owner and that you possessed slaves. This held true for European Americans and Native Americans alike; the history of the Creek Nation is inseparable from the interests of wealthy and powerful Creeks like Alexander McGillivray, William McIntosh, and William Weatherford, slave owners all.\(^3\) So the precedent was there. Seminolos modeled their view of slavery after what they knew of the Creek version, which had been heavily influenced by the plantation model.

Slaves provided the labor necessary to produce goods that had economic value. Their role was central to making a profit. But slaves themselves were also capital and had intrinsic value for sale or exchange. Wealthy Creeks used slaves much as their colonial or American counterparts did. But there was also an out, a path toward freedom, and the suggestion that there were other forces at work besides completely accepting the idea that slaves were fixed and inalienable pieces of property. During his travels through Creek country in the 1700s, naturalist William Bartram was hosted by a Creek plantation owner named Boston. For breakfast, Bartram was served "excellent coffee" by "young negro slaves." At work on Boston's 100 planted and fenced acres were 15 other Negroes, "several of which were married to Indians." But, as Bartram noted, they were only "slaves till they marry," after which they became "Indians or free citizens."\(^3\)

These observations strongly indicate the late eighteenth-century survival of a post-European contact response by native groups to the circumstances of extreme depopulation. Native Americans set up social rules for fusing previously distinct groups together into one new community. In the process, survivors of previous populations had to be able to join together, and
groups who had suffered moderate declines had to be able to bring in others, providing some means for them to become members of the society. Sometimes this was accomplished by raiding, with captives as the booty. Captives were then put to work at menial or dangerous tasks in their new home. European observers frequently described this as a form of slavery, albeit different from their own. The understanding that natives themselves had a form of slavery quite apart from, and distinctly earlier than, its use in colonial America thus entered into the literature and, to some extent, commonly held knowledge about the nature of native life.

Archaeologists have attempted to push the origins of aboriginal slavery further back into the mists of prehistory. Typically, they also have tried to place it within the context of warfare and raiding or within prestige and status systems. However unintended, the combined effects of archaeological and historical scholarship, and the popular views of native society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, legitimized the existence of slavery as a natural condition of all human "races," making the American Indian in particular something less than noble. But this view was also oversimplified. In the Creek system, the concept of slavery melded control over someone else's actions and the loss of certain rights by that person, with the English-based view of slaves as real, immutable property with worth that could be pegged to market value. The system carried forward by the early Seminoles thus had its origins both in the aboriginal past and their exposure to colonial forms of slavery. Those forms present on the plantations of the Southeast and adopted by the Creeks were especially important models.

To the Seminoles of the late eighteenth century, blacks who came to them looked like slaves. They were then recognized as someone's lost property and thus not the social equals of truly autonomous individuals. So, to the extent that Black Seminoles were viewed as property, Seminoles did not view them as equals. Nevertheless, in their own daily definition and through their own eyes, the Seminoles saw their control over blacks to be entirely conditional and situational. In the view of Seminoles, blacks were free-ranging, like their cattle, and could be gathered up and used when needed but were fine to be left alone. In this way, the Seminoles carried forward the Creek concept that slavery was not an absolute condition or an intrinsic property of a certain group of people, but could change and be renegotiated over time.

Because the Black Seminoles lived a largely autonomous existence from the Seminoles and experienced a great deal of freedom, they could be nearly equal to the Seminoles in the course of day-to-day life. The most adept among the Black Seminoles rose to positions as advisors or "sense-bearers." Abraham, for example, was Micopaya's sense-bearer. The option of social mobility also created a certain tension between Seminoles and Black Seminoles because it helped elevate the Black Seminole above a purely subordinate status. Yet there were also limits to this mobility. Evidence for intermarriage between Seminoles and Black Seminoles, like that described by Bartram for the slaves of the Creeks, is scant. If intermarriage was practiced commonly in the late 1700s through the early 1800s, it had become rare by the time of the Second Seminole War. Some evidence has been produced that the famed war leader Osceola had a black wife. There are also scattered references to Seminole-black intermarriage in the late nineteenth century. In almost every case, these unions involved descendants of Black Seminoles who had escaped deportation during the Second and Third Seminole Wars. But the specific mention of these unions indicates that marriages between blacks and Seminoles fell outside the norm and were increasingly viewed with disapproval by the rest of the Seminoles. This historical trend also suggests that marriage as a route to freedom, as practiced in Creek Country, never truly took hold in Florida.

What did take hold was something that looked and felt like freedom. Slave owners of the American South recognized it, too, and regarded these apparently free former slaves with fear and terror. "This, you may be assured, is a Negro, not an Indian war," wrote General Thomas Jesup not long after the onset of the Second Seminole War, "and if it be not speedily put down, the south will feel the effects of it on their slave population before the end of the next season." Labor, Control, Survival

Black Seminoles possessed two basic resources that were in particular demand by the outside world. The first was the energy of physical labor. The second was knowledge. Black Seminoles used each as capital, and each played a critical role in their survival. Knowledge, in particular, was used as leverage in their relationships with the Seminoles and, when necessary, with the military sent to Florida to dislodge the Seminoles. The Black Seminoles knew about the larger world and how it worked. They had seen inside the white world to an extent beyond the experience of most Seminoles. This knowledge became a highly valued commodity and existed in two domains. The first was technological knowledge: how to do work, how to plant and harvest rice, how to husband livestock, how
to smith metal, and how to build things. Seminoles also knew how to do many of these things and performed some of these tasks as well. But Black Seminoles’ firsthand training in agriculturally productive and efficient labor practices set them apart and gave them special expertise in what it took to squeeze out a living from the land. To some degree, then, the plantation experience provided opportunities for apprenticeships that served Black Seminoles well when they became the masters of their own efforts. Indeed, in the years leading to the Second Seminole War, several outside observers remarked upon the busyness and bounty of Black Seminole fields compared with that of their Seminole neighbors, singling out the fullness of their corn cribs for particular praise.41 Those same observers were impressed by the industriousness of Black Seminoles and their generally high standard of living. One of Andrew Jackson’s men wrote in 1831 that the houses of the Black Seminoles along the Suwannee River were larger and better framed than those of Bowleg’s Seminoles nearby.42 Although Black Seminole towns did not completely mimic the spatial layout of a plantation and were not compact, gridded settlements, it does seem that the arable lands were divided into large, single-crop tracts, arranged around the residential areas.

We can also ask whether Black Seminole men and women equally shared this technological knowledge and the labor that went with it. In other words, was sex-based division of labor a significant reality of Black Seminole life? And if so, to what extent did the division of labor in Black Seminole society reflect plantation, Creek–Seminole, or African influences? Although the historical references and archaeological records are limited in what they tell us about the sexual division of labor, some broad contours do emerge.

The message from all sources seems to be consistent: There was a strong division of labor among Black Seminoles based on sex. Women worked the fields, planting, cultivating, harvesting. In the words of Horatio Dexter, who wrote about Pilakikahah in 1832: “Most of the labor is performed by the women, the men are indulged in following the habits of their women and pass most of their time in idleness, occasionally hunting at Pilakikahah.”43 Women also prepared and served the food and generally minded hearth and home. In all of these activities, they were very much like their Native American counterparts. And like their Native American counterparts, Black Seminole men largely interacted with the outside world and served as conduits of exchange for the flow of goods. These goods then moved into a domestic economy controlled by women and were made possible by their productivity. But they passed through male hands on their way in. We know of other activities in the male domain such as hunting and going to war. We do not know who was in charge of the cattle and hogs, although in Seminole society, managing animals fell largely into the domain of male labor, whereas processing hides may have been women’s work. We cannot be sure what taxonomy of activity guided the allocation of Black Seminole effort, dividing tasks into men’s versus women’s work. But we can be sure that among Black Seminoles, one’s sex played a central role in determining the work one performed.

Because men had far greater access to the larger world than women, they played a much larger role in the second domain of knowledge that centered on knowing how the world at large worked and what it took to successfully navigate the extremely complex channels of social, political, and economic interaction and information flow. To be a player in the early nineteenth-century world of the Black Seminole meant melding a cosmopolitan grasp of one’s position in the widely span web of the larger society with the ability to leverage one’s strengths to strategic advantage. Certainly all of the Black Seminoles known to us by name from historical accounts had this cosmopolitan quality. Abraham, Cudjoe, John Horse, and John Caesar were all big names. But there were others: Primus, Sampson, and Tom, to mention a few. All had one thing in common: they knew what was important to the Seminole and to the white man, they knew what both wanted, and they knew that they had something to offer each group.

Many Black Seminole men, even those not as distinguished as Abraham, were fluent in English as well as various Indian languages. They achieved status by serving as interpreters and translators in relations between the Seminoles and governmental, military, and trade interests. On occasion Black Seminole men also assumed diplomatic importance by shuttling the finer points of negotiation back and forth between the two sides. Abraham was particularly noted for this ability. He accompanied Micanopy on a visit to Washington, D.C., in 1832. Ten years later, Abraham saw service as a battlefield diplomat on the Seminole side in General Gaines’s failed offensive in the Cove of the Withlacoochee. Abraham was granted his freedom by Micanopy as reward for his service. He was also given a wife, a black woman who had been the wife or mistress of the late Bowleg.44 The muster rolls of Black Seminole men deported to Indian Territory show several instances where Black Seminoles were owned by other Black Seminoles, men and women alike, suggesting that this reward practice may have been common and applied to Black Seminoles of both sexes.45

Multilingualism also became an asset when Black Seminoles were captured by troops in the Second Seminole War. It enabled them to serve as
guides to the location of Seminole villages. Although undoubtedly coerced, and in some cases leading unsuspecting troops on the proverbial wild goose chase, Black Seminole men took this role as guides as an opportunity not just to survive but to win their freedom. Here they traded on both their language abilities and on their detailed knowledge of the lay of the land, something the military chronically lacked throughout the course of the war. Just as they had in their dealings with government officials and traders throughout the prewar years, Black Seminoles again acted as agents of information on the margins of contact.

Evolving Responses in the Emerging Capitalist Economy

By the late 1790s, many Seminoles had adopted a variant of the plantation system. They were producing for external markets, using a labor force that was, at least in part, controlled and situational viewed as property. In the Alachua area, this transformation occurred as leadership passed from Cowkeeper to Payne, and almost certainly prevailed from the 1790s through the dispersal of the Alachua towns south to Okahumpka and Pilikikaha after 1815.35 Archaeological and historical descriptions of Paynesville, Opauny's Town, and other settlements indicate that these communities physically resembled the plantations of the lower Southeast and looked distinctly different from the surrounding towns of Bartram's day. In the words of Dexter, who visited Opauny's Town over this period: "Two miles east of his [Opauny's] residence you come to his field on which the Negro houses are built. This field is planted with corn and rice and attended in the same manner one would expect in Plantations under the direction of white people."36 Dexter further noted that Opauny "held about 20 slaves who perform the same labor that is generally expected on plantations in Florida." Seminoles sold corn, rice, and cattle to colonial governments in St. Augustine. At the same time that sugar, rice, and indigo produced in plantations along the St. Johns River were competing in international markets, the Seminole plantations helped to feed the colony.

But archaeology indicates that there is more to the story. At Pilikikaha, the Black Seminole site that is best known archaeologically, thousands of artifacts have been unearthed in recent excavations.37 Broken pieces of English-made ceramics in transfer print or shell edged patterns, fragments of heavy, dark green glass wine bottles, broken pipe stems from white kaolin pipes, and shards of brushed-surface earthenwares made by the Seminoles are all commonly found—an assemblage of material indistinguishable from that of a Seminole site of the early nineteenth century. These findings suggest that Black Seminoles had access to the same sorts of goods as the Seminoles and acquired them with much the same frequency. Clearly, Black Seminoles were not going to St. Augustine or to the trading houses to get them. Nor is it likely that traders frequented them, particularly given the increasingly hostile environment leading up to and including the early years of American control. If measured strictly by artifacts, the Black Seminoles were indistinguishable from Seminoles. Of course, the slaves at many plantations also ended up with many of the same consumer goods as their owners and overseers, as hand-me-downs or salvaged items. With the exception of the architectural footprint that distinguishes a Great House from the slave cabin, they too might be thought of as materially indistinct from their owners.38 Historical sources are not sufficiently precise for us to know if this same kind of process was operating between Seminoles and Black Seminoles. But the archaeological record does tell us that Seminoles and Black Seminoles interacted in some regular way and that some type of exchange took place through which the Black Seminoles received their transfer print plates and bottled wine.

The presence of traditional Seminole pottery in its traditional style and forms suggests that the interaction also had other dimensions. This pottery is Seminole in every visible way and is not a type of "colonoware" as described on the lowcountry plantations of South Carolina and Georgia.39 In this context, colonoware is defined as slave-manufactured, low-fired earthware that is vernacular to the setting and evinces in some way an African influence. To the best of our present knowledge, the pottery found at Black Seminole sites in Florida is not this, but is instead Seminole Indian pottery with a long native pedigree in southeastern North America. Seminole pottery was typically made in jar, bowl, and open "casuela" forms. It was used for cooking, serving, and storing food. Several distinct decorative styles were used on the rims of jars, such as fingernail pinching, and pinched or punctuated appliqué, clay strips. Although historical accounts of Seminole pottery-making are extremely rare and do not specifically mention women as the potters, references to women potters in other southeastern groups in the historic period suggest that women predominated among Seminole potters as well.40

But how did these pots get into Black Seminole villages? Anthropology offers several explanations. One theory is that Seminole women lived in Black Seminole villages as marriage partners and in a family setting with Black Seminole men. This is a standard anthropological model. But in the
matrilinial kinship system of the Seminoles. It also meant that children born from the union of Seminole women and Black Seminole men became members of a Seminole clan and therefore fully integrated into Seminole society. Yet except in rare cases, this seems not to have been the case.

A second possibility is that the pots simply moved in as exchange items, changing hands from Seminole women to Black Seminole women the same way that English tableware and wine ended up in these same locations. This is economically feasible. But it is not wholly satisfactory in addressing the social reality that structured the relationship between blacks and Seminoles. To get to the nature of this relationship, it is essential to explore what it meant for Black Seminole women to have and use these traditional Seminole pieces. In other words, in what social context did it make sense to have traditional Seminole pottery in a Black Seminole setting? Here the comparative methods of ethnohistory, while certainly fallible, can help to flesh out this relationship. In 1930, a government agent by the name of Roy Nash described his own encounter with Black Seminole life. Although not entirely free of the biases of his day, Nash provides some observations that are relevant to our concerns. He wrote:

In MacCleary’s day (1880s) there were still three negro women living as Seminole women, relics of slavery days, and seven mixed bloods, all Indian-Negro crosses. At one time the Seminoles possessed a considerable number of slaves; all the Negro blood in the tribe traces back to that fact. The males of the superior economic order never have difficulty in finding mates among the females of an inferior economic group; the Indian-Negro crosses were invariably Indian men who mated with Negro women, never vice versa. No Indian woman, so far as I can learn, ever accepted a Negro male as the father of her children.5

We know, or at least suspect, from the historical record that Oseola and Bowlegs had Black Seminole wives. If so, their cases might not have been unusual. If Seminole men had Black Seminole wives, and these women continued to live and function as Black Seminoles, would this relationship show up in the archaeological record? Perhaps this is why Seminole Indian pottery is found at Black Seminole sites, indicating that Black Seminole women could live in two worlds just like most Black Seminole men. In one role, Black Seminole women served as wives to Seminole men. To a certain extent they were looked upon as property. But they must also have been recognizable Seminole, because having and using Seminole pottery made them Seminole. In their role as Black Seminoles, however, these women had no place in the Seminole clan system and thus had autonomy in their daily lives, living and working with their fellow Black Seminoles. The labor they performed moved them between the worlds of the Seminoles and the Black Seminoles, helping to join the interests of these two distinct societies.

By the end of the Second Seminole War in 1842, most of the estimated five hundred or so Black Seminoles were gone from Florida, either dead or deported to Indian Territory. With their removal and demise, this most peculiar institution also disappeared, its curious mix of native and colonial forms of slavery and tributary vassalage fading from view into near obscurity. There is no doubt that the Black Seminoles were a "freedom seeking people" and that they used their labor to secure some measure of power and control in a world that was largely not of their making. As such, the story of Black Seminole labor is far more than a footnote or curiosity in Florida labor history. How Black Seminole men and women defined their labor and used it to survive cannot be separated from who they were as people.

Notes

1. John Malay’s History of the Second Seminole War (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1967) is considered the authoritative secondary source on this conflict. He describes Micanopy’s attack on the Seminoles on pages 146–52 and provides several primary citations. For a brief firsthand account of the burning of Pahkikahau, see M. M. Cohen, Notices of Florida (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1940), 174–75.

2. M. M. Cohen observes, “While awaiting the return of the express, I examined the palms captured at Pahkikahau. Here are a ballistica, and Indian flute, and small gopher shells, or box-turtle, with rattling Indian shot, or palmetto seed: the music of the dance.” Although Cohen does not directly attribute these items to the Black Seminoles, we know that they expected to find at Pahkikahau. See M. C. Cohen, Notices, 176.


4. Kenneth W. Porter, “The Negro Abraham,” Florida Historical Quarterly 45 (July 1946): 1–44. This work is the definitive source on Abraham and identifies the primary documents associated with his life.


14. Rebecca Bateman has written an excellent synthesis and literature review pertinent to Black Seminole origins. See Rebecca Bateman, “Naming Patterns in Black Seminole Ethnogenesis” Ethnohistory 49 (Spring 2002): 327-37.

15. J. Landers, “Free and Slave.”


17. See James W. Czurlik, The Seminoles of Florida (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993). 197; C. Conklin, The Other War, 214. See also Charles H. Fairbanks, Ethnohistorical Report on the Florida Indians (New York: Garland Press, 1978), 246, note with Bell Addenda no. 29. William Simmons provides this anecdote about one of Payne’s slaves: “When, a very intelligent black interpreter, who had been one of these slaves of King Payne, on my questioning him upon this subject, assured me, that his master, as he called him, had always treated him with the utmost humanity and kindness, and often condescended to give him lessons for his conduct, instructing him to adhere to truth and honesty, and endeavor to act well in his course through life.” See William Simmons, Notices of East Florida with an Account of Seminole Nation of Indians by a Recent Traveler in the Province (Charleston, S.C.: privately printed, 1822; Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 76-77.

18. A. Leehane and S. Moore, My Black Seminole Ancestors.

19. M. J. General George McCull describes tribute as “ten bushels of corn or an agreed amount of beef and veal.” See George A. McCull, Letters from the Frontiers (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipman, 1866), 166. William Simmons states that the “Negroes” raised “furred animals” in the “Seminole” areas and sold them to the traders. See also W. Simmons, Notices, 75-76. I have argued elsewhere that the Black Seminole tribute did not fact allow the Seminole to produce an agricultural surplus for trade, even if the food provided by the Black Seminoles was not used for this purpose. See B. Weisman, “The Plantation System.”


21. I cite here and elsewhere in this chapter from a copy in my possession of typecript of the Dexter manuscript from Albert Dewar’s Early Florida History, vol. 2 (Sebring, Fla.: Sebring Historical Society, 1910), on file in the Florida History Collection, Special Collections, P. K. Young Library, University of Florida, Gainesville. More on Dexter can be found in Mark E. Borell’s “Joseph S. Dexter and Events Leading to the Treaty of Moultrie Creek with the Seminole Indians,” Florida Antiquarian 11 (1958): 69-95. For a print-friendly version of the primary Dexter narrative in the National Archives, see http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~texas/seminoles/observations.htm.


23. W. Simmons, Notices, 41.


25. J. Wright, Crooks and Seminoles.


28. The best archaeological studies that address the aboriginal contexts of slavery come from the Northeast Coast. See Kenneth M. Ames and Herbert D. G. Maschke, Peoples of the Northeast Coast: Their Archaeology and Prehistory (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), chapter 7. Much of the archaeological discussion of social stratification among Mississippian societies in the late prehistoric Southeast also noting the presence of slaves or a slave class in warfare; likewise for late prehistoric Iroquoian

29. Citing the *American Anti-Slavery Almanac* as the original source, Patricia R. Wickman considers the story that Osceola had a black wife not implausible but insufficiently documented. See Patricia R. Wickman, *Osceola’s Legacy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 14–16, 21.

30. This much cited quote is from the *American State Papers: Military Affairs*, 7:820–821. The quote, with some variation of context, is also available at [www.john-horne.com/trail](http://www.john-horne.com/trail).


33. A. Devore, *Early Florida History*.


35. The muster rolls of blacks deported from Florida have been transcribed from congressional documents and from National Archives Record Group 75. They were reproduced as appendices A–K in Daniel F. Lincoln, *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977). Transcribed muster rolls are also available on the Web site of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, [www.seminole-indian-territory.org/negroes_captured.htm](http://www.seminole-indian-territory.org/negroes_captured.htm).

36. See, e.g., the story of the captured Black Seminole named Ansel leading Lt. Henry Prince through the heart of the Seminole stronghold in the Cove of the Withlacoochee in April 1837 in F. Lomax, ed., *Amid a Storm of Bullets*, 90–94.


38. A. Devore, *Early Florida History*.


42. J. Goggin, "Seminole Pottery"