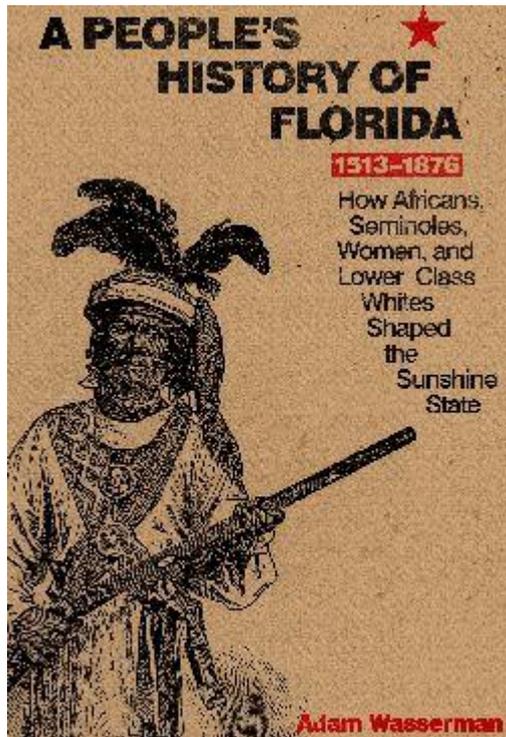


The "Negro Fort" massacre



Historian Adam Wasserman's account of Andrew Jackson's excursion into Spanish Florida to destroy the "Negro Fort" situated on the mouth of the Appalachicola River in Florida. The "Negro Fort" was a free black settlement that served as a rendezvous for fugitive slaves from the Southern states.

This article is an excerpt of Wasserman's [A People's History of Florida](#).

The Patriots War, the War of 1812, the Creek War, and the Seminole War were all closely interrelated conflicts, revolving around Indian Removal and slavery. The fighting in the U.S. Southeast during the second decade of the 19th century defined Manifest Destiny, which was underlined by a disposition to expand slavery and white supremacy. Manifest Destiny was the self-declared right of the United States to violate national sovereignty to eliminate any perceived threat of an encroaching foreign colonial power in its vicinity. This policy also intended to seize Spanish colonial possessions and annex them in order so the South could procure additional slave states. Indian Removal and slavery were combined with Manifest Destiny in the war of 1812 as British agents utilized disaffected native tribes and fugitive slaves to form a Southern front against the United States. The wars in the Southeastern United States were all characterized by the same predisposition of U.S. expansionism – which itself was characterized by attempts to expand and protect slavery. The reigning U.S. doctrines of the early 19th century came about in opposition to the threat that slave and native sanctuaries like Florida posed to the Southern states. As the policies of Indian Removal and Manifest Destiny became more defined in the Southern theater of war, the free black and native settlements found themselves in a constant conflict with the slave-raiding, land-grabbing white settlers of Georgia. After their defeat at Horseshoe Bend in the Creek War, the Red Stick Creeks fled into Florida to avoid Jackson's draconian terms of surrender. Jackson's military intervention in Florida partially focused on further destroying the anti-white Red Sticks Creeks that were incorporated into the Seminole and black settlements. As with the fugitive blacks, they grew to hold considerable power in the Seminole tribe,

eventually enveloping the old chiefs. In the war of 1812, the British used Florida as their base of operations to create a Southern front against the U.S. military. Florida was a diversion from the war in a North. British agents promised thousands of natives and fugitive blacks land, freedom, and protection as long as they fought on the British side in the war. The Seminoles, Miccosukees, Red Stick Creeks, and blacks established closer ties in these frontier operations, with the further understanding that they all shared a mutual interest to fend off the encroaching white settlers.

In 1814, British military official Col. Nichols ordered his Red Stick Creek allies to construct a fort on the Appalachicola River. The British retreated from their position at Pensacola after Andrew Jackson's invasion. They were joined by their Red Stick Creek allies and several hundred slaves belonging to the residents of that town. 1 Nichols furnished the fort with artillery and munitions. The fort was located fifteen miles above the mouth of the river, manned with three hundred British soldiers and an immediate flow of refugee Seminoles and runaway slaves from Southern states who sought the protection of the British military and arms to defend their lands from white settlers. 2 The purpose of the fort was to assemble an army of disaffected indigenous people and runaway slaves to attack the white settlements on the southern Georgia/Alabama borders. By December 1814, over 1,400 warriors gathered at the fort – a coalition of refugee Red Stick Creeks, Seminoles, blacks, and numerous tribes indigenous to Florida. 3 General Gaines estimated 900 warriors and 450 armed blacks inhabited the fort. 4 The runaway slaves were given the opportunity to either leave for the British colonies to receive land as free settlers or fight under the British military. 5 By the early summer of 1815, Nichols left the Appalachicola for England accompanied by a handful of Red Stick Creek chiefs. He intended on making their cause known to the British Crown in hopes for protection against the Americans. The Red Stick Creeks and Seminole warriors who remained behind abandoned the fort soon afterwards. 6 Before Nichols had even left, the blacks had already taken possession of the fort. An additional 300 to 400 runaways were estimated to have fled to the fort for protection. 7 A letter from General Gaines on May 14th declared: "Certain Negroes and outlaws have taken possession of a Fort on the Appalachicola River in the territory of Florida." 8 The Seminoles "were kept in awe" at the hundreds of armed blacks in the vicinity. "For a period," William H. Simmons claimed, the Seminoles "were placed in the worst of all political conditions, being under a dulocracy or government of slaves." 9 Nichols left behind a large supply of arms, artillery, and ammunition to protect the inhabitants from slave raiders and to commission raids on Southern plantations. They were supplied with 2,500 stands of musketry, 500 carbines, 500 steel scabbard swords, four cases containing 200 pistols, 300 quarter casks of rifle powder, 162 barrels of cannon powder, and a large count of military stores. On the walls of the fort were mounted four long twenty-four pounder cannon, four long six-pounder cannon, a four-pound field pierce, and a five and a half inch howitzer. 10

The fort grew from a strategically defensive base to a flourishing free black community around the banks of the Appalachicola. The blacks cultivated fields and plantations extending fifty miles up the river. Many of the black Seminoles were descendents of West Africans. They inherited generations of knowledge of African agricultural techniques. The community surrounding the fort was attractive for its defensible position and cultivatable lands. Runaway slaves were pouring in on a daily basis. The community grew to about 1,000 blacks in the fields surrounding the fort. 11 A total 300 black men, women, and children were in possession of the fort, accompanied by about twenty Choctaws and a number of Seminoles. 12 Joshua Giddings vividly depicted the "Negro Fort":

"Their plantations extended along the river several miles, above and below the fort. Many of them possessed large herds of cattle and horses, which roamed in the forests, gathering their

food, both in summer and winter, without expense or trouble to their owners. The Pioneer Exiles from South Carolina had settled here long before the Colony of Georgia existed. Several generations had lived to manhood and died in those forest-homes. To their descendants it had become consecrated by "many an oft told tale" of early adventure, of hardship and suffering; the recollection of which had been retained in tradition, told in story, and sung in their rude lays. Here were graves of their ancestors, around whose memories were clustered the fondest recollections of the human mind. The climate was genial. They were surrounded by extensive forests, and far removed from the habitations of those enemies of freedom who sought to enslave them; and they regarded themselves as secure in the enjoyment of liberty. Shut out from the cares and strifes of civilized men, they were happy in their own social solitude. So far from seeking to injure the people of the United States, they were only anxious to be exempt, and entirely free from all contact with our population or government; while they faithfully maintained their allegiance to the Spanish crown." 13

Colonel Patterson wrote about the Appalachicola Fort:

"The force of the negroes was daily increasing; and they felt themselves so strong and secure that they had commenced several plantations on the fertile banks of the Appalachicola, which would have yielded them every article of sustenance, and which would, consequently, in a short time have rendered their establishment quite formidable and highly injurious to the neighboring States." 14

The fort was becoming a growing threat to slavery itself. The existence of an autonomous free black community was intolerable alone, but it became a rallying point for runaway slaves fleeing from other Southern states. The blacks were less concerned about "committing depredations" as was depicted by U.S. military officials than they were about protecting their freedom. As Giddings described, they were "happy in their own social solitude," finally free and safe after decades of harassment and terror. They had the means for sufficient provisions with no reason to attack the frontier settlers. As much as the expansionists wished to depict them as outlaws they could not attribute them to even one instance of murder or theft. The crime they were guilty for was to "inveigle negroes from the citizens of Georgia, as well as from the Creek and Cherokee nations of Indians." 15 Col. Patterson commended its elimination:

"The service rendered by the destruction of the fort, and the band of negroes who held it, and the country in its vicinity, is of great and manifest importance to the United States, and particularly those States bordering on the Creek nation, as it had become the general rendezvous for runaway slaves and disaffected Indians; and asylum where they were assured of being received; a stronghold where they found arms and ammunition to protect themselves against their owners and the Government." 16

As the blacks peacefully flourished in their isolated community on the Appalachicola, military officials and slaveholders planned its destruction. On May 21, a British "gentleman of respectability" from Bermuda wrote a memorandum disapproving Col Nichols for having "espoused the cause of the slaves." He wrote of the "Negro Fort": "No time ought to be lost in recommending the adoption of speedy, energetic measures for the destruction of a thing held so likely to become dangerous to the state of Georgia." 17 On March 15, 1816 the Secretary of War ordered General Andrew Jackson to call attention to the governor of Pensacola to the fort. If the Spanish governor refused to "put an end to an evil of so serious nature," the U.S. government would promptly take measures to reduce it. If the Spanish government was too weak to destroy it, then the U.S. was more than willing to take it into its own hands. On April 23, Jackson transmitted the demands of Secretary Crawford, ordering the Spanish governor to "destroy or remove from out frontier this banditti, put an end to an

evil of so serious a nature, and return to our citizens and friendly Indians inhabiting our territory those negroes now in said fort, and which have been stolen and enticed from them.” The blacks at the Appalachicola Fort were supposedly “enticed from the service of their masters.” 18 Of course the runaways couldn’t have possibly been dissatisfied with a life of servitude. Jackson knew that the slaves were not actually stolen away. They were runaways from slaveholders who sought refuge at the fort with the promise of abundance and freedom under the protection of the free blacks. Most of the black warriors and families had been free for generations. Their ancestors had fled from their masters to Spanish Florida many decades before. Plus Jackson’s request to the Spanish governor only gave a façade of legitimacy to the inevitable designs of the U.S. government. On April 8, two weeks before Jackson wrote the Spanish governor, he ordered General Gaines to destroy the “Negro Fort” regardless of its location on Spanish territory:

“I have little doubt of the fact, that this fort has been established by some villains for rapine and plunder, and that it ought to be blown up, regardless of the land on which it stands; and if your mind shall have formed the same conclusion, destroy it and return the stolen Negroes and property to their rightful owners.” 19

General Gaines carefully prepared for the operation. He himself believed that the fort would “produce much evil among the blacks of Georgia, and the eastern part of the Mississippi territory.” 20 Obviously this terrible evil meant to leave their lifetime of bondage for a state of freedom. Lt. Col. Duncan Lamont Clinch was assigned to destroy the fort. Clinch had his own interests when it came to the fort, being among the most prosperous slaveholders of Florida. He undoubtedly felt that his profit interests were threatened by its continued existence. Gaines ordered him to speedily establish a fort near the junction of the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers, where they joined to form the Appalachicola, to intimidate the “Negro Fort.” Clinch was to meet the convoy of supplies from New Orleans with fifty soldiers once he was informed that they had arrived at the river. The convoy was detached with two gunboats. From that point, Gaines ordered him to proceed to the “Negro Fort” where if he was to “meet with opposition” then “arrangements will immediately be made for its destruction.” Gaines wished to provoke an attack to justify the destruction of the fort. For this purpose, Clinch was supplied with two eighteen-pound cannons and one howitzer. 21 On July 10, the supply convoy reached the mouth of the Appalachicola where they received a dispatch from Col. Clinch ordering them to hold their position until he could arrive with troops to escort them up the river. On July 17, a party of five men from the supply vessels was sent to gather fresh water. Once the party entered the river, they discovered a black man on the shore, near one of the plantations along the Appalachicola. As soon as they touched down on the shore, about forty blacks and Seminoles fired a volley of shots from their hidden position in the bushes. The black man on the beach served as a decoy to lure the small party into the ambush. Three of the men were immediately killed, one dove into the water and made it back to the convoy, and the other was captured. 22

On that same day, Col. Clinch commenced to the “Negro Fort.” He left with about 116 soldiers and incidentally met a party of slave-hunting Creeks led by Chief McIntosh. The Coweta Creeks numbered about 150. They had been hired by General Jackson to capture slaves in the Appalachicola - offered fifty dollars for every slave they seized and returned to their owner. A council was held where the Creeks agreed to keep parties in advance and capture every black that they discovered. On the 19th, they caught a black Seminole in the vicinity heading to the Seminole chiefs with the scalp of one of the members of the party they ambushed. The blacks were attempting to garner the assistance of their Seminole allies. The prisoner communicated the story of the ambush. On the 20th, Clinch proceeded with the Creek force over to the fort and came within gunshot range. It was impossible to destroy the

fort without artillery. They were forced to wait until the gunboats from the supply vessel arrived. McIntosh was ordered to surround the fort with a third of his force and maintain an irregular fire. The blacks fired artillery back but to no avail. On the 23rd, the Creeks demanded that the blacks surrender but they responded defiantly. The black commander Garcon told the deputation of Creeks "he would sink any American vessels that should attempt to pass it; and he would blow up the fort if he could not defend it." 23 The blacks then hoisted the English Union Jack accompanied with the red flag over the fort. The blacks knew that surrender would only mean slavery so they would be no compromise. For the next several days the blacks opened fire whenever any troops appeared in their view. On July 27, the gunboats approached the fort. The blacks opened fire when they entered into gunshot range. The gunboats fired back with some cold shots to get an idea of their real distance. The gunboats then fired "the first hot one," made red-hot in the cook's galley, which went screaming over the wall and into the fort's magazine full of gunpowder. The fort completely exploded. Col. Clinch reported the horrific destruction:

"The explosion was awful, and the scene horrible beyond description. Our first care, on arriving at the scene of the destruction, was to rescue and relieve the unfortunate beings who survived the explosion. The war yells of the Indians, the cries and lamentations of the wounded, compelled the soldier to pause in the midst of victory, to drop a tear for the sufferings of his fellow beings, and to acknowledge that the great Ruler of the Universe must have used us as his instruments in chastising the blood-thirsty and murderous wretches that defended the fort." 24

He gave a "divine justification" for the massacre in the official report. But he also wrote a far more descriptive alternative account of the event without involving God:

"The explosion was awful, and the scene horrible beyond description. You cannot conceive, nor I describe the horrors of the scene. In an instant lifeless bodies were stretched upon the plain, buried in sand and rubbish, or suspended from the tops of the surrounding pines. Here lay an innocent babe, there a helpless mother; on the one side a sturdy warrior, on the other a bleeding squaw. Piles of bodies, large heaps of sand, broken guns, accoutrements, etc, covered the site of the fort. The brave soldier was disarmed of his resentment and checked his victorious career, to drop a tear on the distressing scene." 25

The terrible explosion instantly killed 270 black men, women, and children within the fort, the rest being mortally wounded out of the total 330 residents. Only a few survived. The black commander Garson and the Choctaw chief somehow managed to survive the explosion. The Creeks sentenced them to death for the murder of the four U.S. soldiers. They learned that the blacks had tarred and feathered the captured soldier. The Creeks immediately executed them afterwards. Some six of the blacks were captured and immediately returned to their speculated masters - that is if they were ever held in bondage at all. The large number of runaway slaves on the fields that surrounded the river scattered about to safety. Some fled to the protection of the blacks and Seminoles at the Suwannee and others left to the growing free black community just south of Tampa Bay. The elimination of the fort was not the end of the black Seminole social structure in Florida. Several other black communities remained largely intact. But it was far from the end of the terror inflicted on the black Seminoles by the Federal government. It was far from the end of their resistance either. They would strive to avenge the loss of their family members and loved ones. 26

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Fort Gadsden, showing the outline of the "Negro Fort"
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