

Excerpted From:

Mann, C. C. (2011). *1493: Uncovering the new world Columbus created*. New York: Knopf.

## Maroon Communities and Capitulation

### *The United States*

Maroons were fewer in the United States than farther south, because slaves could escape bondage altogether if they traveled north of the Mason-Dixon line. In addition, they found it harder to survive on their own in unfamiliar temperate ecosystems. Nonetheless, maroon encampments were common in places like the valley of the Savannah River, the Mississippi River delta, and, especially, the Great Dismal Swamp, a peat bog that then sprawled across more than two thousand square miles of Virginia and North Carolina. (It is now smaller, because much of the swamp was drained in the nineteenth century.) To escape European incursions, Indians moved there in numbers after about 1630, living in scattered, small settlements of ten to fifty houses. Africans soon followed. Thousands eventually made their base

there, according to the historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, building villages on raised “islands” in the rarely seen heart of the swamp. Hidden from slaveholding society, some maroons had children who reportedly went their entire lives without encountering a European. This happy isolation ended at the end of the seventeenth century, when Virginia initiated big swamp-drainage projects, sending thousands of slaves to dig drainage canals in wretched conditions. Would-be maroons and would-be maroon-hunters alike used the canals to penetrate the marsh, setting off low-intensity guerrilla warfare that did not truly let up until the end of U.S. slavery. (Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, wrote her second novel, *Dred*, about the Great Dismal Swamp in that time of conflict.) By that time, though, the establishment of the “underground railroad” to freedom in the north had robbed the swamp of much of its allure.

Farther south, the best hope for slaves who wished to rid themselves of their bonds was the Spanish colony of Florida. Carolina was founded in 1670 (I described this in Chapter 3). Large numbers of slaves began to arrive a few years after. Quickly they began to escape, also in large numbers, crossing the border into Spanish Florida. A few Europeans, fleeing for one reason or another from their colonial governments, took refuge there as well. Seeing the military potential in these England-hating maroons, the Spanish king promised in 1693 to grant automatic liberty to all Africans who came to Florida from the Carolinas and Georgia, provided that they (1) agreed to convert to Christianity; and (2) promised to stand by Spain and fight any English invasion. Near the Spanish capital of St. Augustine the colonial government in 1739 established a new town, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mosé, to house what amounted to a militia of ex-bondsmen—the first legally recognized free African-American community north of the Rio Grande. (Other free maroon communities surely existed, but were not officially viewed as legitimate.) Most Florida maroons, though, went deep into the interior of the peninsula, territory dominated by Seminole Indians, a group that had



split off from the Creeks decades before, taking over land that had been depopulated by disease. In this low, sandy area, a savannah that had been annually burned for hundreds of years, the two groups formed a strong but carefully delineated alliance.

That any two groups of Indians and Africans would cooperate was not a given—just north of Florida, the main body of the Creek enthusiastically hunted maroons and sold them to the English. Ultimately the Seminole established more than thirty towns, some with thousands of inhabitants, all surrounded by farmland, polycropped in the indigenous mode. Four of those towns were mainly inhabited by Africans—Black Seminole, as they are often called. The relationship between “red” and “black” Seminole was complex, beginning with the fact that some Africans were “red” and some European refugees were “black.” Under Seminole law, most Africans in those towns had the legal status of slaves, but native bondage resembled European feudalism more than European slavery. Seminole slaves owed little work; instead they were supposed to provide native villages with tribute, usually in the form of crops. The burden, though of course unwelcome and resented, usually was not onerous. Many of the slaves were African soldiers, disciplined and organized as one would expect from prisoners of war in wartime. Determined to establish themselves, maroons opened up trade with the Spanish and as a group became more prosperous than their Indian owners. For the most part they lived adjacent to but carefully separate from the Seminole, unincorporated into the big kinship-linked clans that were a principal aspect of Indian social networks. Yet they willingly joined their owners in common fights, of which there were, alas, all too many.

The Seminole faced a parade of adversaries. England took over Florida in 1763; the Seminole resisted all efforts at incorporation. Twenty years later, the United States came into existence; the English stopped seeking to dominate the Seminole and instead asked them to ally with them against the new nation (England had held on to Florida after the revolution). In 1812, the Seminole violently opposed U.S. efforts to annex Florida. Another flareup

occurred in 1816–18; many Seminole, black and red, were driven south to new settlements, the biggest of which, Angola, was at the mouth of the Manatee River in Tampa Bay. Some fled to the Bahamas. In both cases the Seminole received covert support from British guerrillas. Conflict grew more intense still when the United States took over Florida in 1821 and the government, responding to popular pressure, planned to “remove” the native peoples of the Southeast, the Seminole among them, to Indian Territory, a big reservation in what is now Oklahoma. Overt war began in 1835. Maroons joined in, fighting as allies but under their own command.

The Seminole strategy was twofold: First, they destroyed the plantations that supplied U.S. troops, capturing their slaves to bolster the native army. Second, they waited for yellow fever and malaria to kill northern soldiers. If they got in a jam, they pretended to negotiate until the onset of the “sickly season” forced U.S. forces to withdraw. It was so brilliantly successful that in 1839 Thomas Sidney Jesup, commander of the U.S. army in Florida, wrote to Washington, D.C., to ask permission to give the Seminole everything they wanted if they would simply stop wrecking plantations. The idea was indignantly rejected, but Jesup did come up with what would eventually become a winning strategy: he promised that any Africans who gave up fighting and consented to settle in the West would be given their liberty. Slowly the offer pried apart the Seminole-maroon alliance. Its success was understandable, as the abolitionist Joshua Gibbons recognized, for it gave the maroons “that security for which they had contended for a century and a half.” After seven years of increasingly brutal war, the conflict ground to a halt with a cease-fire. Several hundred Seminole remained, unconquered, on the land they had fought to keep; the rest had accepted offers of land and liberty, establishing communities that still exist in Texas, Oklahoma, and Mexico.