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June 2008 Newsletter

A Haven from Slavery on Florida's Gulf Coast: Looking for Evidence of Angola on the Manatee River

By Uzi Baram*

I. Looking for Angola

Draining toward the Gulf of Mexico, the Manatee River is one of west central Florida's major rivers. Over its sixty miles, there is material evidence of human habitation from several pre-Columbian sites, a national commemoration of Hernando de Soto's expedition, and county historical markers for the initial Anglo-American settlements. Today, its banks are experiencing urban sprawl from the cities of Palmetto and Bradenton and exurban development. The river is a key to the region's history; but there is a hidden history under the sprawl and the search for the alternative history is the focus of this paper.

In 1990, historian Canter Brown, Jr., published an article in a regional journal that laid out archival insights into a previously unknown maroon community in this southern part of Tampa Bay. A decade later, Vickie Oldham, a documentary filmmaker, began an overview of Sarasota's history with the saga of those escaped slaves. In late 2004, as a community activist she organized a group of scholars for an archaeological search to find material evidence for this history.

The research team includes archaeologists, an ethnographer, a historian, educators, and community activists and we went to the public from the start of the research process (Oldham *et al.* 2005). The reaction of audiences, the local media, and colleagues ranged from amazement

over a hidden history to excitement regarding an important chapter in American history being under the Floridian sprawl.

In this discussion, I will support conclusions from other scholars of maroon archaeology (e.g., Orser 1998, Orser and Funari 2001, Weik 2005, Haviser and MacDonald 2006, Norton and Espenshade 2007). The broad history for escaping slavery in Spanish La Florida will be followed by a discussion of resistance and conclude with the initial steps of the search for the maroon community on the Manatee River on Florida's Gulf Coast.

II. Escape to La Florida

For the people of Georgia and the Carolinas, heading south offered a route to freedom. Florida, as historian Larry Rivers (2000:210) has noted, has a long heritage of being a refuge. From the late 17th century, the Spanish crown welcomed fugitive slaves to seek sanctuary in La Florida. Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mosé (1739-1763), near St. Augustine in the northeast corner of Florida, was part of a larger racial geopolitics (Landers 1999) that created a dynamic frontier in Florida, with the opening for self-emancipated Africans to fight for their liberty and defend their freedom. The people are called Black Seminoles, escaped slaves, Seminole maroons, Black Warriors, African Seminoles, among terms that indicate the complex relationships and histories for the individuals striving for liberty in the Spanish colony.

After a brief period of British rule (1763-1783), La Florida, during the second Spanish period, included American expansionism from Georgia, British intrigue, Seminole ethnogenesis, and Black Seminole settlements across its north tier. The physical environment of the peninsula provided spaces for self-emancipated Africans to escape, either for temporary hiding places but also for permanent homes. Abolitionist Joshua Reed Giddings (1863:28) described freedom-

loving people in Florida sitting under their vines and fig-trees and watching “around them children and grand-children in the enjoyment of all the necessaries of life.” Gidding’s Biblical imagery was only part of the history for people he called the Exiles; the havens were also spaces of resistance. For an example, Seminoles, Creeks, and escaped slaves and free blacks received British support for a fort on the Apalachicola River. Histories record the names of some of these filibusters: Alexander Arbuthnot, Robert C. Ambrister, Captain George Woodbin and Major Edward Nicholls. According to Millett (2007:378), Woodbine and Nicholls were vocal in their opposition to slavery and their words were known through the Southeast so that Seminoles and Maroons “flocked to the British standard.”

The early 19th century in Spanish La Florida was a violent time. The various battles are today known as the First Seminole War, the War of 1812, and the Patriots War. A key event for the Black Seminoles came in July 1816 at the Apalachicola River, when the Black Seminole fort (known as the Negro Fort) was destroyed by the US Navy. Survivors fled southward to the Suwannee River (Missall and Missall 2004:24-31). Andrew Jackson’s forces followed them and the Battle of Suwannee (1818) caused survivors to flee south again, some to Tampa Bay (Porter 1996:26, Giddings 1863:72, Williams 1837:300, Brown 1990).

The efforts of historians, cultural anthropologists and archaeologists are retrieving insights into Black Seminole lives and the biographies of the warriors and their descendants (e.g., Brown 1990, 2005; Howard 2002; 2006; Weik 1997, 2005). A major gap in the early 19th century history surrounds the settlement at Tampa Bay. The significance of the region is clear from one of Andrew Jackson’s aids – according to James Gadsden: "The bay of Tampa . . . is the last rallying spot of the disaffected negroes and Indians and the only favorable point from

whence a communication can be had with Spanish and European emissaries" (quote from Brown 2005:10).

Gadsden recognized the significance of Tampa Bay for the Black Seminoles. Only recently have scholars recovered and explored those insights.

III. A Silenced History

Maroon settlements at Fort Mosé, on the Apalachicola River, Suwannee River, and Pilaklikaha (Abraham's Old Town) are being recovered by archival and archaeological means (Weik 1997). All are in the northern and north central part of the state. The wide Manatee River, at the southern reaches of Tampa Bay, fills a gap in the history that links people who fled slavery, traveling southward from one major river to the next.

Canter Brown built on newspaper accounts, land claims, and other archival fragments to reveal Angola as a haven for self-emancipated Africans escaping American forces. From the late 18th century until 1821, possibly hundreds of self-emancipated Africans and others lived on the Manatee River (Brown 1990, 2005). Yet there is no evidence for the precise location of Angola or of the lives of the people in the community.

The name Angola comes from an unsuccessful land claim by the Caldéz family, Cuban fishermen on Anna Maria Island at the mouth of the Manatee River when the US took control over the territory. The Cuban fishermen are an important key to the late Spanish-period political economy. Fishermen like Caldéz would spend the end of August through the end of March on the islands off the Florida west coast. At their bases, which were called ranchos, they dried and salted the plentiful marine resources for the Havana market. The communities traded with

Seminoles and others for crops and skins (Covington 1959). Visitors to those communities noted the mixing of Spanish, Africans, and Native Americans in the ranchos.

When the US gained La Florida from Spain in 1821, from the north came raids that destroyed maroon communities, including the settlements on the Gulf Coast (Brown 1990, Klos 1995:133-4, Mulroy 2007:19). The land claim comes at the end of the Angola saga, but the story does not end on the Manatee River. Survivors fled south, again, this time across the Florida Straits to freedom in the British Bahamas. Ethnographic and archival research by Rosalyn Howard suggests the Black Seminoles of the Bahamas (Howard 2002) could be direct descended from those survivors.

Those descendants know only of their ancestors' Florida origins, but not the details of lives lived in Florida (Howard 2002). The archival record is limited although promising for the archaeological search. Most prominently, John Lee Williams (1837:300) traveled through the region to document the new American territory, shortly after the USA gained control over the peninsula. Williams published an account of ruins of cabins still visible in the "old Spanish fields" where the Braden River meets the Manatee River (Figure 1); he identified the ruins as the remains of a black community allied to British filibusters. Similarly, the archives provide the voices of American soldiers and their critics (e.g., Giddings 1863), those who judged British filibusters (e.g., Griffin 2000), lists of people captured in 1821, and those who recorded the Cuban fishermen's land claim. Although the maroons' history has been silenced and the search for the community is challenging, previous archaeological studies on resistance to slavery is aiding in researching Angola.



Figure 1. John Lee Williams 1837 Map. Close Up on Old Spanish Fields. The Oyster River is today known as the Manatee River.

IV. Archaeology of Resistance

Several scholars have noted the difficulty in using archaeological techniques to find maroon sites (e.g., Orser 1998:71; Sayer et al 2006; Agorsah 2006; Norton and Espenshade 2007). The explanation for the challenges offers important insights. Turning to descriptions of the maroon communities of Cuba, the concept of falling back illuminates the history: runaways would abandon their settlement when danger approached (La Rosa Corzo 2003: 230). According to Gabino La Rosa Corzo (2003:230): “For them, the most important thing was to get away from the attack alive so they could regroup later on, either in the same place or in another that had been selected earlier.” The study of the communities in Cuba shows that the sense of territorial permanence was weaker than the need for survival. Without losing sight of the pain when homes and crops were destroyed, the goal was to elude capture not protect the material investment in a place. La Rosa Corzo (2003:230) goes on to explain: maroons “developed a means of struggle in

accord with the conditions of the terrain they occupied and the material resources and possibilities they had as a social group. The most distinctive aspect of this form of slave resistance was the fact that everything was determined by the survival needs of the group of humans who were being hunted down. This united, sustained, and strengthened them.” As Rosalyn Howard (2006: 277) recently wrote of the Black Seminoles: “Their flight was an act of resistance” Alvin Thompson (2006) in *Flight to Freedom* argues that escape was a form of resistance that ultimately overthrew the slavery system in the Americas.

The Angola phenomenon included a multifaceted history, a community of resistance that succeeded in rallying hundreds of people (Brown 2005) together in the fight against American slavery, a place among a network that actively opposed slavery. The concept of falling back as resistance is helpful for understanding the challenges in finding a maroon community in the mangrove woods and thickets of southwest Florida.

The challenges are clear; next are the research steps, presented as a preliminary report of the search for Angola on the Manatee River.

V. Archaeology of the Manatee River

The Manatee River starts in the highlands of eastern Manatee County and flows for approximately sixty miles. There were high bluffs on both sides of the river; at Gamble Creek, the river widens considerably to several hundred yards across. Four miles upstream from Tampa Bay, the Braden River joins the Manatee River.

There has not been sustained archaeological research around the Manatee River. In the mid-20th century, Gordon Willey (1949) included several prehistoric sites in his Survey of the Gulf Coast. There have been small projects at either side of the mouth of the river (at DeSoto

National Memorial and Emerson Point Park), small contract projects in Bradenton, and surveys along the eastern parts of the river, mostly focused on pre-Columbian mounds.

Residents have provided some hints of the material record of this region. In 1971, a fireback, heavy and quite unexpected for the locale (Figure 2), was found near the point where the Braden River enters the Manatee. In 2007, a neighbor to the Manatee Mineral Spring, while digging their garden, recovered a Harper's Ferry Model 1816 bayonet. To the north, in the Little Manatee River, a drum was pulled out of the river's muck (see photograph in Landers 1999:232).



Figure 2. Cast Iron Fireback. Profile is King Frederick IV of Denmark. Courtesy of the South Florida Museum, Bradenton, Florida.

More detailed findings come at the mouth of the Manatee River. At the Tabby House Ruins on the grounds of De Soto National Memorial, artifacts have a mean ceramic date that

correlate to the Angola saga, with the possibility that the structure was used by the British filibusters supporting the Black Seminoles (Svekis 2005). British filibusters set up trading posts in the Florida panhandle and at the Suwannee River; what is now the Tabby House Ruins might have been used in a similar fashion. The pieces from the material record are suggestive for Angola but fragmentary, the need for explanation and the hope that residents could provide local knowledge has encouraged public engagement as the approach to this archaeology.

VI. Looking for Angola: Strategy and Finds

From the start, Looking for Angola has had a firm commitment to civic engagement and public education. Dozens of public lectures and discussions from Tampa to Sarasota mark the endeavor as well as extensive media coverage and teachers' workshops (Figure 3). A web page



Figure 3. Media interest in the excavations. Photograph by author.

[www.lookingforangola.com] with articles, interviews, and the progress of the project provides an accessible repository. The teaching materials generated by the project in Sarasota have been used across the region as well as in the classrooms of Andros Island. A video (Oldham 2006) on the research process was broadcast on the local PBS station. The historical overview fascinates audiences and has been central to community support for the archaeological search for Angola.

Initial testing in some likely locales produced challenges (Baram, 2006) that required that the methodology be rethought (see Norton and Espenshade 2007). We moved to surveys, both underwater in the river and with remote sensing on land. The underwater survey (Figure 4) showed a clear river bottom, the result of a series of efficient Army Corps dredging.¹ One area, a mile west of the Braden River, may be promising; scuba searches are being planned for that locale.



Figure 4. Underwater survey of the Manatee River. Photograph by Sherry Svekis.

¹ According to the US Army Corps (http://www.saj.usace.army.mil/digitalproject/dpn/sajn_030.htm - accessed March 2008): there was dredging in 1882, 1896, 1905, 1916, and 1977.

On land, the area around a mineral spring – a source of fresh water – offered possibilities. Witten Technologies provided hi-resolution 3D underground imagery: the radar tomography (Figure 5) involved a mobile array of rapid-fire GPR antennas, precise laser-tracking and sophisticated image processing software. In the scanning phase, a commercial tractor propelled the array across the ground at about two miles per hour, while the seventeen antennas inside fired in a controlled but rapid sequence and a laser surveyor's instrument tracked the array's position. The result provides possible architectural features over the three acres around the spring as well as many other possible archaeological features.²



Figure 5. Radar tomography survey. Photograph by author.

At this stage of the project, the fragments from the archives and the geographic information fit models for maroon archaeology (e.g., Agorsah 2006, Norton and Espenshade 2007). The initial excavations are providing information on the larger history of the region, particularly sites ranging from the mid-19th through early 20th century; the extent of those

² After planning on the survey, I read Norton and Espendale (2007) noting that maroon would not have settled by springs, since slave hunters would look there. But fresh water was a necessary and the Manatee Mineral Spring is an important source on the south side of the river.

materials are creating a major concern for Looking for Angola: there is a tremendous amount of materials overlaying the region.

VII. The Next Layers of History

The later materials are an opportunity to integrate the region's history, to include more voices and events in the narrative for the Manatee River, but standard histories are also a great challenge for recovering the maroon community.

Discontinuities mark the transition from Spanish La Florida as a haven for self-emancipated Africans to slavery when Florida entered the Union in 1845, a process that violently erased the previous cultural landscapes. American control shifted the Florida territory toward a slave labor-based plantation economy; the process was a "turbulent one, marked by confusion and uncertainty" (Brown 1995:288).

The landscape of fluid identities and multicultural communities of an Afro-Hispanic Caribbean (Landers 1999:252-253) was erased when Spain transferred La Florida to the USA. An image for the violent nature of the transformation is found in a newspaper account from 1821: a "terror thus spread along the Western Coast of East Florida, broke all the establishments of both blacks and Indians, who fled in great consternation. . . . The blacks principally, thought they could not save their lives but by abandoning the country" (Charleston, South Carolina, *City Gazette and Commercial Advertiser* 1821 quoted in Brown 2005:14); Cuban fishermen and British filibusters aided maroons and Seminoles as they fled the terror. The Manatee River was no longer a place for Black Seminoles, with effort put into preventing renewed settlements. The Seminole Reservation (the Treaty of Moultrie Creek of 1823) pointedly excluded the river. In 1824, Fort Brooke was established to watch over Tampa Bay. Yet in 1834, the Second Seminole

War (1834-1842) was ignited nearby, suggesting the continuing significance of the region for resisting American control.

Local histories of the Manatee River never mention the early 19th century inhabitants. It was the 1840s, two decades after the destruction of the community, when Anglo-American pioneers started settling the region, with the mouth of the Manatee River bringing merchants from Key West (Svekis 2005) and other settlers aggregating around the mineral spring (Matthews 1983). There were no memories of Angola for those Anglo-American settlers. Plantations were built on the Manatee River – Joseph Braden in 1843 and Robert Gamble in 1844 (Silpa 2003). Irony is the wrong word for noting the rise of sugar plantations with hundreds of enslaved African Americans over the same territory that had been a haven from slavery. The settlement became the village of Manatee, today part of Bradenton.

The first detailed map of the region dates to 1843 and shows springs and hardwood hammocks (Kevin Robertson, personal communications September 2007). There is no discussion of the maroon community after John Lee Williams' history and that chapter in history seems to have been forgotten in official histories. Yet the Caldéz land claim, the John Lee Williams description, among other resources are the fragments from the previous world on the Manatee River, a cultural landscape that Looking for Angola is seeking to recover and a hidden history that is no longer silenced.

VIII. Settlements as Resistance

The maroon community was part of a large extended network of villages and settlements across Florida that challenged Anglo-American society (Millett 2007:383). Geography in conjunction with the archival evidence leads the Looking for Angola researchers to the south

side of the Manatee River as a likely place for a community using the broad waterway as a defensive structure and employing access to Tampa Bay as an avenue to the Atlantic world. As a haven, Angola is a few decades of a larger history of the struggles for freedom as well as a place that is becoming increasingly significant for contemporary communities around southwest Florida. So we continue looking for Angola, with public participation, in the hopes of locating material remains of an early 19th century community. The cautionary tales about identifications (e.g., Fennell 2007) are clear to all of us, balanced with the potential to reveal important elements of resistance to slavery in an out-of-the-way place.

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