

THE NEGRO FORT AT PROSPECT BLUFF



In the aftermath of the War of 1812 British Forces left behind a unique gift for their allies, the Indigenous and African free people of Florida: a fully operational and stocked military fort along the Apalachicola river. The Seminole had little use for the European style fort, but for African war veterans, many of who had emancipated themselves from American slavery, the potential was clear.

Soon the fort was home to over 300 African soldiers trained in the use of arms. This included around 300 rifles and canons, as well as the supplies to use them. Farms developed using West African agricultural knowledge could be found for miles to feed the growing population. The fort traded regularly with Seminole towns and often hosted Indigenous visitors. Stories of the “Negro Fort” quickly spread, and it quickly became a beacon of freedom for the enslaved; a safe bastion in Spanish Florida that inspired hope, and hundreds of refugees would find a home at the fort.

For Americans the presence of a fully manned and armed garrison in the hands of Free Africans was a nightmare. Not only did it inspire those they held enslaved, but they constantly worried about the threat of attack. They labeled the fort a haven for outlaws and blamed them for acts of piracy, but the true threat was the possibility of an armed slave rebellion.

In July of 1816 American gunboats set out with orders to destroy the fort. In the opening salvoes the American ships launched a “hot one,” a cannonball heated up to set fires. The shot struck the fort’s gunpowder supply, causing an explosion that stunned even the attackers. Nearly 300 men, women and children, African and Indigenous, were killed instantly. Yet over 1,000 others had managed to escape beforehand. The assault was one of the earliest battles of the Seminole War, and a warning of the willingness of American forces to invade Florida.

ABOVE

Warriors from Bondage. The attack of Negro Fort on the Apalachicola River, 1816.

Source: Jason Walker Studio

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