

SURVIVING THE STORMY SEASON



September is peak hurricane season in south Florida, and hurricanes have had a major influence historically in the region. In fact, hurricanes are partly to blame for keeping colonizers away from the gulf coast during the 17th and 18th centuries (fierce resistance by Seminole ancestors like the Calusa was the other reason). Colonizers simply did not know how to identify signs of coming storms and prepare for them, and their large ships and immobile settlements left them especially vulnerable.

Of course, the opposite is true for the Seminole and Miccosukee, and their ancestors. Traditional knowledge of their surroundings and adaptive strategies developed over generations allowed them to deal with all kinds of weather, hurricanes included. As Miccosukee Tribal member Betty Osceola once explained to a reporter, "Our ancestors were taught not to fear the hurricane" because they could recognize the signs and prepare. One such sign was blooming sawgrass, which Tribal members noticed just before the 1928 hurricane that devastated south Florida. Shifts in atmospheric pressure just before a hurricane cause the release of sawgrass pollen and trigger it to bloom early. Recognizing this, Seminole ancestors packed up their canoes and retreated to higher ground where trees like palmettos, that were adapted to high winds, provided shelter.

Flexible and adaptable structures, like chickees, also had an important role in helping the Indigenous communities of south Florida, past and present, weather severe storms. Tribal members share memories of roofs of chickees being removed and placed on the ground so their families could shelter beneath them during storms. According to Seminole Tribal member, Mr. Lonnie Billie, a long-time chickee builder, the light, flexible construction of chickees keeps them from being destroyed by high winds, unlike modern buildings.

These aren't the only ways that the ancestors and their modern descendants who form the Seminole and Miccosukee Tribes today have survived hurricanes, but they are two important strategies, and both are great examples of how generational knowledge continues to serve the Indigenous communities.

To see more Seminole History Stories, please visit the THPO website at www.stofthpo.com

Painting: Harold Newton, Untitled [Hurricane] n.d. Oil on Upson board 27 x 47 in. Courtesy of the Schlesinger Collection © Harold Newton

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