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# THE “WILD INDIANS” OF ANDROS ISLAND

## Black Seminole Legacy in the Bahamas

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Andros Island, Bahamas, served as a refuge for freedom-seeking Black Seminoles who escaped from Florida. They began landing secretly on the island in 1821 after the British in Nassau reneged on their promise to help the Seminole Indians and Black Seminoles fight against White aggressors in Florida. While conducting research on Andros Island in 1937, anthropologist John Goggin met Felix MacNeil, a descendant of the Florida Black Seminole refugees. His encounters with MacNeil and others led Goggin to conclude that he had positively identified the legendary “Wild Indians” of Andros Island as descendants of the Florida Black Seminoles. The majority of residents in the present-day settlement of Red Bays on Andros Island are descended from those original exiles from Florida. This article provides an ethnohistorical perspective of the Black Seminole legacy in Florida and the Bahamas that focuses on the oral history and lives of Felix MacNeil and other descendants.

**Keywords:** *Black Seminoles; oral history; cultural retentions; African-Seminole alliance; Bahamas*

**Andros Island<sup>1</sup> historically has been reputed** as a refuge for pirates, bootleggers, and gunrunners. Bordering the Gulf Stream that runs between the island and south Florida, its location is quite strategic for such enterprises. Less known is the fact that the island also served as a refuge for groups of freedom-seeking Black Seminoles<sup>2</sup> who escaped from Florida beginning in 1821. The majority of these Black Seminoles or Exiles<sup>3</sup> established an isolated existence in the island community they named *Red Bays*, located on the otherwise uninhabited, northwestern shore of Andros. They remained undisturbed there for 7 years, at which time a British

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Customs officer “discovered” them. Their lengthy isolation and “unusual” cultural practices created an atmosphere of mystery and encouraged references to them as “wild Indians.”

For many years after their arrival, tales about the so-called wild Indians of Andros Island were an integral part of Bahamian folklore. In a 1923 report, Andros wildlife warden E. W. Forsyth characterized the people of Red Bays as “nomads . . . who range the whole of this territory [and who had] a strain of Seminole blood” (cited in Curry, 1928, pp. 9-10). Bahamian journalist Mary Moseley wrote in her 1926 *Bahamas Handbook* that

it is to be hoped that the mystery of the interior of this [Andros] island will some day be unfathomed by means of aviation, when the allegations of explorers as to the existence of a tribe of people who hunt with bows and arrows can be investigated. (p. 6)

Details of the story of the Bahamas as a sanctuary for Black Seminoles have been largely obscured in the scholarly record. Two notable exceptions were the essays of historian Kenneth W. Porter (1945) and anthropologist John Goggin (1937, 1939, 1946).<sup>4</sup> Porter, who conducted extensive research on the “Seminole Negroes,” primarily followed their trail west from Florida to Oklahoma, Texas, and Mexico but not eastward. Porter (1945, p. 56) learned of Seminole Negroes in the Bahamas from Alan Lomax, a folk-song collector who in 1935 recorded a song in Nassau sung by “Mr. Bowlegs,” originally a resident of Andros Island (p. 56). Porter (1945) asserted that his “examination of a dozen or more handbooks, guide-books, histories, travel-accounts, dealing with the Bahamas, reveals no further specific reference to the Seminole Negroes of Andros Island” (p. 60). He was not privy, however, to an 1828 letter, discussed later in this article, which would have shed much light on the subject.

Goggin (1946) suggested that the investigation of the legend and legacy of Black Seminoles in the Bahamas “would be interesting from many points of view and is certainly a worthy project” (p. 206). Despite his suggestion, however, no detailed study was conducted until the research described herein commenced 50 years

later.<sup>5</sup> This article provides an ethnohistorical perspective of the Black Seminole legacy in Florida and the Bahamas that focuses on the life of Felix MacNeil (whom Goggin met there) and his descendants. Their ancestors were among the earliest Florida Exiles (see Appendices A and B). A portrait of the Bahamian Black Seminoles emerges from a review of primary and secondary sources, and from the oral histories recorded in interviews of the descendants.<sup>6</sup>

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE BLACK SEMINOLES**

Enslaved Africans fleeing the plantations of the Carolinas and Georgia forged the southern route of the Underground Railroad—traditionally perceived as only a northward journey to freedom—beginning in the 17th century. Their flight was an act of resistance, encouraged by a 1693 Royal Spanish decree that promised freedom and sanctuary—conditional on their adoption of the Catholic religion—to all enslaved persons who reached Florida, then sovereign Spanish territory. The Spanish granted these newly freed Africans plots of land 2 miles north of St. Augustine where they established the first legally sanctioned free Black community in North America: *Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose*, also known as Fort Mose.<sup>7</sup> Greater than their concern for the spiritual well-being of these Africans, or respect for their humanity, was the Spaniards' urgent need to use them in defensive efforts against invasions by United States' militias. By offering enslaved Africans sanctuary, the Spanish could simultaneously bolster their defenses and undermine the stability of the plantation system that was threatening to overtake their sovereign territory. Members of various Native American nations often assisted the United States' militias that sought to claim the land and reclaim the human "property" of Southern slave owners; their familiarity with the territory aided significantly in tracking and recapturing the runaways.<sup>8</sup>

Not all of the runaways sought protection among the Spaniards after their arrival in Florida, however. Many of them joined forces with the Seminole Indians.<sup>9</sup> The Seminoles were actually an

aggregate of linguistically and culturally diverse Native American nations. A large contingent of the Seminoles were former members of the Muscogee Polity (Creek Confederacy) of Alabama and Georgia<sup>10</sup> who, following internecine disputes, had separated from the Muscogee (Creeks) and moved into Florida where they absorbed members of various indigenous nations already resident. Incorporating the African refugees would have not been a foreign experience, as they were accustomed to linguistically and culturally diverse people as former members of the Muscogee Polity. In addition to their importance as additional warriors for self-defense, the Africans' military, linguistic, artisan, and agricultural skills were highly valuable to the Seminoles. Many of them had guerilla warfare experience, the ability to speak several European languages, and were knowledgeable about agricultural techniques that were well adapted to the tropical environment.

The foundation of the African-Seminole alliance was their mutual interest in securing their Florida haven; Seminole Indians fought to retain their land and livelihood, while Africans fought against a return to enslavement. It was this alliance that led to a new identity for the Africans, as Black Seminoles. Their ethnogenesis was forged in the crucible of radical sociocultural and sociopolitical change in Florida, fueled in large measure by the fluid and complex interactions occurring among the indigenous people, runaway and free Africans, and various European powers. The Black Seminoles' Florida sanctuary was interrupted for 20 years (1763 to 1783) when the same harsh slave policies as they had endured on the plantations were codified under British authority. Spain regained sovereignty after the 1783 Treaty of Paris and

began encouraging runaway slaves to go to Seminole villages. The Indians' lenient tribal system of vassalage, suited Spanish aims perfectly. The blacks would become part of the Seminole, and the Seminole could help fight Americans if and when it became necessary. By aligning the Indians and Africans, Spain increased its defenses without having the responsibility of providing for the runaways. (Guinn, 2002, p. 24)

In most historical accounts, the Black Seminoles are referred to as “slaves” of the Seminoles. It was, however, a very different kind of bondage than the chattel slavery they endured on the plantations; their association was more analogous to peonage or tenant farming. They were required to pay a tribute, a portion of their harvests, to the Seminole leaders but enjoyed substantial autonomy in their own separate communities known as “Black Towns.”<sup>11</sup> By the 1820s, an estimated 400 Africans were associated with the Seminoles and appeared to be “wholly independent, without regard for the authority of their so-called masters, and [were described as ‘slaves’ only] in name” (Humphreys, quoted in Klos, 1989, p. 66). In fact, the Black Seminoles played significant roles in Seminole sociopolitical life as war leaders, negotiators, and interpreters.

Although the Black Seminoles and their Seminole allies mounted fierce resistance on many occasions, they could not escape the persistent harassment of Whites and their Native American allies, particularly the Coweta, who were promised any Africans they captured as war booty. At the end of the First Seminole War in 1819 and the annexation of Florida by the United States that same year,<sup>12</sup> the colonists’ migration greatly accelerated in response to the official sanction. Retrocession of the Florida territory to the United States marked an end to any sanctuary that the Spaniards had provided Seminoles, Black Seminoles, and the Exiles who had taken refuge with the Spaniards at Fort Mose. The Spaniards abandoned their headquarters at St. Augustine for Cuba, accompanied there by 145 free Africans and 86 Indians, some of them settling in Matanzas, Cuba (Deagan & MacMahon, 1995, p. 37; Landers, 1996, pp. 96-97; see also Fairbanks, 1957, p. 33).

A primary goal of the American effort to annex Florida was to eliminate the significant threat to the institution of slavery that Spanish-controlled Florida represented. The eventual displacement of almost all of the Seminoles from Florida to Indian Territory was directly related to their tradition of harboring escaped Africans who were described by their combatants as fierce and intelligent warriors. General Jesup, in fact, described the Seminole Wars as being more accurately “Negro and Seminole wars” (Littlefield, 1977, p. 15).

Pushed further and further south by the influx of colonists and unfavorable treaty negotiations, Seminole Indians and Black Seminoles became Maroons, taking refuge in the swamps and hammocks of southern Florida. Seminole and Black Seminole leaders, desperate for assistance in their struggle against White aggressors, reached a consensus to solicit the aid previously promised to them by the British. They had reason to expect aid because of their long history of trade relations and military alliances with the British, including their loyal service during the siege of New Orleans. Seminole tribal elder Chief Kenadgie arrived in Nassau, the capital city located on New Providence Island, in a dugout canoe on September 29, 1819. An interpreter described as "an Indian of mixed blood" accompanied him; that interpreter may have been Abraham, the Black Seminole who enjoyed a close association with Chief Micanopy and who was an important negotiator on behalf of the Seminoles.<sup>13</sup> Chief Kenadgie's request was denied; a peace treaty the British had recently signed with the United States motivated their disinclination to interfere in the Seminoles' current dispute (Munnings, 1819, cited in Wood 1980, in Appendix 5). The chief and his entourage were provided with food and shelter on New Providence for 1 week and summarily returned to Florida. Another party of 10 Seminole Indians arrived in Nassau in 1821, described as destitute and in need of food and clothing. Once again, the British leaders refused to advocate on their behalf, offering only provisions to the Seminoles before sending them back to Florida.

Later that same year, a third group departed for the Bahamas. The majority of this group likely consisted of Black Seminoles. They secretly congregated at Cape Florida<sup>14</sup> and embarked in whatever transport they could secure, whether wreckers or dugout canoes. The Seminoles were known to be skilled at building large dugout canoes that could accommodate 20 to 30 people and were suitable for crossing wide expanses of sea (Neill, 1952, pp. 65-66). Ethnohistorian Harry Kersey described their exodus as "an epic journey born of desperation which has a modern counterpart in the Haitian and Cuban 'boat people'" (quoted in Flag, 2000, p. 234).

The rejection that the Seminoles' previous trips to the Bahamas had yielded clearly demonstrated the futility of seeking aid from

the British in Nassau, so they altered their strategy. This third time they chose to land on the western shore of Andros Island. As the oral history maintains, they first landed at an area known as Cedar Coppitt,<sup>15</sup> located on the remote northwestern coast of Andros Island. After making homes there for an indeterminate amount of time, many then traveled 15 miles north to establish the first permanent settlement known as Red Bays on the northwestern coast; some pushed further northeastward along the coast past Red Bays, eventually settling in north and central eastern Andros communities. A smaller number decided instead to travel southward along the shoreline from Cedar Coppitt, taking up residence in South Andros Island.

Several hurricanes devastated the original Red Bays settlement and eventually forced all of its residents to relocate to other communities: in North Andros—Lewis Coppitt, Nicholls Town, Lowe Sound, Conch Bay, and Mastic Point; in Central Andros—Staniard Creek, Calabash Bay, and Fresh Creek; and in South Andros—Mangrove Cay, Driggs Hill, and Long Bay. Their descendants reside in all of these communities today, although the present-day Red Bays settlement is home to the critical mass of Black Seminole descendants in the Bahamas. From 1821 to 1837 an estimated 150 to 200 Black Seminoles and Seminoles sailed from Cape Florida and the Florida Keys to the Bahamas.

Black Seminole Exiles had been living as free men and women for 7 years in the original Red Bays settlement before British authorities encountered them. An August 1828 letter from Customs Officer Winer Bethell (1828, cited in Wood 1980, Appendix 10) stated that he seized and delivered to the Port of Nassau “ninety-seven foreign Negro slaves.” They were taken from their homes on Andros Island under the mistaken premise that Spaniards had illegally deposited them there with the intention of later retrieving them for transport to and subsequent enslavement in Spanish colonies (Grant, 1828).<sup>16</sup> The names listed in the 1828 letter (Grant, 1828) *Governours’ Despatches* match many of the names related to me by my consultants, confirming the oral history that their great grandparents were among the original settlers who escaped from Florida. That letter also indicated that the persons seized had been



living on Andros Island, “peacefully and quietly, and have supported themselves upon fish, conchs and crabs which are to be met in abundance and upon Indian corn, plantains, yams, potatoes and peas which they have raised” (Grant, 1828). After reviewing their case in Nassau, Bahamian Governor J. Carmichael Smyth (1831), an abolitionist, concluded that

The question of these people being considered as slaves illegally imported was not noted until they had already been settled here seven years and that during these seven years, there did not occur a single instance of any one of these Negroes being carried away to Cuba. I see therefore no grounds to suspect any improper motives on the part of the owners of the vessels who brought them from Florida; or to doubt the truth of the story told by the poor people themselves more particularly as many of them still have their discharges from His Majesty’s service. (p. 12)

After almost 1 year of detention in Nassau, they were released and returned to their homes in Red Bays. The Black Seminoles had finally found freedom—in the Bahamas.

By choosing the remote, northwestern coast of Andros Island, an area covered with dense pineyards (*coppitts*) and bordered by shallow waters that would prevent large ships from landing with slave catchers, the Black Seminoles finally achieved the sanctuary that they and their ancestors had sought since their escapes from the plantations of Florida, the Carolinas, and Georgia. The present-day Red Bays settlement is located 3 miles south of the original settlement of the same name, which had long been abandoned. Originally called Lewis Coppitt,<sup>17</sup> this area was renamed *Red Bays* to honor the memory of their ancestors.

For more than a century, the Black Seminoles in Red Bays were cloaked in an air of mystery. With the exception of an influx of men who came from other Bahamian islands to engage in the sponging industry, Red Bays was virtually isolated for almost 150 years because of its inaccessibility. Greater access to the community was only achieved in 1968 when the Owens Illinois logging company cut a road through the “bush” to facilitate the harvesting of cut

trees. Although the new road created unprecedented access into Red Bays, travel by automobile remained rather difficult until the late 1980s when the road was finally paved. Their relative isolation created an endogamous community where many of these families intermarried and, therefore, most people in Red Bays are closely related.

### **BLACK SEMINOLE DESCENDANTS IN THE BAHAMAS**

Anthropologist John Goggin's (1939) 1937 research on Andros Island focused on confirming the prehistoric habitation sites of Lucayans; however, he found no evidence of that. He discovered, instead, that

The famous "Indians" of whom so many tales have been written, turned out to be descendants of Negro-Seminole crosses instead of Lucayans. . . . The main settlement of these "Indians" is at Red Bay. I did not visit the settlement but at Mastic Point I met an old Negro named Felix MacNeil who was originally from Red Bay and who was well informed on the subject of the old people. (pp. 22, 24)

Goggin (1937) recorded the following journal entry:

Tues., July 6, at Mastic Point, Andros Island: . . . Later went down to the water and sat under a big almond tree where a Negro named MacNeil was making a sculling oar. Spent the rest of the day there talking. MacNeil is from Red Bay and is part Indian. (n.p.)

Seventy-six-year-old Felix MacNeil told Goggin that "the Indians brought log cabins—pole huts—when they came to Red Bay" (Goggin, 1937). They also made "lean-to's of rock supported on beams," and they hunted with bows and arrows. "The arrows were pointed with brass tacks" (Goggin, 1937). Rev. Bertram A. Newton, a leader in the present-day Red Bays community, confirmed the historical use of bows and arrows when he stated that "well in my early days I have seen the bow and arrows . . . where myself used

to make them . . . and we often used to beat the tin on our arrows and shoot at certain objects” (Newton, personal interview, November 12, 1996).

MacNeil stated that he was the grandson of Scipio Bowlegs,<sup>18</sup> a Seminole Indian bush medicine doctor who was among the first Black Seminoles to migrate from Florida to Andros Island and settle at the original Red Bays site. MacNeil’s family members, along with many others, were forced out of the original Red Bays settlement in 1866 when a hurricane devastated their homes. The MacNeils relocated to Mastic Point, a settlement located on the northeastern coast of Andros. Goggin’s (1946) encounters with MacNeil and others led him to conclude that he had an answer to Mary Moseley’s earlier query; he had “positively identified the legendary Indians of Andros Island as Seminole Negroes” (p. 201).

In 1997, I interviewed Felix MacNeil’s great-grandson Tellis Smith (personal interview, April 3, 1997) in Mastic Point, the same Andros Island settlement where Goggin met MacNeil (see also Appendix B). Smith permanently resides in Nassau but visits “down home”<sup>19</sup> as frequently as possible where he maintains the family’s house. He recounted the oral history that he had learned from his maternal grandmother Marion Pickstock, MacNeil’s daughter:<sup>20</sup>

Well, my grandmother was Marion Pickstock, and she told me about the Indian story and it goes like this: I understand they [the Black Seminoles] landed in [the original] Red Bay. Now the year I don’t know. And they was the original Bowleg family. They migrated from Red Bay into Mastic Point. My mother was Aslea Pickstock and she marry into Smith. Pickstock was actually from England, migrated to British Honduras, from British Honduras into Mastic Point. They came over [to The Bahamas] on a boat called the *Potomac*. The *Potomac* got shipwrecked on Nassau bar.

As previously noted, some of the Florida Exiles had initially attempted to land in Nassau. Not only were they not welcomed but also were turned away. Subsequently, they secretly settled on other Out Islands. Apparently, this was the fate of Smith’s great-grandparents whose home became Andros Island.

Smith's oral history demonstrates that, in addition to his Black Seminole heritage, his ancestors include the British Loyalists who migrated to Andros Island.<sup>21</sup> The Loyalists came to the Bahamas from two directions as a result of the 1783 Treaty of Paris that was struck after the American Revolutionary War. They were refugees from North America (New York, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida) and from Central America (where they were forced to vacate their homes and plantations on San Andres, an island off the Mosquito Coast of British Honduras). Among them were enslaved Africans and "a mixed stock of Scotch, Indian and Negro blood" (Parsons, 1918, p. ix). They sought asylum in the British-controlled Bahamas where they hoped to re-create their thriving cotton plantations and resume their indulgent lifestyles.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly before her death, Smith's grandmother Marion Pickstock (1889-1980) tape-recorded an interview (1980) in which she recited the oral history that had been passed down from her father, Felix MacNeil. Her father was only 5 years old and her mother just a baby, she related, when the 1866 hurricane caused major damage to the original Red Bays settlement. Their house was swept away by the sea, forcing the family to move in with a neighbor in Mastic Point, where they eventually established their permanent residence. British Crown Commissioner Burnside (1980) surveyed the 1866 hurricane damage in Red Bays and remarked that he "can scarcely picture its destitution. Not a single house was left standing" (p. 16). Five men and four children drowned and 140 persons were left homeless. Some of the residents chose to rebuild their homes and lives there, however, until the next deadly hurricane struck.

The 1899 hurricane was worse than the previous one; it destroyed boats, and "carried a lot of people off Andros' shore" (Pickstock, 1980). It was reported that for many miles the community was submerged:

parts of houses [were] made fast to the higher branches of the pine trees and numbers of vessels were scattered throughout the pine yard. . . . I had detected a most unpleasant odour. . . . My attention was called to a vessel which had been capsized and driven some

distance into the pine yard . . . there was a dead body on board.  
(Governor's Office Report, 1980, p. 17)

The loss of lives in this hurricane, estimated at 100 to 150 persons (Governor's Office Report, 1980, p. 18), led the Bahamian government to order the permanent abandonment of the community, threatening to refuse aid in the event of future hurricanes if residents did not comply.

At age 25, Marion Pickstock left her home in Mastic Point, joining other Bahamians seeking domestic work in Florida's burgeoning tourist industry. She returned home 2 years later, averse to the toil of washing, cooking, and cleaning. With the exception of this 2-year period, she lived her entire life on Andros Island. Farming (including citrus orchards), fishing, and sponging were the primary means of subsistence for Androsians. The fertile sponge beds were once a substantial component of the Bahamian economy, supplying a worldwide market. Goggin's journal (1937) mentions Felix MacNeil's sponging activities:

MacNeil's sponge boat came in today. It will leave soon for a two-week voyage to the Mud. Each man will take 2 lbs. of lard, 6 lbs. rice, 4 lbs sugar, and 25 lbs. of flour for his ration for that length of time. (n.p.)

Spongers frequently would be absent from home for several weeks, returning only for water and wood for galley cooking ("Andros the Fabled Island," 1958).

Migration to Andros for sponging was especially great after Emancipation in 1834.<sup>23</sup> The sponge beds off the western coastline of Andros Island near Red Bays, an area called the Mud, provided a major source of employment for Bahamians. Greek sponge merchants bought the sponges via an exploitative system known as "truck and credit" that resembled the "company store" system in the southern United States, under which sharecroppers suffered. In the mornings, sponge merchants outfitted boats for the voyages and placed number markers on the piles of sponges that spongers had deposited the previous night. Later, buyers would "mark how much they want to give for the sponge—no question about it" (Rogers,

1974). Spongers, forcibly prevented from listening in on the merchants' pricing discussions, often were cheated. According to Reverend Rogers, a former sponger, "when they [Young & Son sponge merchants] sift my 47 lbs. around & around then told me, 'Captain, your share is 7 lbs 9,' 40 lbs was gone!" (Rogers, 1974). Rogers stopped sponging because it was apparent to him that the merchants were actually thieves.

A traveler's account recorded in *Nassau Magazine* described the isolated and subsistence-level lifestyle of the legendary "Wild Indians" of Andros:

Ahead of us lay three diminutive dinghys, each with a small tattered sail, a baffling smell of sponge and dried fish, and a husky brown-skinned figure squatting amidship. How amazing to see these tiny boats so far from land, their owners apparently well satisfied in irking [*sic*] out a livelihood as "free-lance" spongers. Our guide told us that they came from a tribe that constantly move up and down the lonely shores of western Andros and are rarely seen even by the inhabitants of the established island settlements. For days on end the little dinghys stay at sea, finding their way by the colour of the water and the position of the stars. (Toogood, 1936, n.p.)

In 1938, 1 year after Goggin's conversations with MacNeil, the sponge beds were largely destroyed by a mysterious bacterium or fungus. The sponge beds have revitalized since the devastating bacterium outbreak; however, sponging has not reclaimed as critical a role as it previously occupied in the Bahamian economy.

### CULTURAL RETENTIONS OF THE BAHAMIAN BLACK SEMINOLES

As he stated, Goggin never actually visited present-day Red Bays, the Andros Island community that boasts the majority of Black Seminole descendants. It was quite difficult to reach; the only access was by boat or narrow footpaths—a journey of at least 3 miles through dense pine forests filled with thatch undergrowth. He was "told that very few Indian customs remain" (Goggin, 1946, p. 205). In 1918, folklorist Elsie Clews Parsons published folktales

that she had recorded from the people of Andros Island. She stated that the "Indian descendants are located for the most part . . . at Nicolls [*sic*] Town."<sup>24</sup> Probably owing to the fact that her stay there was brief, she may not have been aware of, or may have had no access into, the remote Red Bays community, where most Black Seminole descendants resided.<sup>25</sup>

When considering cultural retentions, it is important to recall that while in Florida the Black Seminoles in Florida had lived in separate communities, usually located nearby their Seminole "masters," and were permitted a substantial degree of autonomy in exchange for payment of a percentage of their harvest to the Seminole chief. In many cases, they adopted the Seminole style of dress and mode of dwelling construction. Confirmation of this is provided in the account of a White doctor, William Haynes Simmons (1822/1973):

The Negroes dwell in towns apart from the Indians, and are the finest looking people I have ever seen. They dress and live pretty much like the Indians, each having a gun, and hunting a portion of his time. (p. 76)

This physical separation may indicate a conscious desire on the part of both groups to essentially maintain the integrity of their own cultural systems. It is also speculated that they may have desired separate settlements because "the Black Seminoles were emerging as a distinct people at this time and . . . were developing their own unique culture" (Herron, 1994, p. 38). The primary Seminole-related practices that I noted in Red Bays were in food ways, with the preparation of *coontie*, *cassava*, and fry bread. African cultural retentions among many Black Bahamians, not only Black Seminole descendants, include religious rituals (e.g., call and response, rushing), linguistics (lexicon and grammar), and an economic system called *asue*.<sup>26</sup>

Parsons (1918) witnessed African-related cultural practices among Andros Islanders that mirrored those of Black Seminoles on the Texas-Mexican border,<sup>27</sup> such as "settin-ups with the dead, with prayer, singing, food and drink" (p. xiii).<sup>28</sup> These practices have been continued; however, many of the funerals and rituals associated with

them have changed dramatically, being split between the home island of the deceased and Nassau, where many family members relocated to secure employment opportunities. The acculturative process for African-descended peoples, begun long ago on the plantations of North America and continuing to the present day, has served to make exact cultural attributions problematic. Although, the African and Seminole cultural foundations of their adapted cultural practices, as stated above, are clearly indicated.

### ORAL TRADITION

Bahamian Black Seminole descendants' understanding of the past is contextualized in their social memory, the collective oral accounts that have been passed down to them through the generations. Today, Black Seminole descendants of the original settlers reside throughout the Bahamas, though the majority resides on Andros Island.

During my residence on Andros Island, I recorded interviews in several communities with elders who traced their Black Seminole heritage to the original settlers. The oral tradition consistently emphasizes their ancestors' tenacious spirit of resistance to enslavement. The surnames Newton, Russell, Lewis, Bowlegs, Miller, Colebrooke and Marshall predominate among the descendants still residing in Red Bays, and in other settlement in North Andros, including Lowe Sound, Nicholls Town, and Mastic Point. Rev. Bertram A. Newton, Omelia Marshall, and Benjamin Lewis are key among the elders in present-day Red Bays. Eighty-year-old Reverend Newton has held leadership positions in the community for more than 50 years. He is affectionately called "teacher" or "Rev," in honor of the roles he has fulfilled as the teacher and principal of the Primary (formerly "All-Age") School for 41 years and as the pastor of the settlement's only church—New Salem Baptist.

Reverend Newton traced his descent from the original settlers to his paternal great-grandfather Moses Newton, who originally settled in Staniard Creek, and to his maternal great-grandmother Mary Lewis, a native of Red Bays. A man named "Moses" was included



on the 1828 roster of people taken to Nassau and may, in fact, have been Rev. Newton's great-grandfather. In 1968, Reverend Newton published a pamphlet titled *A History of Red Bays, Andros, Bahamas*. He deemed it important to record the oral history at that particular moment in time because, as he stated "I believe that this is an appropriate spot to finish my short history, as the opening of our road brings the first chapters to a close, and will be opening up a whole new story" (p. 4).

It is not only the content of the *History* personal narratives that is critical to consider but also the context. Its publication coincided with a time of great sociopolitical change in Red Bays and in the Bahamas in general.<sup>29</sup> The country elected its first Black Bahamian as prime minister, ending centuries of governance by the British and other White Bahamians. Newton's *History* promoted a new identity for Red Bayans as descendants of a courageous group of people who sailed across the Gulf Stream to escape enslavement in the United States. They and their ancestors had always lived as free men and women in the Bahamas, had created a self-sufficient livelihood, and had survived against tremendous odds. This new identity was key to countering the pejorative reputation of Red Bayans as "backward" people.

At age 85 years, Omelia Marshall, affectionately known as "Mama," or "Meena," to community insiders, and referred to with due reverence by outsiders as "Mizz Marshall," is considered the matriarch of Red Bays. She has been a bush medicine woman, a midwife, and "tour guide" in Red Bays since she was very young. She asserted that her family originated the techniques used in crafting the unique baskets of Red Bays. Sales of these baskets, sewn primarily by women, represent a major part of the Red Bays' economy. Marshall's paternal ancestors originally settled in Lowe Sound, a community located northeast of Red Bays. Her mother, Martha Celeste Russell, was from Red Bays. Like Felix MacNeil, Marshall is related to the original settler Scipio Bowlegs.

Benjamin Lewis (1927-2005), a retired seaman and construction worker, was also related to the original settlers. He stated that his great-grandfather was Sammy Lewis who arrived on Andros Island in a canoe. His great grandfather's name, "Sam Louis" [*sic*], is

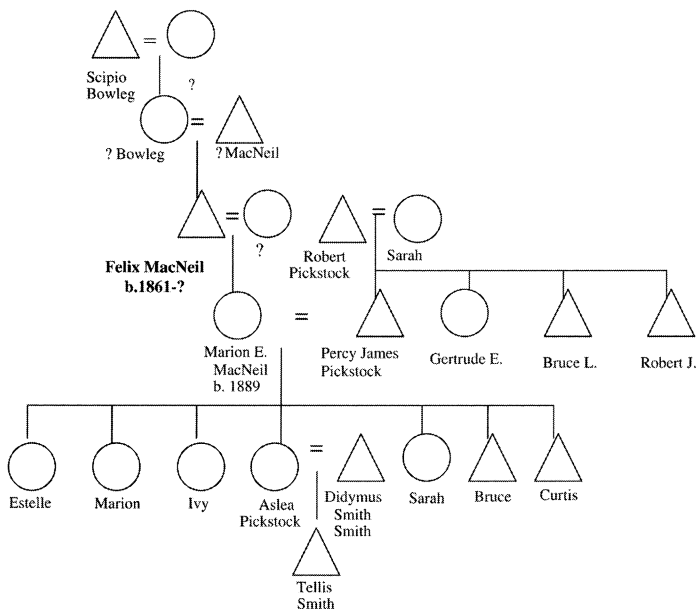
listed on the 1828 Customs' roster. His father, Joseph Lewis, was the source of most of the details included in Reverend Newton's *History*.

This legacy of their Black Seminole heritage was previously transmitted orally, around fires that lit the pitch-dark nights in Red Bays; however, unfortunately, this tradition has not continued, primarily because of the influence of several factors. Modernization of the community began when the first road was cut through in 1968 and continues today. Electricity, satellite television, street lamps, individual telephones in their homes (as of 1998), and easy exit via paved roads (since the late 1980s) have significantly altered the infrastructure and social structure of this community and have contributed to the loss of opportunity, and inclination, to sustain their oral tradition.

Increasingly, however, community members, primarily the elders, are showing an interest in revitalizing their unique cultural heritage, and the Bahamian government has shown support for this endeavor. In February 2003, the Bahamian government supported the first reunion of the Bahamian Black Seminole descendants and members of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. This monumental event occurred at the Seminole Tribal Fair, held on the Hollywood reservation near Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. A small group of men and women from Red Bays came to display and sell their baskets and wood carvings. Several representatives from the Bahamian Ministry of Tourism, and Bahamian media personnel, accompanied them. The Bahamian media interviewed the Seminole Tribe of Florida's chairman, Mitchell Cyprus, and the Black Seminole descendants presented him with special gifts: a mahogany wood carving, created that day on the fairgrounds, and one of the unique baskets for which Red Bays has become noted. This historic event received widespread coverage on Bahamian television and radio. It is hoped that this reunion represents progress toward establishing a meaningful alliance between peoples whose ancestors valiantly fought together against egregious odds on Florida soil, and that the legacy of the Black Seminoles in Florida and the Bahamas will endure.

**APPENDIX A**  
**MacNeil, Pickstock, and Smith Family Genealogies**

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**APPENDIX B**  
**Felix MacNeil, 1937 Mastic Point settlement,**  
**Andros Island, Bahamas**

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**From the John Goggin Collection, courtesy of the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections, Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.**

**NOTES**

1. Andros measures 2,300 square feet (104 miles in length and 40 miles wide) and is the largest island in the Bahamian archipelago. The majority of its area, however, is uninhabitable because most of the island barely rises above sea level. The entire western coast, including the coastline adjacent to present-day Red Bays, is muddy rather than sandy beach.

2. These Africans have alternately been called Seminole Negroes, African Seminoles, Seminole Maroons, Exiles, Afro-Seminoles, Black Indians, Black Muscolgules, and Self-Emanipated Africans.

3. This is the term used by Joshua R. Giddings (1858) who wrote one of the first accounts of the Africans in Florida who had escaped enslavement.

4. Subsequent books offering extensive details on the topic of Black Seminoles focus primarily on their Florida and Indian territory experiences, such as Porter (1996, p. 26) and Mulroy (1993, p. 26) dedicated only a few sentences to the Black Seminoles' Bahamian connection.

5. The complete case study has been published as *Black Seminoles in the Bahamas* (Howard, 2002).

6. Prior to conducting this research, permission was obtained from the Bahamian government, community elders in the Red Bays settlement on Andros Island, and the Institutional Review Board at the University of Florida.

7. For an extensive discussion of Fort Mose, see Deagan and MacMahon (1995).

8. According to an 1819 account (Wood, 1980) published in the *Bahamas Royal Gazette*, the Seminoles complained that "their greatest enemies [were] the Cowetas . . . who having made terms with the Americans [were] set on them to harass and annihilate their tribe" (p. 5).

9. In the Creek language *Seminole* means "runaways." Others concur that *Seminole* means "wild" or "runaway" but argue instead that the name applies to Creeks who abandoned their territories in Alabama and Georgia and settled in Florida (Katz, 1986; Littlefield, 1977). *Seminole* is further speculated to be an adaptation from the Spanish *cimarron* meaning "wild one" that originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills in Hispaniola. Later on, it was associated with Native American slaves who had escaped from the Spaniards as well. William Sturtevant (1971) suggested that the meaning of *Seminole* evolved into use as the collective name for all Florida Indians, despite the fact that they emanated from culturally and linguistically diverse Indian tribes or nations (p. 110).

10. The Muscogee polity (Creek Confederacy) incorporated many different ethnic groups: the Hitchiti-speaking groups, including the Apalachicolas, Chiahahas, Hitchitis, Yamasees, and others; the Alabama (including the Alabamas, Koasatis, Tuskegees and others); and the Muscogees (including the Kasihtas, Cowetas, Coosas, Abihkas, Hothliwahalís, Eufaulas, Hilibís, Wakokais, Tuckabahchees, Okchais, and others) (Littlefield, 1977). Moore (1996) noted that in addition to the above groups the Yuchis (Eucheas), Shawnees, Natchez, Coushattas, Choctaws, Cherokees, and African American Freedmen have at various times been considered part of the Creek and Seminole Nations.

11. The "Black Towns" that were associated with the Seminole towns in Florida can be understood both as Maroon communities whose members were constantly prepared for guerrilla warfare (Ogunleye, 1996; Mulroy, 1993; Price, 1979), and as "structural components" of the Seminole towns (Riordan, 1996, p. 64).

12. Formal annexation occurred in 1821.

13. A staunch ally of Chief Micanopy, Abraham was the leader of the Black Town known as Pelaklikaha, or Abraham's Old Town, located nearby Micanopy's Okahumpka village, which thrived from 1813 to 1836.

14. Cape Florida was located in the area now known as Key Biscayne, Florida.

15. "Coppitt" is Bahamian vernacular for "coppice," defined as a densely wooded area. My consultants advise that remnants of the original house foundations remain there today.

16. The Spanish continued the slave trade long after the British. It became the British custom to “liberate” the human cargoes of slave ships after they abolished the slave trade in 1807.

17. The Lewis family had purchased 61 acres of land and gave the area their family name.

18. The name *Scipio* is listed on the roster of names in the 1828 Customs Officer’s letter without a surname. This person may be Scipio Bowlegs, his grandfather. The name *Bowlegs* is the only Seminole name that still remains among the Bahamian Black Seminole descendants.

19. *Down home* is a Bahamian colloquialism referring to the “family” or Out Island point of origination for a person who is usually now a resident of Nassau or Freeport, the tourist meccas to which many people migrate seeking jobs.

20. Church records confirm that Smith’s grandmother Marion MacNeil married seaman Percy James Pickstock at St. Stephens Church, Fresh Creek, Andros Island on March 1, 1908 (Births & Marriage Register, n.d.).

21. Documentation shows that sections of Andros were granted in the late 18th century to small numbers of Loyalists who established plantations and settlements. There are also intriguing hints in the literature pointing to earlier, perhaps as early as late 17th century, settlement by African fugitives from other island communities or by pirates establishing bases to prey on the Spanish ships sailing through the Florida Straits in the Gulf Stream. An indication of this is the occasional location of European ceramic materials on Andros dating from the mid-17th to the late-18th centuries (Aarons, 1990).

22. Initially successful, these plantations were not to be long lived. They failed miserably because of the unsuitability of the rocky land, unyielding soil, and devastation caused by the chenille bug that between 1788 and 1794 “destroyed hundreds of and nearly bankrupted the American Loyalists. Consequently with their finances nearly exhausted many of the Loyalists sold their land, took their slaves and returned to the United States (*An Account*, 1785).

23. The British abolished slavery in 1834. There was, however, a 4-year “apprenticeship period,” effectively extending near slavery conditions for many until 1838.

24. This settlement was named in honor of Colonel Nichols, a British officer who established Negro Fort and with whom some of the refugees had served in the War of 1812.

25. Ian G. Strachan (2002) critiqued Parsons’ work, and that of others who were engaged in collecting “native folklore” during colonial times, as an act of “imperialist nostalgia, similar to the tourist’s wish to see and experience the so-called exotic and primitive” (p. 97).

26. The *asue* or *esusu* (a Yoruba cultural tradition, also known as *susu* in Trinidad) is the practice of collective saving. Groups of trusted people are formed who create a pool of money from which credit can be extended to its members.

27. These people in the Texas and Mexico areas are descendants of Black Seminoles who made the journey west with the Seminoles during the Removal. After their arrival in Indian territory, some fled to Mexico where they established the community Nacimiento de los Negros. After Emancipation, some returned to the United States and fought with U.S. soldiers as the Seminole Negro Indian Scouts. Brackettville, Texas, is now home to the Scouts’ descendants.

28. Porter (1945) believed that “[t]hese wakes [‘settin-ups’] could be drawn from a common African origin” (p. 60).

29. Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) leader Lynden O. Pindling became prime minister in 1967, the first Black Bahamian to lead the country. The PLP and P. M. Pindling’s rule lasted for 25 years. In 1992, the Free National Movement (FNM) gained a majority, and the country had its second Black Bahamian prime minister, Hubert Ingraham.

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