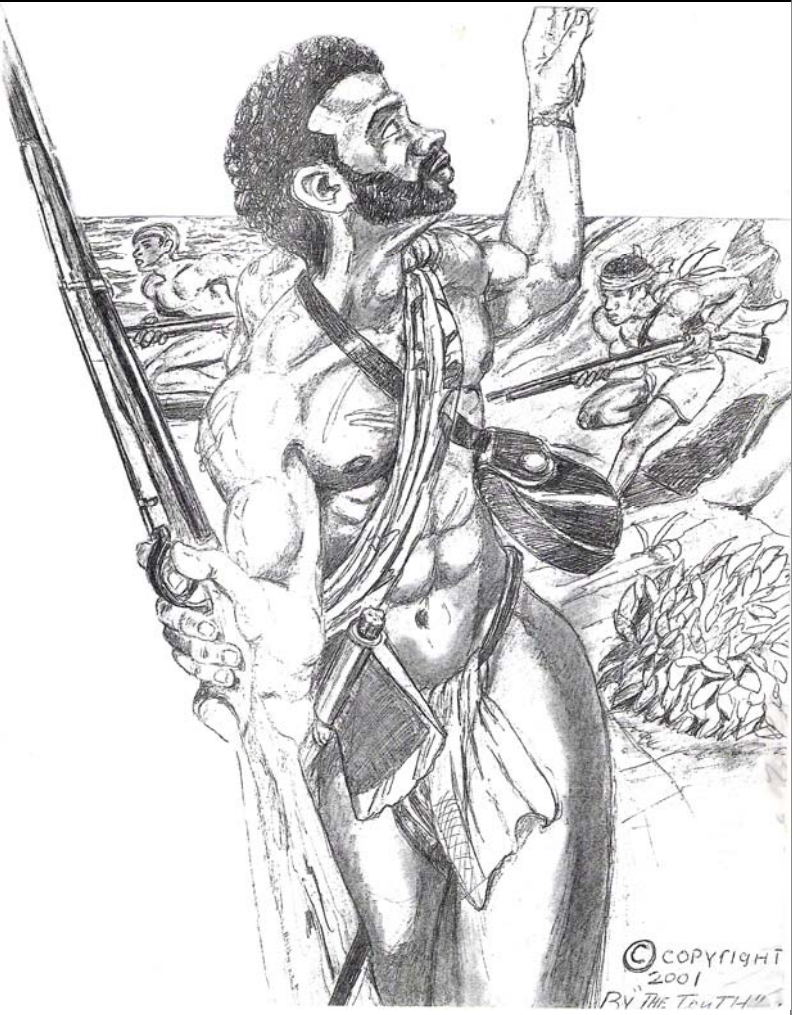
The Real Resistance to Slavery in North America



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Action Alert

We urge individuals to write to Jeffrey Beard re: grievance procedures and the right to obtain an outside doctor for a second opinion regarding medical issues with prisoners

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By Russell Shoatz
Dated April 27, 2005

The Real Resistance to Slavery in North America

Long before the founding of the country, Africans were transported to what later became known as the United States of America. Some came as free individuals and companions of the Europeans from Spain and elsewhere. They were ship guides, sailors, soldiers, explorers, and adventurers. Others, however, were "enslaved" workers.

The earliest known enslaved Africans were brought by the Spanish to serve in a colony that was set up in what is today the Carolinas. There, within a couple of years (around 1528) the survivors are reported to have "rebelled and escaped to dwell amongst the Indians."

In the mid 1500s, an even less-known but larger group came as "free colonizers" from South America. They numbered at least 300 and had been formerly enslaved, but were part of a successful rebellion and takeover by enslaved Africans and English and "mixed-race" privateers, or pirates.

They, along with a larger group of *indigenous South Americans, were recruited by England to help shore up the failing English colony at Roanoke, Virginia / North Carolina. They eventually abandoned Roanoke and melted into the countryside – never to be heard from again.

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the Spanish, English, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Danish vied to control North, Central, and South America as well as the Caribbean islands. At that time, however, the Amerindians-- contrary to popular myth-- were still the strongest military power in all of those areas, not discounting the breakup and conquest of the large Aztec and Inca empires. Thus, Europeans were forced to use a strategy of "divide and conquer," forming alliances of convenience with and using the various Amerindian ethnic groups and confederations to fight each other, primarily to enslave the defeated and sell them to the Europeans, keep all of them off balance while the European colonies were weak and, finally, to police the enslaved Africans and "indentured" whites.

Outside of a small number of coastal enclaves where the Europeans could concentrate their power with the aid of ships and cannons, the only leverage they had over the militarily strong Amerindians was the use of their "trade goods." Many Amerindians deeply desired these goods and eventually allowed themselves to

become "enslavers" – on a massive scale – in order to acquire the metal utensils, tools, jewelry, cloth, blankets, mirrors, guns and gunpowder, alcoholic spirits, knick knacks and other goods; either for use, status or in the case of the guns, powder, hatchets and knives – for sheer survival!

It is true that the Amerindians practiced a form of enslavement prior to any contact with Europeans, however slavery's overall effect on their societies was relatively mild, mainly because although the Amerindians practiced farming on a broad scale, the plantation farming introduced by the Europeans, which demanded huge numbers of tightly disciplined and overworked enslaved people, was unheard of… and undesired.

Ironically, the Amerindians were successfully manipulated to become deeply involved in conflicts with neighboring groups, the same way that on the continent of Africa vast numbers of people and wide expanses of land were simultaneously falling victim to an equally disastrous cycle of wars to enslave people for trade goods and weapons to defend themselves against enslavement.

During this early period, race, as it's viewed today, made little difference. After all, one could find Africans, Amerindians and whites all equally enslaved on the same plantations, in the towns and on ships. History shows clearly that all three cooperated with each other in rebellions, escapes and other enterprises. Indeed, such cooperation was always dreaded by the slave masters and was one of the primary reasons that the enslavement of whites and Amerindians was eventually phased out all over the western hemisphere.

Amerindians and whites found it easier to escape enslavement. The Amerindians knew the land and also had kinfolk to help or seek out. The whites could better blend in with free people, or join others moving to colonize other parts of the land. The Africans, on the other hand, had no such advantage. They either found sympathetic Amerindians to help them, or had to try to find and join with other runaways, called "Maroons," fugitive enslaved people of North, Central and South America and the Caribbean islands who had set up their own communities.

Africans continually escaped enslavement, from as far back as 1502 when they were first brought to this hemisphere, and thus, Maroons were always active to a greater or lesser degree. The early Maroons were Africans, whites and Amerindians, and were viewed as a major threat to the entire institution of plantation slavery. In certain areas they threatened the elite colonizers domination and control of their colonies. In the elites' calculation, any large Maroon community stood a good chance of uniting the Amerindians not addicted to their trade goods, with both the indentured and "poor whites," and also the enslaved Africans – all of whom heavily outnumbered the landowning and other upper class whites.

This writer, contrary to popular practice, will not dwell on or attempt to outline

the innumerable ways individuals resisted slavery, or detail the names of the multitude of known actors – except for a few that cannot go unmentioned. No doubt, one surefire way of mis-educating people of all races about the real resistance to slavery has been, and continues to be, the highlighting of the most spectacular instances of resistance, and afterwards burying the oppressed in the depressing day to day inhumanity of the slave system… a method that cannot help but sour most people's desire to learn more about the overall subject.

Instead, I will help you see the more or less "hidden" resistance to slavery in North America by outlining three major, long running, and ultimately successful efforts to resist and overcome that system. Then, once you see how much crucial historical data has been kept under wraps, I'm confident that you will be stimulated to go beyond what is being taught in search of further knowledge on the subject, as well as deciding what lessons that knowledge holds for us today.

The successful 150-plus years of Maroon resistance centered on the Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina; The equally successful 150-plus year struggle of the Black Seminole Maroons and their Amerindian allies in Florida and throughout all of the areas they were forced to travel, and, The Underground Railroad of the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The Dismal Swamp

The awesome, defiant and legendary Dismal Swamp straddles the eastern sections of southern Virginia and northern North Carolina. Even today it contains vast expanses of extremely harsh and dangerous wilderness areas, although much of the original swamp has been drained.

In the 15th – 19th centuries, however, it stretched at least one hundred miles one way, and sixty miles the other; which means it was almost as large as the state of Delaware. It was recorded to contain everything within it: from poisonous snakes and other reptiles, to alligators, bears, big cats and insects unknown to the early colonists. It's swampy marshes and bogs were so treacherous until only the most daring and knowledgeable – or foolhardy – Europeans would venture far into them.

From all accounts, the first known Maroons to occupy and use this swamp as a place of concealment, a natural fortress, a liberated territory and a home were Amerindians. They were, sadly, escaping from the enslavement that had all but engulfed the eastern and southern sections of the continent. They were joined there by kinfolk and other Amerindians who had suffered defeats in wars with rival groups acting in league with European colonists.

It's unclear whether the Amerindians were first

joined by runaway Africans or whites. One would assume that white runaways would seek out more hospitable surroundings, but below I'll lay out a much misunderstood social phenomenon that will help explain such an oversight.

It hardly matters though, as historical record reflects repeated examples of Amerindians, Africans and whites all using the swamp as a refuge from as far back as the early 1700s.

These early Maroons were able to overcome language barriers, mistrust, and the growing influence of racial doctrines that eventually evolved into the white supremacist cultural construct outside of the swamp. That is not to say that they didn't have any racial or ethnic prejudices. It's absolutely clear, however, that they overcame them enough to be able to live, support, protect, fight and die for each other for well over 100 years.

Obviously, there was also intermixing. Between the Amerindians and Africans it proceeded to the point where it became virtually impossible to know any difference between them. The whites on the other hand, though also mixing with the Africans and Amerindians, still by and large remained phenotypically Caucasoid*. That, however, worked to everyone's advantage because the white Maroons and their descendants could still interact with the surrounding white society.

Indeed, white Maroons largely came to occupy areas of the swamp that bordered on the surrounding white-dominated society, while the other Maroons stayed in the interior. Such an arrangement helped to establish and sustain lively trade that was carried on by those in the interior, who would hunt, fish and trap wild game for sale through their white Maroon allies. Also, wood products were produced in abundance in the interior. So much so, until it began to effect the local economy, which caused George Washington – who would later become President – to find himself in hot water after being accused of using Dismal Swamp Maroons to provide his private company with wooden house shingles.

Interestingly, the white Maroons were probably the first to be labeled with the "poor white trash" derogatory epithet. When reflecting on the social evolution of things, consider the following-- after escaping indentured servitude, one had to remain ever wary of being found out and returned. Over time, therefore, those who did not melt into the broader white society took on a self-protective, insular, standoffish, hostile to strangers, semi-outlaw mentality. Assuredly, they would trade with the broader white society, but they occupied (if they could be said to be "occupiers" of any permanent places at all) their own hardscrabble areas – places so inhospitable that they attracted only scorn. Generally, they wouldn't dedicate themselves to being reliable employees of any land owner, mill owner, ship captain or even slave catcher! Plus, they were known by all as being under none of white society's other social restraints…so the elites labeled them not "poor whites," but since they were seen as unable to be restrained, unreliable and useless = trash! It is only much later that the epithet would be used to shame and discipline poor whites in general.

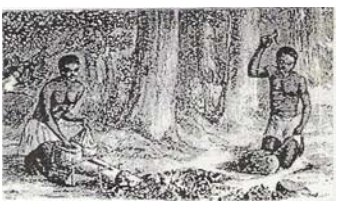
In fact this same phenomenon came to play itself out a little differently further west in the Appalachian mountains and foothills, except there the many descendants of runaway indentured whites came to be called "hillbillies." Unquestionably, the latter's legendary clannishness, hostility to all outsiders, secretiveness and fierce protectiveness of their kin and tiny communities, as well as the disdain and economic isolation and poverty that has systematically been imposed on them, leaves very little doubt as to their history!

Although they are generally viewed as being ultra-racists, placing their racism in the context of their hostility to and vision of outsiders as enemies…puts their "racism" in a different category all together. Furthermore, real hillbilly culture does not see itself as being in league with the dominant culture or system. Their loyalty is ultimately to their own small clans and communities. And all law enforcement authorities know it!

In addition, its such elements that bring a historically ultra-militant and violent posture to labor disputes between coalminers and mine owners, police and National Guards in Appalachia, and who have always been diehard operators of illegal liquor stills, and who nowadays are major marijuana growers. Yet, the primary difference between today's hillbillies and the white Maroons of the Dismal Swamp (up until the end of the Civil War) is that the latter were the close and trusted allies of the African and Amerindian Maroons.

So, up until 1776 the Dismal Swamp Maroons lived as free people, protected by the harshness of the swamp and well organized and capable defenders from amongst their collective ranks: each Maroon settlement had its own armed members that were responsible for patrolling its surroundings, warning of intruders, decoying or attacking any hostiles- while giving the other Maroons enough time to escape to other pre-planned and built up settlements. And in the event of sustained, heavy searches by outside militia, posses or bounty hunters, the Maroons had gradually evolved a system of coordinating their defenses and a unified command structure – which was known to have been headed by individuals from all of the various racial and ethnic groups-- and which saw its mission as one of driving the hostiles out of the swamp, or outlasting any intrusion. An attack of that nature was dealt with as an attack on all!

Moreover, within the swamp, the Maroons were unbeatable! The swamp itself was so treacherous until it could not be traveled without fear of being swallowed up at every turn. There were fast moving rivers concealed by thick vegetation, quicksand, heavy undergrowth encased mud, deadly sharp thickets and concealed protuberances, poisonous insects, snakes, reptiles, alligators and big cats. Then, there was the Maroon laid snares and traps, along with the possibility of being ambushed by the Maroon guerillas,



who would lead pursuers into even more treacherous terrain that only they knew how to traverse. In fact, the Maroons developed and passed down effective ways to cross otherwise un-crossable terrain by using methods certain animals would employ.

Remember, we're talking about a swamp that was one hundred miles one way, and sixty miles the other… The bottom line is, at no point in recorded history did outsiders succeed in capturing or killing all or even substantial numbers of the Dismal Swamp Maroons, or forcing them out of their lair. The outsiders even tried to drain sections of the swamp for commercial and travel reasons, but even that left an area almost the size of a small state.

Therefore, when the colonists' efforts to shake off England in their so-called War of Independence reached the swamp, both sides found fully trained and tested militias among the Maroons. Only one side, however, offered anything of value. England, through its loyalists in Virginia and the Carolinas let it be known that anyone fighting for the British would be guaranteed freedom from slavery and indentured servitude, and could also look forward to dividing up some of the estates of any plantation owners in rebellion.

So, once the word got around, literally tens of thousands answered England's call: Maroons, enslaved individuals from the plantations and towns, and poor whites who wanted to help break the strangle hold that the plantation elites had on the south.

The Dismal Swamp was not the only place that Maroons could be found. There were, astonishingly enough, thousands upon thousands of other Maroons all throughout the backwoods and foothills of all of the states from Delaware to Georgia (Florida is a special case that will be discussed later). All characteristically living in fiercely independent and semi-outlaw states, some the forefathers and mothers of the Appalachian hillbillies. Huge numbers of them, consequently, answered England's call and eventually received arms and went on to fight the entire war on England's side.

Although most of today's "teachers" of history are fond of reminding everyone that Blacks provided over five thousand fighters to the colonist cause during that struggle, they hardly ever highlight that at least ten times that number fought for England. Or more accurately, fought to get the plantation ruling-elite and their followers off of their backs and out of power. Saying 50,000 plus Blacks fought for England is not historically correct. However it can be said that those 50,000 plus Africans, Amerindians, whites and mixed race individuals' aspirations were closer to those of the overwhelming majority of the enslaved and oppressed Blacks of their time – then to the rest of the colonial society.

Even so, England was forced to grant the colonists independence – not due to

losing the war in most of the areas that saw massive Maroon participation (southern Virginia to Georgia), but because George Washington and his army held on in the northern states until France joined the war on their side. Afterwards, Washington and the French naval fleet trapped a major British force at Yorktown, Virginia* causing England to abandon the fight in the colonies in order to better carry out its worldwide struggle with France and other European imperial powers.

So, when the English navy evacuated what would become the United States, within its ships were hundreds of Maroons and their families. They were transported to English controlled islands in the Caribbean and to Canada. Thus, today one can find their descendants in places like Nova Scotia and the Bahamas.

Of course, although their cause was not successful outside of the Dismal Swamp, the surviving Maroons had absolutely no intention of becoming slaves! The Maroons, therefore, retreated back into their all but impregnable fortress within the swamp. Others migrated further south to join up with the Maroons already in Florida, or the French claimed lands as far west as present day Louisiana; others still went into the Appalachians, mixing with the Amerindians there or trying to live as cut off from the dominant white controlled society as possible. Consequently, between the end of the Revolutionary War and the start of the Civil War, the Dismal Swamp Maroons held onto their freedom inside of the swamp redoubt.

It was later discovered, moreover, that the Maroons who lived inside of the deepest sections of the swamp had located enough dry grounds to build any number of settlements that included well constructed living quarters and systems of log covered and otherwise concealed pathways. Some of these homes, nevertheless, were built on high platforms for protection from wild animals and sudden changes in the swamp's water level. Furthermore, enough useful ground was found in order to plant crops and grow food, which, in addition to their fishing, hunting and trapping, allowed them to independently sustain their food needs.

On the other hand, the white Maroons living on the edges of the swamp relied on its still heavy undergrowth to conceal their homes which were usually separate structures connected by winding, all but invisible pathways. An outsider could travel through these areas and never run into their dwellings.

As mentioned, those in the interior and those on the edges of the swamp cooperated in facilitating trade with the surrounding white dominated society. This means of sustenance was maintained in addition to a certain amount of brigandage, mainly cattle rustling, for which the Maroons had bred a ferocious line of dogs.

Needless to say, the collective Maroons under no circumstances would allow their people to go without the things needed to remain alive and safe, even if that meant mounting larger raids on the surrounding areas and coping with the resulting intensified searches of the swamp.

But mostly, from the end of the Revolutionary War up until the Civil War, the thousands of Maroons known to occupy the swamp lived an independent existence, only periodically interrupted by mostly futile incursions and searches by posses, militias or bounty hunters.

Freedom fighter Nat Turner and his rebels were headed for the Virginia side of the swamp, but their rebellion was suppressed before they could get there (although some may have made it). More than anything, the Dismal Swamp of those times was viewed and accepted like it was a foreign, independent, hostile territory. A place, above all, never to venture into for fear of its fabled terrain and illusive, crafty and untamed inhabitants. A "spooky place," or so the surrounding enslaved Blacks were taught to believe, which over time kept most of them from seeking refuge there amongst the Maroons. Thus, the losses that the plantations elites suffered because of the Maroon presence in the swamp were not enough to alter their course, so they came to accept and absorb what they couldn't otherwise change.

When the cataclysmic events surrounding the beginning of the Civil War reached the Maroons of the Dismal Swamp, a new generation of Maroon guerrillas thrust themselves forward and almost immediately began to play a little known strategic role against the slave holding system. Emerging from the North Carolina side of the swamp, in particular, the Maroon fighters would eventually become so numerous and militarily powerful that they totally dominated and controlled whole counties and areas of the state. Of note here would be Henry Berry Lowery, a Black who was one of their most effective leaders. After recruiting heavily amongst other Blacks and Amerindians, mounted on fast horses, his forces would dominate large sections of the state for ten years, even after the war was over.

How, one may ask, could that happen in the very heart of the south?

It is true that since the end of the Revolutionary War the Maroons were never numerous or militarily strong enough to venture out of the swamp - except by stealth, or during quick pinpoint raids. The Civil War, however, forced the majority of the white males who supported the slave system to join the fight against the Union Army elsewhere. Assuredly, it was believed enough able-bodied men would be left behind to keep enslaved Blacks docile and terrorized. While that might have worked for a while, the Maroons expanded their numbers by recruiting among Amerindians, fed up "poor whites" and other Blacks who were beginning to flee in larger parties. Plus, one must remember that all of the Maroons were past masters at using guerilla tactics: concealment, living off the land, improvising traps and deadly snares, the ambush, lightening raids and retreats. Plus, after proving their fighting qualities, they could gradually depend on more and more of the enslaved

Blacks, poor whites and Amerindians providing them food, information about the weaknesses of the whites protecting slavery, munitions and recruits.

So within two years of the outbreak of the war, the Maroons had pulled together enough fighters to soundly defeat all of the slavers' available forces. The slavers, in fact, sent official documents to the Confederate government announcing their complete withdrawal from their cause and the Civil War all together! Afterwards, in those "liberated areas," the Maroons and their allies set up a rudimentary framework for a new social order… that the rest of the South would not know until the Reconstruction era.

Even so, in other areas of North Carolina and Virginia the Maroons faced stiffer resistance. On the Virginia side of the swamp, undoubtedly, they had to be more aggressively combative simply because of the swamp's closeness to the heart of Confederate productions at Portsmouth, and not far from their seat of government in Richmond. The latter, in particular, was always simultaneously being threatened by strong Union forces.

Therefore, those Maroons were able to tie down and neutralize sizeable numbers of Confederate troops through the use of their well honed guerilla hit-and-run tactics. The Maroons, even when unable to defeat the Confederates militarily, still found other ways to strategically undermine their war effort, the morale of the troops and their entire infrastructure. Due to their effective use of the Dismal Swamp, any Confederate officer worth his weight in salt knew not to send his men into Maroon territory!

Certainly, the Maroons' most effective blows came from their helping to liberate multitudes of enslaved Blacks! That is a subject that's rarely written about. But, if one wants to understand where the tens of thousands of mostly Black Union soldiers emerged from, in those dark days when the North needed a lot of fresh troops in order to break the Confederates' will, then turn to the so-called "contrabands," which were the thousands upon thousands of enslaved Blacks who were running away from bondage. Indeed, these contrabands provided the overwhelming majority of the two hundred thousand Blacks who fought for the Union, and the Maroons of North Carolina and Virginia played a major role in that undertaking.

Just imagine all of Harriet Tubman's exploits in liberating hundreds of captives, combined with John Brown's vision of the wholesale running off of captives with the guns taken in his failed raid at Harper's Ferry, then multiply that hundreds of times… only then is it possible to grasp the magnitude of the numbers of captives run off by the Maroons.

Secondarily, their experience in cattle rustling was put to such good use, until the Confederacy in their areas of operation began to suffer starvation.

True to their loyalties, the white Maroons who joined the Union force fought in the segregated "colored" units, although they didn't have to.

After the end of the war, the Maroons would fully emerge from the swamp and play important roles in local affairs. Certainly, once one becomes knowledgeable of the hidden parts of history, s/he can better understand just why a country dominated by a white supremacist culture and institutions would go out of it's way to keep it undercover.

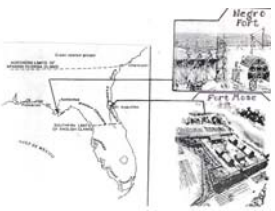
The Seminole

Let's examine another perfidious example of mass deception and miseducation surrounding this subject, namely, the so-called Seminole Wars.

Scholars inform us that the word Seminole comes from the Creek Indian "simano-li," meaning "fugitive" or wild. Furthermore, although later it would apply to an entire ethnic group, originally - get this - it was used by Creeks to describe fugitive or runaway enslaved Africans, in particular, those Africans escaping through Creek country to reach the "sanctuary" of Spanish held Florida in the 1700's. By then, a section of the Creeks were breaking off from the main body and also making their way there. The African Seminoles (who the Spanish dubbed Negro Seminoles) were already there - so the ethnic name is as much rightly theirs as the Amerindian Seminoles.

Thus, it's totally wrong to see Seminoles as Amerindians who befriended and mixed with Africans. Instead, they are the result of a coming together of the two to form the ethnicity. Apparently, they eventually came together in Florida because they both needed the help of the other; in defense from slave catchers and other Creeks not content with the separation.

To better grasp the deceit that continues to surround our subject we have to closely examine what the Seminoles are best known for: the First and Second Seminole Wars. The first ended in 1819, and the second lasted from 1835-1842. In truth, there were other Seminole Wars.



Everyone is led to accept the misleading title Seminole Wars, when in reality they started as slave catching expeditions, and that always played a major role in the conflicts. This is because the expanding plantation slave holders could no longer tolerate a sanctuary for their runaways in Florida. Over and over their emissaries and military commanders made it crystal clear to the Amerindian Seminoles that if they would de-

tach themselves from the African Seminoles, they would no longer be a party in the wars.

Yet in popular depictions, most literature, docudramas and movies, one can hardly read about or see a Black person…

At the same time, the United States government eventually joined forces with the slavers and expanded the venture into a land grab. In fact, they had long been uncomfortable with Spain occupying the Florida peninsula, and after it changed hands with England several times, the latter using the panhandle as a military base in the War of 1812, by 1815 they decided to do something drastic about it.

So, they sent Indian killer Andrew Jackson to Florida to start the First Seminole War. That said, the country's archives contain many of Jackson's own letters clearly spelling out his two-fold mission of capturing runaway slaves, and forcing Spain to give up Florida all together. He failed to capture any significant number of runaways, but was successful in starting the war, and thereafter Spain was forced to "sell" Florida to the U.S. in 1819. The collective Seminoles, however, never gave in to Jackson and his soldiers; fighting pitched battles and eventually a guerilla war until Jackson finally just withdrew most of his troops - and simply proclaimed victory.

Sound familiar? For their part, the Seminoles just migrated to areas not under control of the forces Jackson left behind; which was just about everywhere but a few growing towns and the few that Spain had founded. Consequently, until the outbreak of the Second Seminole War, African and Amerindian Seminoles built their own towns and settlements all over the rest of Florida. In addition, they again established a strong agriculture and livestock base to sustain themselves with, and for trade.

Usually, Africans and Amerindians lived in separate town and settlements. Thus, the admixture between them never reached the degree that it did in the Dismal Swamp. Nevertheless, they still intermarried, and one of those mixed marriages was to play a strategic role in later events. In addition, since the U.S. had nominal control of the peninsula, plantation owners began to acquire unused land and bring in enslaved Africans, while even a substantial number from there and out of state tried to get long held fugitive slave warrants served on African Seminoles, claiming to have owned their ancestors - and by law them too. Spain had, however, granted their ancestors freedom, in return for serving on the border militia.

Therefore the African and Amerindian Seminoles began the practice of "adopting" each other as nominal slave and slave owner. That practice all but put a halt to the prosecuting of most of those old warrants, for which

the Africans gave some crops to the Amerindians for the service, but otherwise were totally free. Moreover, both groups continued to peacefully coexist as they always had.

Still, things could not remain in that position for two primary reasons. The plantation owners wanted to expand throughout the area, and the peninsula was still a sanctuary for "new" runaways from the local plantations and the neighboring states of Georgia and Alabama. In fact, to get a clearer picture, one must see Florida as a base from which fugitive Africans would carry on a low level guerilla war with the neighboring areas for the purpose of rescuing their loved ones still in bondage, and in encouraging others to join and strengthen their ranks - for over 100 years! Complicating things for the slavers was the fact that nothing seemed to shake the African/Amerindian Seminole alliance.

Picture this: American emissaries and other government officials trying to negotiate slave catching arrangements with Amerindian Seminole chiefs, who had African Seminole interpreters and advisors. In addition, the absurdity of trying to get certain chiefs to agree to turn over Africans whom they had known all their lives, some of whom were relatives, many who had been comrades in arms, and who the chiefs had otherwise only known as free individuals - but since their ancestors had escaped slavery, they were now also supposed to be slaves and turned over to strangers… Finally, and this must be emphasized due to our own racial fears, there was a lot of selfless love between the African and Amerindian Seminoles… not lip service love, but the kind of love that manifests itself in situations that endanger lives!

A clear example of the latter was the "blood pact" entered into by both parties - at the prodding of Africans - that dictated that any Amerindian Seminole who tried to deliver an African into slavery was to be killed by their own people. History's most recognized Amerindian Seminole, Osceola, showed where he stood by killing a powerful Amerindian Seminole chief when it was discovered that the latter had broken the pact. Afterwards, and until his death, Osceola would be held in high esteem by the Africans, and when he was captured during the war, it was discovered that his personal guards were mostly African Seminoles.

Osceola, Seminole leader, refused to turn his allies over to slaveholders.

Earlier, Osceola was married to an African woman who was separated from him and put into chains during the couple's visit to a U.S. government settlement. He was also jailed briefly, while his wife was sold into slavery and transported north.

This state of affairs came to a head in 1835, when a U.S. Army commander's plan to capture some Africans backfired when the guide, an enslaved African, led his soldiers into a prearranged trap. In the ensuing bloody encounter, an entire company of over one hundred American army soldiers were

killed. The African Seminoles suffered only slightly. Almost at the same time, Osceola and other warriors ambushed and killed the government official who had ordered the enslavement of his wife. Thereafter, all over the peninsula Seminoles opened generalized warfare against the U.S. government, and all those believed to be in league with them.

The collective Seminoles, though extremely capable fighters when employing guerilla tactics, still found themselves hard pressed when the U.S. sent in massive numbers of army, marine and navy troops, along with thousands of state militia, mercenaries, settlers, slave catchers and adventurers. In particular, the Seminole women and children suffered terribly from the constant fighting and movement. Yet, for seven years they fought on.

In a testament to the resiliency of the African/Amerindian alliance and ties, neither group ever fell victim to ploys to divide them. In fact, they fought successive American commanders and new infusions of troops to a stand still, forcing the last commander to reject all direction and advice from Washington and the slavers, and instead concentrate his efforts on trying to get the collective Seminoles to agree to migrate to Oklahoma territory, where they could occupy lands in close proximity to other Amerindian ethnic groups who had also been forced to leave the east coast: the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw and their kin, the Creeks.

Wisely, the last commander also ignored the insistence of the plantation owners that he use his soldiers and sailors to insure that the fugitive slave warrants were served on any of the African Seminoles. Instead, he either got the U.S. government to pay the slavers out of tax monies, or more often than not, he just had his junior officers "cook the books" allowing any Amerindian Seminoles who were willing to migrate to "adopt" African Seminoles as their alleged property" and take them with them. Overriding all criticisms, he roughly rebuked all naysayers by noting that the last thing needed on a plantation was a veteran African Seminole warrior! Even so, the commander had to transport respected African and Amerindian Seminoles west to inspect the new settlements, and on their return, they had to painstakingly locate the Seminoles guerilla hideouts and convince them the migrate.

As is well known, nevertheless, the U.S. could never fully dislodge all of the Seminoles. So, once again, they just declared victory, ended all hostilities with the remaining Seminoles (whose direct descendants are still in Florida), and got on with establishing plantation based slavery all around them.

Was the struggle against slavery over for the African Seminoles? Hardly! In fact, as soon the collective Seminoles began arriving in the allotted Oklahoma areas, other slave holders and former mercenary war veterans who had fought with the Americans in Florida began their own efforts to try to serve fugitive warrants against African Seminoles.

After a couple of near showdowns, most of the collective Seminoles left Oklahoma for Mexico. On the way, thanks to their finely honed survival and fighting skills, they were able to fend off attacks by hostile Amerindians and whites alike. So, since Mexico had already abolished slavery, they applied for asylum and some land to work. For their part, the Mexican government was glad to have them in their border regions - having learned of their legendary fighting abilities during their recent war with the U.S. Thus, the Mexican government offered them large tracts of unused land, if they would agree to protect that section of their border from both marauding Amerindians and whites from Texas. Both the African and Amerindian Seminoles agreed, and up until the end of the American Civil War 20 years later and the abolition of slavery, they effectively protected the area, while otherwise establishing secure and productive settlements.

After the Civil War, however, many of the collective Seminoles returned and settled in the U.S. Regrettably, the African Seminoles lent their superior tracking skills to the U.S. Army's Buffalo Soldiers, and both of these Black descendants of enslaved people aided the U.S. in the near destruction on the Southwest Amerindians - a very shameful episode in an otherwise illustrious history.

That aside, the Seminole Wars, in particular the Second Seminole War, remains as a shining example of diverse peoples coming together to resist and over come everything in their path - in defeating attempts to impose the barbaric system of chattel slavery on the members.

Finally, out of the daily retelling of the fabled renditions of America's "cowboys and Indians" and "Fort Apache" style fair, you have to be a scholar to learn that out of all of America's so called Indian Wars, the Second Seminole War was the most costly to them in both human and material losses! Plus, it's probably the only one they cannot boast of winning!

But, of course it really wasn't just an Indian War, was it? So why talk about it?! Today, the Seminoles' descendants can be found in Oklahoma, Texas and Mexico. All still fiercely proud of their distinct history and heritage, with many still speaking their own pidgin dialects and practicing their own customs.

The Underground Railroad

The storied and much celebrated Underground Railroad (U.G.R.R) is another subject that still demands study in order to more firmly grasp it's magnitude, historical significance and to determine what lessons it holds that we may be failing to come to grips with.

Here we will examine:

- It's dimensions & It's defiance of the government and popular sentiments
- Why it was one of the two main causes of the Civil War and the "emancipation" of the enslaved Blacks.

Submerged in a welter of stories that attempt to focus our minds and imaginations on the creativity of the many, the heroism of others and the sacrifices of others, very rarely do we examine the true magnitude and scope of the underground railroad and it's historical accomplishments. Moreover, since slavery was such a lucrative money maker of an institution, a mountain of papers surrounded it. Many of those are still available for us to study.

It can confidently be said that by the beginning of the Civil War, there were more then one hundred thousand fugitive slaves in Canada, and thousands more in Mexico. Just about all of them having received some direct or indirect assistance from the U.G.R.R. Yet Mexico is usually not even mentioned as a destination on the U.G.R.R.-- but it was, and our already mentioned collective Seminoles played a key role that.

Think about it: "100,000 plus runaways," while four million were still in bondage in the south. That roughly equals the proportion all of today's Blacks in jail and prisons to the overall Black population of this country!

Canada became the main destination (other then the northern states) after the U.S. passed a "aggressive" Fugitive slave Law in 1850 since England (Canada's ruler) had outlawed slavery, and would tolerate no violations of it's territory by slave catchers.

Mexico, on the other hand, was open to those fleeing from Texas, but once there they would have to form "fighting alliances" with either our Seminoles or other Amerindian in order to protect their freedom from regular, aggressive slave catching expeditions from Texas, a replay of Seminoles days in Florida.

Finally, an unknown number of runaways remained in the cities and towns, organ-

ized to defend themselves – not counting those Maroons still in the south's swamps, backcountry, foothills and mountains.

Never before or since has this country had to cope with such a huge segment of it's people offering such widespread, "militant" and economically damaging opposition to it's authority and control.

Still, the popular conception is that the U.G.R.R. and it's "Abolitionist" had a free ride, which included "overall" support outside of the south. Notwithstanding it's breadth and depth, that is far from the reality! Admittedly, in certain places like Oberlin, Ohio and Boston, Massachusetts, abolition of slavery was supported by sizeable segments of the populace, but in most northern areas it remained a "minorities" agenda. We know that because they could not get enough people behind them to stop the repressive arms of the state from interfering with their activities.

Furthermore, in a number of northern areas rich and powerful people and those in their employ relied on slavery to keep their livelihood and profits in tact. Banking, manufacturing of farm instruments, chains, shackles, insurance and key political alliances all relied on the profits of slavery. No, the widespread and militant activities were carried on by the runaways themselves, and their U.G.R.R. supporters.

Consequently, Abolitionist in many places were periodically assaulted, jailed and killed. Moreover, their homes and families were burnt or attacked. They were arrested, imprisoned and generally never truly safe. Finally, the true Abolitionist was one who either directly or indirectly supported the U.G.R.R. and thus also had to be ready to defend runaways, associates and neighbors from armed and dangerous slave catchers and the authorities backing them – who, contrary to what's usually highlighted – were more often then not their own neighbors, looking to gain a reward for identifying and kidnapping "runaways" and "free" Blacks alike.

Certainly, the so-called "Treason at Christiana" in 1851 is instructive as to the plight of both runaways and Abolitionist alike. Christiana, Lancaster County Pennsylvania is not far from Philadelphia – the main U.G.R.R. hub on the east coast… both on the "Mason Dixon Line," the official divide between the northern and southern states and Pennsylvania and Maryland: free and slave states. Thus, a secondary but still much used U.G.R.R. escape route.

Enter William Parker and his wife, two Black runaways from Maryland who worked a small farm near Christiana for about ten years. Along with them lived the wife's runaway mother, as well as their children. The farm itself was on lands leased to them by local White Abolitionist. In addition, there were other Black farmers nearby – both free and runaways.

Even so, Parker and the others were not just farmers. In fact, they constituted a active, aggressive and very effective armed section of the U.G.R.R. As such, for years they had protected themselves, other runaways, free Blacks and the U.G.R.R. traffic from slave catching bounty hunters, which more often then not, were from neighboring communities. They had fought pitched gun battles with them, rode down and rescued kidnapped Blacks and tried to rescue others from the local jail. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, however, their situation was worsened. That act "commanded" all citizens – both north and south- to actively assist in the capture of fugitive slaves. All of the slavers and bounty hunters were greatly emboldened by it. So, the stage was set for the subsequent Christiana events.

As it were, a Maryland slaver received information that he could capture some of his runaway "property" in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Straightaway, he assembled his son, another relative and others and proceed to a Federal Courthouse in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where he obtained an official warrant to capture his property. In addition, he was also appointed or hired a Federal Deputy and a city policeman to help in the undertaking.

Afterwards, this posse took a train out to Lancaster County; but unknown to them a U.G.R.R. "courier" was also on the train- in their very coach- watching their every move. Low and behold, a Philadelphia U.G.R.R. spy had sent word to the local "Vigilance Committee" of what was learned about the warrant at the courthouse, prompting them to dispatch the courier to warn Parker and company. Thereafter, on the following day, the posse bribed someone to tell them that the two runaways they sought were hold up on Parkers farm. There, the Parkers and others waited whatever was to come.

As things turned out, the slavers boldly entered the ground floor of the Parkers home, while exhibiting the type of bluster one would expect, while the Parker's and other fugitives at first were on the second floor. Descending, Parker and some White Abolitionist tried to get the slavers to leave- to no avail. Thus, Parker's wife began to sound an alarm by using a window to send out blasts on a bugle. That caused a slaver to climb a tree and shoot into the window. Only causing her to duck down and continue to blow. In short order other Blacks began to show up – armed to their teeth.

Afterwards, things degenerated into a shooting, cutting and fighting melee. Before long all but one of the slavers were either wounded or being chased through the countryside by the Blacks. The ringleader, moreover, after being wounded was "finished off by the women." No Blacks were seriously hurt.

In the aftermath, of course, the government leveled a lot of repression on the re-

maining Blacks and the White Abolitionist, going as far as to jail and try both groups. They all, however, were exonerated, and all of the runaways and their children escaped through the U.G.R.R. – except the elderly mother.

In Oberlin and other northern areas similar "militant" actions were taken: invading courtrooms and jails to forcibly rescue and spirit away fugitives, overpowering any guards or like minded individuals, usually resulting in some Abolitionist being arrested and tried.

Then, there were the "Vigilance Committees," U.G.R.R. "Conductors" and "Stockholders". Those brave and committed individuals, along with their public agitators, newspapers, and a handful of elected officials were the "technicians" of the movement, while it's "heart and soul" was always the runaways themselves. The latter, as is well documented, used all manner of creativity, ruses and violence, to escape on foot, by carriage, horseback, boat, box (Henry "Box" Brown was only one of a number of men and women known to have shipped themselves – as freight – to freedom); and on most of these flights, some U.G.R.R. were involved… north, south, east, and west.

Make no mistake about it, the U.G.R.R. was anchored by a cadre of truly "selfless" people addressing each other with respect, warmth and commitment: "Dear Friend William Still," (Philadelphia's brave, intelligent and masterful Vigilance Committee head). "Dear Friend." "Esteemed Friend," "Dear Friend and Brother," " Truly thy Friend," " Thine for the poor Slave" and on and on… Whether motivated by religious convictions or otherwise, the dispassionate student cannot help but reach that conclusion. Indeed, a study of the huge amount of extant U.G.R.R. correspondence, coupled with what's known of their risks and sacrifices, makes any detractors seem foolish or narrow minded ideologues whom you can be assured cannot themselves produce similar bona fides.

And remember, this ain't no chess or debating club we're talking about! Harriet Tubman always went armed and vowed never to be taken alive. Levi Coffin had armed relatives to protect his person and home. John Brown helped Blacks in the north set up a armed section of the U.G.R.R., like the Parkers in Lancaster County. And, for two decades after leaving Florida, the Seminoles in Mexico fought off any number of large and small parties of slave catchers.

Add to that, this wonderful correspondence could just as easily land the "Friends" and U.G.R.R. writers in jail-or worse! if it were to fall in the wrong hands. Even more astonishing, they were not being paid to take these risks, they were not "drafted' by any government and only a few were professional politicians.

Thus, the author having himself spent decades as part of a similar 1960's generated "Movement", can readily recognize the same type of altruism that he's been fortunate enough to witness amongst his own comrades (latter day "Friends").

Clearly then, this moral and humane endeavor played a major role in "forcing' the entire country to ultimately involve itself in a bloody clash to resolve the slavery issue. Yes, the emerging industrial system in the north, depending as it did on "wage slavery" was on a collision course with the south's system of "unpaid labor". Never the less, on the eve of the Civil War, there were more "millionaire" (slavers) in the Mississippi Delta then could be found in all areas outside of it-- a Southern Aristocracy that had absolutely no intention or incentive to abolish slavery. If anything, they were busy trying to spread it to the lands from which the Amerindians were being pushed off. Consequently, if the "U.G.R.R. and the abolitionist had not forced them to "panic" and secede from the Union"- provoking the Civil War- there's no telling how many more decades their system could have survived!

Thus, the U.G.R.R. stands as the most "Militant Egalitarian Movement" this country has ever seen. Others have come close; Women's Suffrage Movement, Labor Movement, Civil Rights Movement and the Anti Vietnam War Movement. But it's beyond argument to suggest that any of those movements had to tackle and defeat the most heinous form of oppression known: chattel slavery!

In a separate category, however, must be placed the Black, Native American, Puerto Rican and Chicano/Mexicano "Liberation Movements". Militant is not a word that fits these struggles' needs. They need "Revolutionary" changes, something never sought by the U.G.R.R. or most Abolitionist.

Finally, from my studies, it seems as though history is reluctant to bring forth the type of mass selflessness displayed by the participants in the U.G.R.R. – except once every few generations. Maybe the following generation(s) just feel as though they should rest and collect and enjoy the fruits of their forerunners sacrifices.

That said, the author challenges readers to more closely study the resistance to slavery in North America, and then look in the mirror and ask yourself just where you fit in the historical drama? How do you measure up to the generations outlined here, that had so much effect on events until today's oppressors try very hard to keep their "Real" accomplishments hidden?

Books to read:

"Hidden Americans" : Maroons of Virginia and the Carolina's," by Hugo Leaming-Bey

"Maroon Societies" , Richard Price

"To Be Free" , Herbert Aptheker

"The Exiles of Florida" , J.R. Giddings

" Black Indians", William L. Katz

"Underground Railroad" , William Still

" But We Have No Country" , Ella Forbes

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