

Shirley Boteler-Mock and Mike Davis

Seminole Black Culture on the Texas Frontier

I'd like to see the whole story told before I die...Most of us are pretty scattered out now, scattered out or dead.

—San Antonio Express News, 1990
Miss Charles Wilson, tribal historian

A small, dusty side road outside Brackettville leads to a small well-tended cemetery, bounded by a barbed wire fence and scrub brush. Established on the Fort Clark reservation in 1872, its obscurity belies its importance in the history of Texas. Here lie the 100 or more Seminole black scouts and their families, and four distinguished Medal of Honor winners. These people known for their horsemanship, scouting, and courage played a major role in defending communities and forts on the Texas frontier.

Seminole black culture and history is the focus of the ongoing research described in this collaborative paper. The project was born out of a 1993 Cultural Resource Management Project (CRM) in Brackettville, Texas, at two sites—41KY18 and 41KY68—located within the limits of the Seminole black village as depicted on a 1910 U.S. Army Quartermaster plane table map of the Fort Clark military compound.

The fruits of this project were many; however, the recovery of a house foundation and artifacts in the Seminole village at 41KY68 by Mike Davis and ethnographic interviews and research

conducted by Shirley Boteler-Mock revealed significant new information. Such a collaboration has the power to make substantive contributions to a reconstruction of both the behavioral and physical aspects of the Seminole black culture, enhancing greater anthropological understanding than a single strategy would allow by itself.*

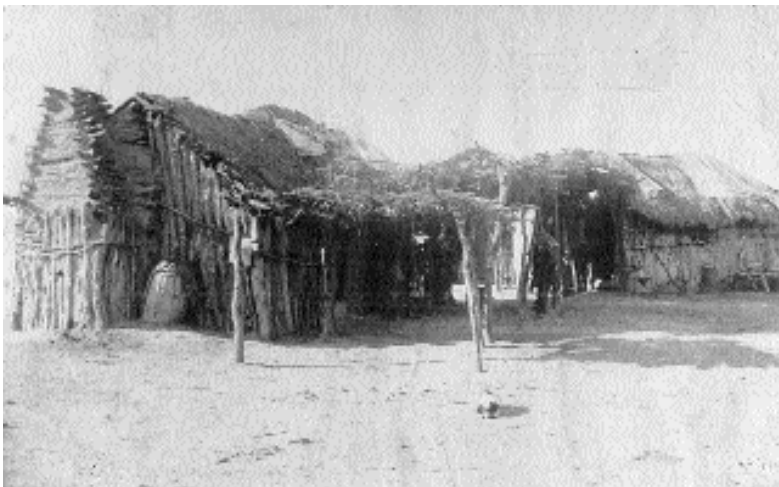
Seminole Black History

One of the distinctive and fascinating cultures of Texas, the present-day Seminole blacks are descendants of runaway black slaves (maroons) who took shelter in the early 1800s with the Seminole Indians in Florida. The Seminole Indians in Florida practiced a modified form of slavery; however, maroons essentially controlled most aspects of their existence, living in their own villages, owning property, and having their own leaders. Some intermarriage did occur between the two neighbors. Both groups shared the common goal of resisting European intrusions into their homeland and a desire for independence. During the frequent border skirmishes and Indian Wars, the Seminole blacks enhanced their fighting skills and evasive tactics of guerrilla-like warfare in the Florida swamp lands; skills which would lead to their eventual deployment to Fort Duncan on the Texas frontier as Indian scouts.

Following the Indian Wars, the Seminole blacks were forcibly moved with their Seminole allies to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. After suffering harsh treatment at the hands of the slave owners and oppression by the Creeks, groups of Seminoles, Seminole blacks, and other runaways began desperate migrations to Mexico, where slavery was not practiced. One journey, in particular, began in 1850 and taking nearly a year, was led by the great Seminole chief, Wild Cat (Coacoochee), and John Horse (Juan Caballo), the Seminole black chief. During this trek, making camps near Waco, along the Llano River, and at Las Moras Springs (near Fort Clark and Brackettville), they were constantly chased by slave hunters.

After crossing the Rio Grande at Eagle Pass, the Mexican government granted the Seminole blacks asylum and gave them supplies, provisions, and title to lands or *sitios* in the state of Coahuila. In return the Seminole blacks, because of their

The Seminole blacks lived in adobe jacals or chink houses in the village on Las Moras Creek outside Fort Clark. Photo courtesy the Institute of Texan Cultures.



Seminole black scouts at Fort Clark, Texas, c. 1885. Photo courtesy Institute of Texan Cultures.

fierce reputation, were expected to act as an effective deterrent to Indian raids along the Mexican border. Eventually, the Seminole blacks would start a small community, the *hacienda* of Nacimiento at the headwaters of the Rio San Juan Sabinas, northwest of Muzquiz. At this time they were also given the official designation, *Mascogos*, a term still used to describe the Nacimiento maroons today.

Seminole black ties to Texas strengthened after the Civil War, accelerated by the return of their Seminole Indian allies back to Indian Territory. In 1870, U.S. military officials, plagued by Indian raids on settlements and seeing value in their scouting and diplomatic skills with Indian tribes, persuaded the Seminole blacks to return to Texas. In July of that year, a small group moved to Fort Duncan and two years later, another contingent of Seminole blacks moved to Fort Clark, becoming a unit and fighting their first military engagement. The scouts and their families occupied land south of the fort on both sides of Las Moras Creek.

We'd have baptisms right in the river, and cook food over the fires,...Sometimes they'd cook a whole goat in the ground, head and all....If we didn't have dolls we'd take sticks or something and our parents would carve faces on them. Our houses had dirt floors, except the living rooms would be board floors. Any company got entertained in the living room.

—Miss Charles Wilson
San Antonio Express News, 1994

Here they continued to speak their Creole language called Gullah, a survival of their southeastern and African heritage; however, many who had lived in Mexico were also fluent in Spanish. Fort Clark became their home base through the early 1880s as the scouts performed exemplary duty in the Texas Indian campaigns of Bullis, Shafer, and other military leaders. Under Bullis's leadership for eight years, the Seminole black scouts were to embark on a period of intense border wars, many of their future postings being at outlying posts such as San Pedro Springs, Elm Creek, Camp Meyers Spring, Camp Del Rio, and Painted Cave.

With the final removal of Indian tribes to reservations outside Texas, the scouts fought their last battle in 1881 and their residence on Fort Clark became problematic. The War Department determined that Seminole black families would be removed from the fort and were entitled to no allotments since they were black and, despite their mixed blood, not considered Seminole. Forced from their homes, some families returned to



Nacimiento, Coahuila, while others traveled to Indian Territory in Oklahoma to settle among Seminole blacks who had not migrated south to Texas in 1849. Yet, a few families, often destitute and dependent for handouts, remained in Brackettville until 1914 when the Seminole scouts were disbanded. Descendants, such as Miss Charles Wilson, granddaughter of the illustrious Seminole black chief, Sampson July, and a community spokesperson and educator, still live in Brackettville; however, the majority have spread out to other parts of Texas or the United States.

Current Research

ITC, in particular, with research grants from the Summerlee Foundation, and in collaboration with the Texas Historic Commission, The Fort Clark Springs Association, and the Fort Clark Springs Museum, has been actively engaged in the act of recording Seminole black culture and history by developing the following projects:

- Recordation of oral interviews with key Seminole black elders in Nacimiento and Texas
- Production of a video documentary entitled "Singing to the Ancestors: Revitalization Attempts Among the Seminole Blacks" (with ITC Director of Media Production, Leslie Burns)
- Outreach activities such as classroom presentations and university lectures
- Integration of Seminole black history and culture into the African-American area of the ITC Exhibit Floor
- Involvement of the Seminole blacks in preservation efforts and public forums
- Development and production of an exhibit on Seminole black culture that will travel to selected museums in Texas.

These projects have centered on core themes:

- How new beliefs acquired have been layered over traditional beliefs and practices, to accommodate a diversity of needs among the Seminole blacks of Texas and Mexico

- The dynamics of gender and the representation of women in Seminole black culture
- How Seminole black descendants assimilate new interests and influences into their culture, while holding on to the tenuous threads of the past.
- The changes through time in the two communities, Nacimiento and Brackettville, and reasons for these changes

Today, the Seminole blacks of Mexico, Texas, and those remaining in Oklahoma continue their attempts to maintain ties between the various groups through yearly reunions at Brackettville during Juneteenth and Seminole Days. The Seminole scout cemetery just outside Brackettville, containing the remains of four scout Medal of Honor winners, survives as a dramatic symbol of historic time and place and a link with the Seminole black ancestors. As Miss Charles notes:

My grandfather, my mother, even a lot of those of us who weren't in the military, we're all buried here. The Julys, the Jeffersons, the others, we were all cousins (*Fort Worth Star Telegram*, March 1990).

Note

* Subsequent to this, the prospects of expanding this research as well as a continued commitment to the collaboration were enhanced by the present authors' new positions: Shirley Boteler-Mock at the Institute of Texan Cultures (ITC) at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and Mike Davis at The Office of the State Archeologist (OSA) of the Texas Historical Commission (THC). Thus ITC, a multicultural institution focused on the history and culture of Texas, and OSA/THC are presently conjoined in a common mission: to continue documenting the history and culture of the Seminole blacks and assist them in revitalization efforts.

Dr. Shirley Boteler-Mock is a Research Associate at the Institute of Texan Cultures of the University of Texas at San Antonio in San Antonio, Texas.

Mike Davis is an archeologist with the Office of the State Archeologist, the Texas Historic Commission in Austin, Texas.

Jenny Masur and Kent Lancaster

Interpreting Slavery at Hampton NHS

Hampton National Historical Site, Towson, Maryland, contains the core of the Hampton estate, which belonged to seven generations of the Ridgely family from the 1740s-1940s. The huge and beautiful mansion is known for its careful reconstructions of earlier periods in the family history. Exciting research is now underway on the work force that made gracious living at the site possible, particularly the African Americans, who at one point numbered as many as 329 under Ridgely control.

The Ridgelys were the consummate record-keepers. Mrs. Eliza Ridgely (1803-67), for example, recorded her every expenditure down to five cents for a year of ribbon for her own use and \$1.27 for cloth for slave clothing. A working socialite, the mistress of a great plantation, she was typical of the family who produced and saved an enormous number of documents detailing their history. Most of these records are now at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, the

Maryland State Archives in Annapolis, or in the Park collection. Scores of long account books, thousands of brief receipts for purchases, letters, runaway advertisements, diaries, lists of clothing and shoes given out, and other sources are available to reconstruct slave life at this site for more than a century before the Civil War.

Two interesting examples are a list of "Christmas Gifts of the Colored Children of Hampton" kept by a daughter of the house from 1841-54 and a letter from a Washington lawyer in 1866 to Master John Ridgely demanding the return of property—including "furs and muff" and "6 prs of white lace sleeves"—claimed as her property by Lucy Jackson, a former slave. Of more importance, though, are recently discovered documents, which permit identification of large numbers of slaves by age and, it is hoped, eventually by family groupings. These documents open various avenues of understanding of the Hampton community.

By his will, Governor Charles Ridgely manumitted his slaves in 1829. Controlled to some