

The Evacuation of South Florida, 1704-1760

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Abstract

The fall of Spanish Florida's western mission chain between 1704 and 1706 brought the ravages of the English-sponsored Indian slave trade into South Florida, which had previously remained isolated from intensive European contact for more than a century. The peninsula was quickly evacuated, with Indian refugees coalescing both to the south around present-day Miami and the Florida Keys and to the north around St. Augustine. Final remnants of both groups independently settled in Cuba in 1760 and 1763, leaving the entire southern peninsula under Creek domination. This paper presents newly-discovered details and ongoing analysis of this process.

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For Southeastern archaeologists and historians studying the impact of the European colonial era on indigenous chiefdoms, South Florida has always remained something of an anomaly, a forgotten stepchild that doesn't seem to fit in either with Spanish Florida and its missions, or with the rest of the Southeastern Indians who ultimately became trading partners with the English and French. Though most are at least aware of the Spanish ethnohistorical record of the Calusa and other South Florida Indians during the colonial era, there seems little obvious connection between these groups and the currents of change that ultimately swept across the colonial Southeast during the 16th through 18th centuries. Even researchers specializing in colonial Spanish Florida seem to find little common ground with South Florida, which was effectively *tierra incognita* throughout much of this era.

To be fair, South Florida differs greatly from the rest of the Southeast in many fundamental respects, not the least of which is its semi-tropical climate and its low relief punctuated by sandy soils, karstic landscapes, and vast wetlands. Furthermore, its indigenous inhabitants differed in many important ways from their northern neighbors, lacking intensive agriculture and possessing a patrilineal social system. In sum, South Florida *was* different, but not so different as to make its inhabitants somehow immune to the forces that swept across the Southeast during the European colonial era. Of course, the end result was virtually the same as for most other groups—cultural extinction in the face of rampant disease and warfare—but the unique location and character of South Florida provided a protective buffer that delayed the worst effects of the colonial era in the short term, but which ultimately made the trauma all the more quick and violent in the end. Detailed examination of this process as it unfolded in South Florida, however, provides a significant comparison and contrast with other Southeastern Indians who experienced similar though distinct trajectories of change. Ultimately, South Florida

represents an important and distinctive case-study from which to extrapolate generalizations about the nature of culture change during the European colonial era.

Throughout the entire colonial era, South Florida was far more intimately connected to Havana than it ever was to St. Augustine, despite the fact that Spanish Florida's political jurisdiction theoretically reached all the way to the Florida Keys. Beginning as early as the 1560s, when three forts were maintained for between 1 and 3 years at Calos, Tequesta, and Tocobaga, it was Havana that maintained the closest and most regular contact, also providing provisions and supplies in large part because of its proximity. When a Franciscan mission finally arrived at Calos in 1697, they too were based in Havana, and virtually all subsequent interaction between the Calusa and the Spanish was directed southward to Havana. For all intents and purposes, colonial Spanish Florida extended directly west from St. Augustine to Apalachee, incorporating all agricultural peoples in northern Florida, including the Timucua and Apalachee. But most of South Florida was effectively ignored by St. Augustine, and normally by-passed by ships that circumnavigated the peninsula to carry on trade with Apalachee. Indeed, if anything, Spanish officials actually tended to avoid the hostile Indians of South Florida, whose reputation for imprisoning and executing shipwrecked sailors was spread far and wide. The only regular interaction that was carried on between St. Augustine and South Florida was an illicit trade in ambergris with the smaller chiefdoms of the Atlantic seaboard, punctuated by the occasional rescue mission to salvage shipwrecks and barter captives. But of all the places in South Florida, the heartland of the Calusa along the Southwest coast seems to have been the most explicitly avoided, and the fact that there were only two documented Spanish visits to the Calusa capitol during more than a century following the withdrawal of Fort San Antón in 1569 suggests that the

Calusa policy of isolationism was tremendously effective, allowing the Calusa to maintain their culture largely intact through the first decade of the 18th century.

Of considerable importance, during this same period the Calusa appear to have been able to weather radical population loss presumably due to European plagues, and were still an intact, functional, indigenous chiefdom by the time Franciscans arrived in 1697, nearly two centuries after their first skirmishes with Juan Ponce de León in 1513. The earliest population estimate available for the Calusa places their population at 20,000 people in the 1560s, while the Franciscans guessed that the Calusa chief controlled only 2,000 people in the 1690s. Although some of this 90% loss may well represent a fragmentation of regional political power, there seems no doubt that epidemic depopulation did indeed affect the Calusa and other South Florida Indians during the course of the late 16th and 17th centuries. Nevertheless, documentary details from the Franciscan mission of 1697 reveal that the Calusa villages along the Southwest Florida coast bore the same names, and in exactly the same order, as recorded by Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda some 125 years earlier. Despite apparently enormous population losses, the Calusa were still living and fishing in the same villages that they had been at first Spanish contact, suggesting that depopulation alone was not enough to destroy the Calusa political or settlement system, or to erase most of the fundamental elements of their indigenous culture.

In the end, the Calusa and other South Florida Indians were not brought to their knees by Spanish colonization or the spread of European plagues, but rather by the juggernaut of the Indian slave trade, originating in the English colonies to the north. The long-lived policy of isolationism and resistance under which the Calusa and others had lived for so many decades as neighbors of Spanish Florida ultimately proved to be their downfall. What had successfully kept the forces of Spanish colonialism at bay for nearly two centuries also ensured that the Calusa and

other South Florida Indians possessed neither the firearms to defend themselves, nor the political relationships to garner Spanish support and protection. Backed by Spanish troops, Florida's mission Indians withstood the onslaught of English-sponsored slave raiding for nearly half a century between 1659 and 1706, but the unallied Indians of South Florida were almost wholly decimated during the 7 years between 1704 and 1711. What had withstood nearly two centuries of European presence was annihilated in less than a decade.

The western mission chain of Spanish Florida stood as a bulwark against the worst hostilities of the slave raiding through the last decade of the 17th century, but even when gaps in the Camino Real were opened up as missions were relocated for protection, the presence of the Apalachee and Timucua missions still provided a magnet to confine slave raids to northern Florida. There is no evidence of any substantial penetration of the southern Florida peninsula until 1704, when the Apalachee province fell in a series of combined Creek-English attacks that resulted in the enslavement of more than 1,200 Christian Apalachee. With the destruction of the western hub of the Florida mission chain, the mission Indians retreated eastward, falling back again in 1705 and in 1706 as Creek and Yamasee Indian raids intensified. By May of 1706, the last surviving mission Indians had been withdrawn to the protection of St. Augustine, leaving the western frontier effectively unoccupied and undefended.

With the 1704-1706 collapse of the western mission chain, peninsular Spanish Florida lay completely open and utterly vulnerable for continued raids by armed bands of Yamasee and Creek Indians, who rapidly plunged deep into the heart of South Florida. Spanish documents are largely silent as to the details of this newest wave of attacks, though subsequent accounts indicate that as early as 1704, the chief of Cayo Hueso, or Key West, was granted permission to immigrate with his people as refugees from such raids to Cuba. The Florida governor later

lamented in 1715 that he had been unable to prevent the coastline of Carlos and the rest of South Florida from being overrun three years earlier, and had only been able to save those in the immediate environs of St. Augustine.

Details of one memorable slave raid that probably took place during these first few years after the collapse of the missions were recorded by Carolina Indian trader Thomas Nairne, and subsequently published posthumously. Accompanying a band of 33 Yamasee raiders on an expedition upriver and south along the then-unguarded St. Johns River, the party disembarked and traveled overland south through the central Florida lake district and deep into South Florida, ultimately capturing some 35 slaves before a counter-attack by 33 Indian warriors armed only with spears, all of whom were killed.

As early as 1708, in a letter accompanying a newly-drawn map of the Southeastern borderlands, Nairne himself reported that the Florida peninsula had been largely depopulated of its native Indians, noting that the Yamasee at that time were "now obliged to goe down as farr on the point of Florida as the firm land will permitt," continuing that "they have drove the Floridians to the Islands of the Cape, have brought in and sold many hundreds of them, and dayly now continue that trade so that in some few years thay'le reduce these barbarians to a farr less number." Nairne's comment that the South Florida Indians had been driven beyond the reach of dry land, past the Everglades and into the Florida Keys, is confirmed by details of the 1720 Moll map on which his earlier Yamasee raid was also reported. The map shows "many villages" located in the southeastern tip of the Florida peninsula, confirming subsequent evidence regarding the retreat of these surviving refugees.

During the rampage of 1704-1711, the surviving South Florida Indians seem to have fled largely in two directions: south to Miami and the Keys, and north to St. Augustine. Both areas

ultimately became safe-havens for refugees. As late as 1707, only five mission towns were listed at St. Augustine, and all were comprised of refugee Guale, Timucua, and Apalachee Indians from the northern mission territories. But in a 1711 census a total of 8 towns were recorded, including one town consisting of more than a hundred Ais and other coastal South Florida Indians. Many more refugees from the rest of South Florida congregated in the southeastern corner of the peninsula, extending into the Keys where they were protected from the land-based raiders. By 1711 this included the chief of the Calusa and most or all other neighboring chiefs, and many of their surviving vassals, many of whom would ultimately request permission to immigrate to Cuba.

This migration was not without precedent, for Cuban and Spanish records reveal the sporadic presence of South Florida Indians in and around Havana from as early as 1688, increasing through the 1690s. By the time of the devastating raids that pushed the Calusa and other South Florida Indians to the Keys, Havana seems to have been familiar territory. In the spring of 1711, a Franciscan friar visiting Key West baptized the dying Calusa chief, who requested transport for his vassals to Cuba. Soon thereafter, a Spanish vessel returned and picked up some 270 Indians, including 50 vassals of the Calusa chief, along with 220 other Indians including the chiefs of Jove, Miami, Tancha, Muspa, and Rioseco (or Jeaga). The Calusa chief, who was actively engaged in distant warfare with the Yamasees upon the boat's arrival, sent his brother-in-law the Great Captain, and evidently came to Havana later to be baptized Phelipe V. Nevertheless, after being settled together at La Cabaña, within a few months he, along with three other chiefs and up to 200 Indians, perished from rampant epidemics of typhus and smallpox. The survivors were divided up among private citizens around Havana, while others were sent inland, with only 16 or 18 ultimately returning to their homeland in Florida.

In the meantime, the successful depopulation of most of South Florida by Yamasee and Creek raiders between 1704 and 1711, and the flight of survivors either north to St. Augustine or south to the Keys, resulted in a substantial falloff in the number of available slaves in the Carolina market, a condition which reached crisis proportions in 1712 and 1713. It was precisely the depopulation and evacuation of South Florida that precipitated this drop in supply, and it was the subsequent threats of Carolina traders against heavily indebted Yamasee Indians that ultimately sparked the 1715 Yamasee War, which radically changed the political and economic landscape of the Southeast. Not only did this result in the flight of most of the Yamasee to find refuge in St. Augustine among their former victims, but it also shifted the dynamic of the Indian slave trade, after which it never recovered its former strength. Nevertheless, although English-allied Creeks continued to raid across Spanish Florida, the intensity of such raids diminished in South Florida, allowing a brief respite for its inhabitants.

Throughout this period there is considerable evidence for population mobility between St. Augustine and the Atlantic coastal region of South Florida, to which many surviving groups had apparently relocated in the relative calm after the Yamasee War. St. Augustine mission lists continued to record the presence of South Florida Indians throughout this period, including Mayaca, Jororo, Ais, Casipuia, Pijaja, Costas, Amacapira, Alafaia, and Pojoy. Some of these groups also maintained remote villages along the Atlantic coastline, where there is clear evidence for internicene warfare along this frontier zone. A 1722 French shipwreck survivor later made note of the Calusa chief's reluctance to travel north from Miami to St. Augustine because of ongoing warfare with groups in this region, and during the late 1730s, the murder of the chiefs of Pojoy and Amacapira by a chief named "El Bonito" from the southern coast sparked

hostilities between a number of factions, and led to the virtual extinction of some groups formerly attached to St. Augustine.

A brief and abortive mission to the mouth of the Miami River by Jesuit priests in 1743 provided important details regarding the last of South Florida's Indians. The Jesuits reported that no more than 500 remained alive at that time, including some 180 congregated Calusa, Boca Ratones (or Tequesta), and Keys Indians at Miami and the Keys, as well as about 45 Santaluzes, including Jobe and perhaps Jeaga Indians, living near present-day Lake Worth, and a similar number of Mayaca Indians living farther north and inland, perhaps at Port Mayaca on the eastern shore of Lake Okeechobee. Reports also indicate that an unknown number of Maymi Indians lived just to the north of these southern groups, perhaps along the lower Kissimmee River drainage just north of Lake Okeechobee. Despite ongoing wars with the invading Creek Indians, these remnants of the South Florida Indians maintained themselves in part as fishing guides and wage laborers on Cuban fishing vessels already plying the waters of the southern Florida peninsula. Boat traffic with Havana was regular, and many of the Keys Indians were said to have been baptized in Havana. Some even immigrated to Cuba during these intermediate years, including a party of 11 in 1738.

By 1748, however, the mainland had almost certainly been abandoned to the invading Creeks, since during that year nearly the entire crew of an English sloop that ran aground near Miami was summarily shot by unnamed Indians who wielded firearms, ate corn, and spoke at least a little English. By 1757, there seems no doubt that the entire Florida peninsula had been overrun by gun-toting Creeks, and that all surviving South Florida Indians had relocated to the Keys, and perhaps to Key West itself. Cuban fishermen along the Indian River to the east, the port of Sanibel to the west, and even in the upper Keys to the south were attacked by Creek

Indians on several documented occasions between 1757 and 1760, indicating that the Creeks dominated the entire mainland peninsula.

At some point in 1757, surviving Indians in the Keys were violently assaulted by advancing Creek raiders, and subsequently fled southward to Havana, completely abandoning the Florida peninsula. In an effort to convince these last indigenous allies to return to the Keys, the Governor of Havana gave them guns and munitions, assigned them a commissioner, and had a vessel constructed for their use in traveling back and forth to Havana. Nevertheless, on May 17, 1760, the surviving Keys Indians on Key West were subjected to a final, devastating raid by the Creeks, who burned their village and boat, and destroyed their canoes and fisheries. A total of just over 60 Indians made a final voyage to Cuba, where they settled for the last time in La Cabaña. The Governor of Havana prepared a dispatch to the Crown reporting that South Florida had been completely abandoned to the enemy Creeks, and that the Keys Indians would only return if a Spanish fort was built there for their protection. Two years later, the governor of Florida lamented this absence, citing a recent ambush of a party of Spaniards hunting on Key West by Creek Indians, who killed one soldier and imprisoned the rest, finally freeing the party at Tampa Bay.

What little information that survives regarding the fate of this last group of immigrant South Florida Indians suggests that they did not fare well. A 1766 report from Cuba indicates that "the majority of them have perished in the rigors of hunger and miseries, and the few that remain find themselves divided at this time in various locations of this island." During my recent research trip to Cuba this past October, I was able to conduct a detailed examination of the parish records of the church of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Guanabacoa, where the surviving 89 Florida mission Indians were settled in 1763, and during this search I did encounter

some traces of the South Florida Indians, though unfortunately mostly in the death registries. Some had clearly immigrated during previous episodes in 1704, 1711, and 1738, but several were undoubtedly part of the final evacuation in 1760. Perhaps most tragically, while I was indeed able to find records of several north Florida mission Indians marrying local Cubans and each other during the years after 1763, as well as at least half a dozen children born to those marriages in Cuba, as yet there is no trace of any children born to immigrant Keys Indians after 1760. Nevertheless, the most hopeful sign may be my discovery of two children born out of wedlock to a Christian Calusa woman named Leonor de Sayas in 1729 and 1731. She seems to have migrated to Cuba as an infant in 1711, was baptized and like many of her contemporaries took the surname of the Commissioner of the Keys Indians Don Christóbal de Sayas, and later died in 1766. But as yet I have found no record of the deaths of her daughters María Antonia and Maria Casilda, making it at least possible that there are living descendants of this Calusa woman in Cuba today, perhaps even having returned to Florida this past century.

In the end, the indigenous chiefdoms of South Florida suffered a similar fate to that of many other Southeastern Indians during the colonial era, namely cultural extinction. Yet the details of this process as it unfolded in the protected zone of the southern Florida peninsula can provide modern researchers with considerable points of comparison and contrast with other groups, providing a basis for better understanding the colonial experience of Southeastern Indians in general, and just possibly for discovering a few lost descendants of extinct cultures.