

1924

Indian Races of Florida

Benjamin Harrison

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Harrison, Benjamin (1924) "Indian Races of Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 3 : No. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol3/iss2/8>

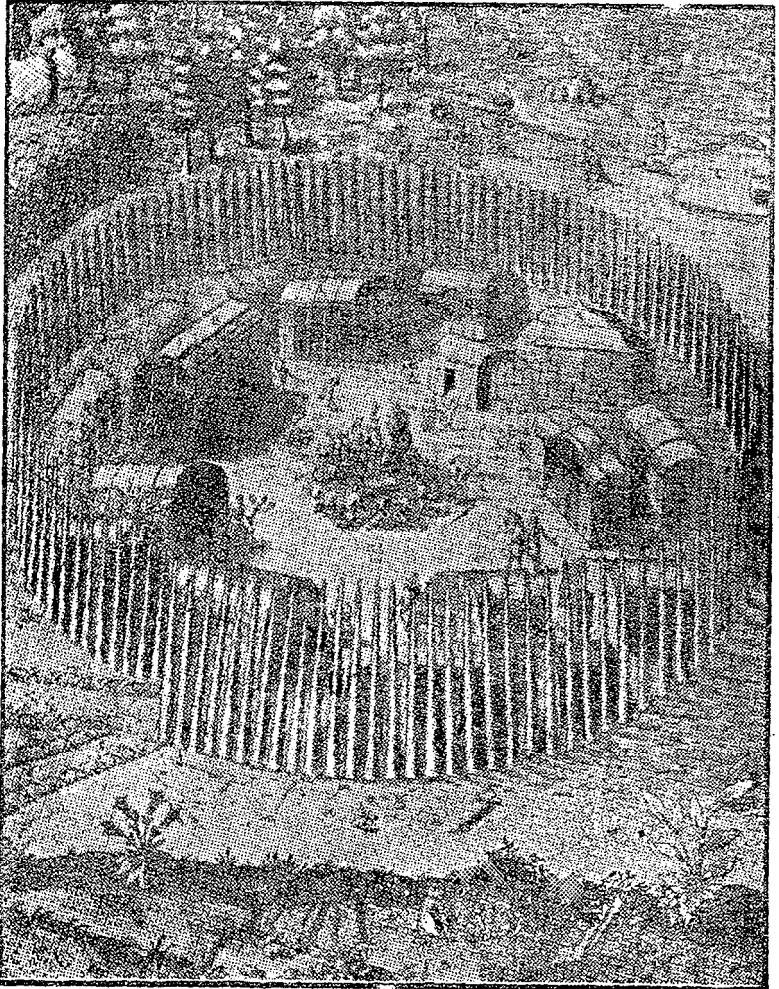
INDIAN RACES OF FLORIDA

By JUDGE BENJAMIN HARRISON

Ethnologists now accept the conclusion that the races who built the mounds were pressed to the southward by ruder invaders who came from the North and that the great battles of the conflict between the two were fought in Ohio where the remains of the fortifications erected for defense still remain. On this continent we have, on a smaller scale, a duplication of the struggle which ended in the overthrow of the Roman empire. The great body of these invaders were diverted towards Mexico, where the Toltec empire was overthrown by the Aztecs, soon to be conquered in their turn by the Spaniards under Cortez. But there was no wide difference between the culture of the invaders and the Mound Builders ; both were ignorant of the use of metals and both belonged to the Stone Age, although a people capable of such works as the defensive mounds must have been much more than rude hunters. The strategic points they selected are now the sites of our cities and showed ability of no mean order since they constituted successive lines of defense such as would now be adopted under like circumstances.

It must have been the descendants of these mound builders that De Soto found in the Southern States since they still occupied such artificial positions and were still building them. Thus we are to understand that the works in the Southern States are of a later date than those of the Middle West and we can gain some knowledge of the old conditions by studying those which attracted the attention of the white men on their arrival; In Florida we have from Garcilaso de la Vega a description of the Indian method of founding a town; they first collected a quantity of earth with which they formed a platform large enough to hold ten or twelve houses-sometimes fifteen or more. In these dwelt the chief, his family and the principal men. At the foot of this a

square was marked out sufficient to accommodate the inhabitants and within this the houses were built. Around the whole a palisade was often erected and the trunks of trees bound together with vines.



Fortified Village of Florida Indians

Sometimes there were walls of earth and ditches ; the palisades were too close to admit of the passage of a man's body but open for shooting arrows. Within were warehouses for the storage of provisions and the land outside was laid out in fields for the growing of crops. These towns were always bravely defended; despite their superiority of arms the Spaniards were roughly handled and little progress was made in the conquest of these peoples until our government undertook the task, although the Spaniards exterminated the Mexicans and Peruvians without much effort who were both more numerous and seemed to be more advanced in the arts and in the science of war.

The Spaniards often speak of Indian kings and nobles but they found nothing answering to these titles as used by us - usually the chief was taken from a certain family, but he was always chosen by election and the influence he exerted depended much more on his character than on his birth. The tribes were made up of clans but the communities thus formed were confederacies of independent communities. No government known to the Indians of our territory could enforce its decrees except by general consent; all land was in common and there was little personal property beyond the arms and clothing of a family that might not be called upon, on occasion, for the use of the whole community. The system of government was socialistic and communistic, regulated only by established customs and varying with the character of the chiefs in power at the moment. Each village was independent in very much the sense that our States are independent, with a common subjection in some respects to the council in which every village was represented. The township system in Massachusetts bore a very close likeness to that of the tribes holding the country when the white man came and the likeness is continued in our constitution today for the government of the nation. Thus the American began under a social-

istic conception which some of us would renew in many respects.

The Indians of our territory had no domestic animal except a dog which they had reclaimed and partly domesticated from the wolf of their forests, but on the Pacific coast they had tamed the turkey. For the summer they had booths of branches and leaves, caring little for the rain, but when the cold required it they built huts of wattled branches or other easily adapted materials which they strengthened with clay and grass mats; "daubed within and without with clay and the door is very little; they shut it by night and make fire within so that they are in it as warm as in a stove and so it continueth all night so that they need not clothes. Besides these they have others for summer and their kitchens near them where they bake their bread. And they have barbacoas where they keep their Maiz, which is a house set up on four stakes, boarded about like a chamber and the floor of it, is cane hurdles. * * * And about them they have many lofts wherein they lay up maiz and deer skins and mantles of the country which is like blankets; they make them of the inner bark of trees and of a nettle which, being beaten is like flax. The women cover themselves with these mantles. They put one on from the waist downward and another over the shoulder with the right arm out, like unto the Egyptians." So says the Gentleman of Elvas who passed with De Soto through the country.

The possession of Florida in our time was disputed by the French, the Spaniards and the English; even so when the white man came he found three distinct races struggling for it. The Muscogeese held Georgia and Alabama with their allies and kinsmen, the Apalachees holding western Florida and reaching down into what is now part of middle Florida; the Timuquanans who came from the East held Amelia Island which they called Guale, the Atlantic coast south to Cape Canaveral and the whole of Peninsular Florida down to Lake Okeechobee, where their boundaries met those of the Calus or

Carlos Indians whose villages kept the south and Gulf coast from Tampa to the keys with their main settlements on the Caloosahatchee river which keeps their name. These Calusans were Caribs who were the pirates and buccaneers of the islands when Columbus came.

We have given the description of the original Muscogees by the Gentelman of Elvas; as a companion picture here is the sketch of the Timuquanans by Laudonniere who saw them at the mouth of the St. Johns River. He says they had great skill in the manufacture and use of dyes which they obtained from vegetables. "The most of them have their bodies, arms and thighs painted with fair devices, the painting whereof can never be taken away because the same is pricked into the flesh * * *

They exercise their young men to run well and they make a game among themselves which he winneth who has the longest breath. * * *

They have their priests to whom they give great credit, because they are great magicians, great soothsayers and callers upon devils * * *

They eat all their meat broiled upon coals and dressed in the smoke which they call boucaned. * * *

The agility of their women is so great that they can swim over the great rivers, bearing their children upon one of their arms."

Fontanedo says that the Apalachees lived in communal houses, some of these accommodating 500 persons, but each Timuquanan family occupied its separate dwelling which was thatched with palmetto leaves with walls of skins or mats of grass. From the Apalachees came the pearls De Soto noted among the Indians and these were taken from the oysters at the mouth of their river and passed as ornaments throughout the neighboring peoples.

The village of the Florida Indians consisted of a central council house, sometimes on an artificial mound; in this the warriors and chiefs met to debate questions of public interest and here sat, as often as need arose, a body over which the chief presided to give judgment-a court of last resort. But a village site was often changed



Chiefs of Florida Indians on the War Path

From Le Moyne, 1565

for a variety of reasons; sometimes from a superstitious motive, for security from attack, failure of the food supply or exposure to flood, etc. But there was something of a limitation of territory for each community. Within the tribal boundaries land was common but intrusion on hunting grounds was often the cause of war.

The Indian had but one cereal and on this his agriculture was based, but he had indigenous vegetables in the pumpkin and a variety of beans. He used a great variety of fruits and roots and his women dried stores of both these so that the French settlement was often supplied with them to meet a time of scarcity. A stick or stone was the implement of husbandry - usually this was pointed with a shell or a bone.

Whether in the village or on the march, the clan was the unit of the community through which the government operated and kindred was based on descent through the mother; no man could marry in his own gens, but

sought a wife in another clan to which his children would belong. It was always the clan that enforced justice on its members or demanded satisfaction for murder or other wrong. It was the clan that held the common property and it was the clan that provided for those who could not care for themselves. A clan assumed a distinguishing name, usually that of some animal to which it attributed its origin in some remote past and to which it paid a certain reverence.

The government of the village in time of peace resided in a civil chief who was elected, but was sometimes allowed to retain his office and even to leave it to his brother. He was assisted by the old men and to the council an appeal could always be made.

In time of war the headship resided in a war-chief, who was elected though the office usually was restricted to a family; however, the leader had no power except such as personal character won for him. "Nowhere in North America," says Major Powell, "have a people been discovered who had passed beyond this tribal society to a national society based upon property." Groups of villages are mentioned by early writers who call them confederacies but these were loosely held together by pressure from without and acted together only to meet a common danger though a seeming alliance may have continued for a long period. Of such a nature was the confederacy of the Six Nations or Iroquois, that of the Muscogeese and the one over which Powhatan presided in Virginia.

Lowery and many other students insist that the Indian had no idea of a supreme being except as Christian influences have so shaped his superstitions. "But the Indian feared the powers of nature in their visible aspects, in their constant influence on his life, in his success or failure in the war or in the chase, in the abundance of rain for his crops and his recovery from disease. Wherever he could trace an influence exercised over him by any object whatsoever he immediately endowed it with

intelligent being and propitiated it by sacrifice or prayer." That may be ; if so we are still compelled to admit that the Indian owed many virtues to nature. He was simply amazed to find that the Spaniard did not hesitate to break his pledged word ; before the Indian had experience of the white man's code a promise to him was enough. Even yet, the most amazing charge he can make against the white man is that of bad faith and the fact that "The big chief of the white men is a liar all the time" seems more wonderful to the Seminole than the white man's power.

The Indian is accused of worshipping his maize ; is the authority sufficient? What are his dances and ceremonial observances but our celebration of the harvest home? "Dances, feasts and fasts were celebrated in its honor ;" did our ancestors "worship" wheat because the last sheaf was brought in with dances and songs? The Puritans condemned the dances around the May-pole and it is true that this festival also was once idolatrous, but did the dance and the song necessarily imply worship? The Indian was accused of "animal worship," and here he may be more guilty, but this, with him, was much nearer akin to ancestor-worship in which he bears company with those of corresponding culture throughout the world. We are taught that the Egyptians did not worship the bull, the dog and the cat, but divinities who manifested themselves under these forms; the Indian might be treated with equal consideration. The history of the Indian from the coming of the white man is easily understood after we recognize the racial differences in the population of Florida. When Ponce de Leon entered a bay on the Gulf Coast a multitude of canoes came out to attack him - these were the Caribs of Calusa, who made war in their war-canoes in all the islands. On the East Coast the Indians attacked the white man only after his landing; these were the Timuquanans. De Soto found that Jean Ortiz stole away from one Indian town near Tampa and was protected in the adjoining one; he

fled from cruel captivity among the Caribs and was protected and kindly treated by the Timuquanans, who were of a gentler nature and always held themselves the enemies of the Caribs.

In his march De Soto broke the force of the people of Vitachuco and marched on. After this there was a vacancy in peninsular Florida which the Muscogeas and Apalachees hastened to occupy. Within a few years Menendez found these Apalachees in possession of the country between Jacksonville and Tallahassee and they made incursions into the valley of the St. Johns so that he was obliged to make war upon them. Somewhat to his surprise he found the Indians of his neighborhood willing to help him; the Timuquanans hated the Apalachees almost as bitterly as they hated the Spaniards and gladly saw their hereditary enemies forced as slaves to build the fort of San Marco.

When our Seminole War began the Timuquanans appreciated the necessity and made common cause with the Creeks because Caocoochee was a statesman, but the Caloosans refused to join the league until Americans attacked them without cause and so made an enemy without need. The Caloosans withdrew to the islands when threatened with subjection by the Americans and given the option of removal. A remnant of the race is still found in Jamaica and Martinique.

The Timuquanans differed in language and character from the Creeks and even during a war of ten years their forces were not joined until the last battle on the shore of Okeechobee.