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BLACKS IN BRITISH EAST FLORIDA

by J. LEITCH WRIGHT, JR.*

BLACKS BEGAN ARRIVING in Spanish Florida in the early sixteenth century soon after the appearance of Europeans, and from that point on they constituted a significant minority of the population, if not an absolute majority. During the British era, 1763-1784, blacks outnumbered whites. Except for rare instances, scholars interested in Negro history at any time during Florida's lengthy colonial era will search in vain for published books and articles.¹ A stroll 200 years ago through rice and indigo fields and through sugar houses of St. Johns River plantations or a visit to St. Augustine's public market on the plaza and to the slave auction block would provide much information no longer available. Knowledge which was commonplace two centuries ago has been lost. Contemporary historians must utilize the few sources available, and be conscious that, if they are lucky, they may at least see the tip of the iceberg.

It is risky even to speculate concerning what language most East Florida blacks spoke. Qua appeared briefly in 1777 just before he was executed, and at least, his name is recorded for posterity— which is itself a rarity. But even this fragment is meaningful. Africans named their children for the days of the week. "Qua" represented a male child who had been born on Thursday. Considering the African origins of the few other known East Florida slave names, and taking into account the large scale pre-Revolutionary slave importations into all southern colonies di-

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1. Those few authors who have made studies of blacks in colonial Florida are: I. A. [Irene Aloha] Wright, ed., "Dispatches of Spanish Officials Bearing on the Free Negro Settlement of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, Florida," *Journal of Negro History*, IX (April 1924), 144-95; Kenneth W. Porter, in his articles "Negroes and the East Florida Annexation Plot, 1811-1813," *Journal of Negro History*, XXX (January 1945), 9-29, and "Negroes and the Seminole War, 1817-1818," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXVI (July 1951), 249-80; and John J. TePaske, "The Fugitive Slave: Intercolonial Rivalry and Spanish Slave Policy, 1687-1764," in Samuel Proctor, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Florida and Its Borderlands* (Gainesville, 1975), 1-12.

rect from Africa, suggest that Qua was a typical East Florida Negro. Presumably he had been born in West Africa, retained a knowledge of his African tongue and culture, but had been forced to develop a pidgin in order to communicate with whites and fellow blacks alike.² The small number of surviving runaway slave notices also shed some light on language, but in no way can these few advertisements be considered a broad statistical sample. Relying on such notices as are available, runaways seemed to be young mulattoes able to speak both French and English.³

The problem of language is closely associated with where blacks were born and where they lived before arriving in East Florida. One can consider three major origins: Africa, the West Indies, and the other southern colonies. Though most native Africans presumably came from West Africa, this vast area encompassed many different peoples and cultures. Some, and probably a considerable number of blacks imported into East Florida, came from Jamaica in the West Indies. But where did the blacks described in the runaway notices learn to speak French? Guadeloupe, Martinique and especially Saint Domingue (Haiti) come to mind.⁴ East Florida planters such as John Moultrie, master of Bella Vista, had moved into the new province from South Carolina. He had brought slaves with him, but the percentage of his slaves— numbering 180 at the end of the Revolution — which had been born in America and were acculturated and the number who were recent arrivals from Africa is unknown.⁵

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2. General acc't. of contingent expenses, East Florida, June 25, 1777-June 24, 1778, Great Britain, Public Record Office, Colonial Office 5/559. Hereinafter cited as CO. J. L. [Joey Lee] Dillard, *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York, 1972), 124. Approximately one-half of the fifty names which I was able to discover were clearly of African origin. This, along with the importation of slaves direct from Africa to East Florida and to adjoining colonies by Richard Oswald, Henry Laurens, and similar merchants, helps demonstrate the strength of the African culture in British East Florida.
 3. *Georgia Gazette*, November 15, 1775; *Royal Georgia Gazette*, January 18, March 8, 1781.
 4. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969), 75-84.
 5. Memorial of John Moultrie, London, March 24, 1787, Great Britain, Public Record Office, Audit Office 12/3. Hereinafter cited as AO. Most, but not all, of the East Florida loyalist claims are reproduced in Wilbur Henry Siebert, ed., *Loyalists in East Florida, 1774 to 1785: The Most Important Documents Pertaining Thereto, Edited with an Accompanying Narrative*, 2 vols. (DeLand, 1929), II.

There is another possible source of French-speaking slaves. During the Revolution French prizes were brought to St. Augustine, where at least some crewmen exchanged a French for a British master.

Yet after all these considerations the original uncertainty about the dominant language of blacks remains. A visitor to East Florida's slave quarters during the American Revolution might have heard English, French, Mandingo, Fulani, Hausa, and Mende, among other languages. In the Indian country there were black Hitchiti and Muskogee speakers. A pidgin, such as Gullah, was emerging and presumably was spoken with varying degrees of proficiency by a majority of East Florida blacks. Regardless of which were the most important languages, at least some blacks, simultaneously thrust into several cultures, became exceptional linguists. Whites employed them in their dealings with other Negroes and with Indians.

Despite the dearth of shipping and plantation records, more is known about the aggregate number of blacks in Florida. There were just over 2,000 Negroes in 1775, and by the end of the Revolution that number had increased to nearly 10,000. Throughout the British period blacks outnumbered whites approximately two to one.⁶ This ratio was higher than in other southern colonies but considerably lower than the ratio in the British West Indies. In Jamaica there were at least fifteen blacks for every white.⁷ In many respects, including a black majority and numerous absentee planters, East Florida had much in common with the British West Indies.

Population statistics reveal that there were few white yeomen farmers in East Florida. Whites were overseers, civil officials, in the military, or artisans and merchants who catered to their needs. Except for overseers they typically lived in or close by St. Augustine. The largest body of whites were the Minorcan, Greek, and Italian indentured servants at New Smyrna, but this settlement failed early in the Revolution, and the survivors moved to

6. Charles Loch Mowat, *East Florida as a British Province, 1763-1784* (Berkeley, 1943; facsimile edition, Gainesville, 1964), 137; J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *Florida in the American Revolution* (Gainesville, 1975), 13. Population figures are the best estimates available, though they do not include blacks living among the Indians.

7. Alan Burns, *History of the British West Indies*, rev. 2nd ed. (New York, 1965), 511.

St. Augustine. East Florida produced and exported indigo, sugar, rice, timber, naval stores, and barrel staves, and most of these commodities were grown or manufactured on St. Marys and St. Johns river plantations worked by slaves. One reason so little is known about Florida blacks is because little is known about the British plantation system. Surviving records would allow an enterprising scholar to locate those plantations which existed for some period and to discover more about the crops grown. This basic study has not yet been made, and more is known about plantations which failed than about those which did not.⁸

Some large plantations existed for many years. Governor James Grant, East Florida's first governor, left the province in 1771. He employed an overseer to supervise his sizable holdings, and he did not dispose of his numerous slaves until 1784.⁹ The Scottish planter-merchant, Richard Oswald, who helped negotiate the 1783 peace treaty, owned two large East Florida plantations. In 1779 he moved over 100 slaves to his property in Georgia where royal authority had been reestablished, and near the end of the Revolution he returned 170 to Mount Oswald on the Tomoka River.¹⁰ Henry Strachey, an absentee planter who also helped negotiate the 1783 peace, operated his East Florida plantation during the war through an overseer.¹¹ For seventeen years Robert Bisset and his son managed several plantations on the Hillsborough River employing more than 100 slaves.¹² Taking time out from feuding with his political opponents, Governor Patrick Tonyn periodically inspected his plantation on the St. Johns River.¹³ Books have been written about the Minorcans and

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8. Three separate books by Epaminondes P. Panagopoulos, Carita Doggett Corse, and Jane Quinn have been written about New Smyrna which survived for a decade. There are no published works about the respectable number of other plantations employing 50 to 200 slaves which lasted much longer. See E. [Epaminondes] P. Panagopoulos, *New Smyrna: An Eighteenth Century Greek Odyssey* (Gainesville, 1966); Carita Doggett [Corse], *Dr. Andrew Turnbull and the New Smyrna Colony of Florida* (n.p., 1919); Jane Quinn, *Minorcans in Florida: Their History and Heritage* (St. Augustine, 1975).
 9. Patrick Tonyn to Strachey, St. Augustine, December 7, 1784, Henry Strachey Letters, Bancroft Collection, New York Public Library; New York City.
 10. Memorial of Mary Oswald, November 11, 1786, AO 12/3.
 11. Strachey to Tonyn, London, March 31, 1783, CO 5/560.
 12. Memorial of Robert Bisset, London, March 27, 1787, AO 12/3.
 13. J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *British St. Augustine* (St. Augustine, 1975), 15, 17, 39.

other white indentured servants who settled in New Smyrna and about the approximately 500 who survived and in 1777 fled to St. Augustine.

Little is known of the blacks at New Smyrna except that 500 shipped over from Africa were drowned just off the Florida coast and that crews from Spanish privateers occasionally landed and spirited away slaves.¹⁴ There is an absence of data on the plantations of Grant, Oswald, Strachey, Bisset, Tonym, and others who employed 100 or more slaves.

Claims submitted by loyalists after the Revolution to secure compensation for their losses provide the best glimpse of life on an East Florida plantation. These documents reveal that slaves were used extensively in establishing the new British colony to build planters' and overseers' houses, Negro huts, kitchens, barns, fences, and to clear land. Two male field hands were expected to clear one acre every three weeks. Black artisans were in great demand. Perhaps twenty per cent of the slaves were skilled coopers, sawyers, squarers, carpenters, shipwrights, tar burners, and carters, and at times both skilled and unskilled slaves were hired out. Skilled male slaves were valued at between sixty and 100 pounds. Slaves worked in rice, indigo, and sugar cane fields, and operated sugar houses, indigo vats, and rice machines to prepare these crops for export. They boxed many thousands of pine trees to collect turpentine, and upon occasion they picked sweet and sour oranges and prepared juice for sale. Royal bounties for the production of naval stores and indigo served as a stimulus.¹⁵

Typical plantations employed from seventy to over 200 slaves. They lived in small wooden "Negro houses" holding three to four persons each clustered in a village. The overseer's residence was nearby. Though villages frequently had a common kitchen, it is not clear whether it was essentially an African or European one and whether food was prepared in the African, European, or New World style. Better quarters had built-in wooden beds. After the British period Florida slave houses sometimes were constructed of tabby, but archeologists will have to verify if any were built with this material during the British regime.¹⁶ Based on a few

14. Panagopoulos, *New Smyrna*, 58; memorial of Robert Bisset, London, March 27, 1787, AO 12/3.

15. This information is based primarily though not exclusively on the loyalist claims published in Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, II.

16. Charles H. Fairbanks, "The Kingsley Slave Cabins in Duval County,

available samples, fifty-seven per cent of the slaves were male and forty-three per cent, female.¹⁷ Because the colony had so recently been acquired by Britain, and because of wartime disruptions, Negro villages never assumed the stability and permanence of those in the West Indies where many black communities became almost a state within a state.

It is an understatement to assert that little is known about plantation slaves in British East Florida, but relatively speaking a veritable cornucopia of documentation survives as compared to sources about blacks in the Indian country. Blacks had lived among the Indians for many decades— probably well over two centuries— before 1763. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries Carolinians had engaged in a brisk trade in Indian slaves. As a result southern blacks and Indians had labored side by side, intermarried, and sometimes had escaped together to the Indian country. During the Revolution David Black was reimbursed £20 for bringing fugitive Negroes back to St. Augustine.¹⁸ One can only speculate whether the Negroes in question had fled from some harsh East Florida overseer or were homesick and were returning if not to a *zambo* mother at least to *zambo* relatives.

Blacks in the Indian country were either slave or free and lived in separate communities or intimately among the Indians. Two loosely-structured factions seemed to have been evolving: a maroon society and another composed of recent fugitive plantation slaves. Maroons presumably had established themselves at an early date in separate communities and retained much of their African heritage, including agricultural techniques. They adopted some of the Indian culture and perhaps rendered the natives food in return for protection. Because of their superior knowledge of husbandry and ability as interpreters, maroons may have been a far more dominant force in the Indian country than has been generally realized. Maroons partially emerged from their obscurity in the nineteenth century during the course of the

Florida, 1968," *Conference on Historic Site Archeology Papers*, VII (1972), part 1, 62-93.

17. Memorial of John Graham, November 23, 1786, AO 12/3; memorial of Denys Rolle, September 10, 1783, Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, II, 291.

18. General account of contingent expenses, CO 5/559, 66.

Seminole wars. The other group of blacks among the Indians were recent runaways, at least some of whom were looked down upon and enslaved by Indians and maroons alike. *Zambos* were likely to adopt the culture of their mothers and count themselves as either blacks or Indians.¹⁹

In 1778 John Stuart, Britain's southern Indian superintendent, ordered Moses Kirkland, Seminole Indian agent, into the Indian country to help organize the Indians for the forthcoming campaign. Stuart assured Kirkland that Bully and the Black Factor, who lived near the forks of the Apalachicola River, would furnish horses.²⁰ At once one wonders about the origins of Black Factor's name. Was it on account of his pigmentation or for some other cause? Along the southern frontier blacks had been employed at cow pens, horse pens, and in various aspects of the Indian trade. Black Factor may have been a mulatto—possibly one of the numerous progeny of the Georgia Indian trader George Galphin—who for some time had raised horses and cattle and had been an enterprising merchant and land speculator.²¹ Much of this is conjecture, as are Bully's racial origins and the number of other "black factors," if any, among the Indians.

East Florida had no formal slave code until 1782, but through custom and statutes the lives of slaves were regulated in detail. Blacks were outright chattels, and every Negro and mulatto who clearly could not demonstrate that he was free was deemed a slave. When Qua was publicly executed for robbery in St. Augustine, assessors estimated his value, and the state reimbursed his owner for his property loss.²² Slaves in and around St. Augustine had their own garden plots and legally could sell their vegetables, fish, etc. only at stalls in the public market. Thirty-nine lashes

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19. The best accounts concerning blacks among the southern Indians in the early nineteenth century are Roderick Brumbaugh, "Black Maroons in Florida, 1800-1830," unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Boston, 1975; Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York, 1971), 182-358. These two scholars, however, do not concern themselves with British Florida.
20. John Stuart to Moses Kirkland, Pensacola, January 30, 1778, AO 13/36A. Bully was also known as Buly or Birl.
21. Tonym to Stuart, September 8, 1778, CO 5/558.
22. General account of contingent expenses, East Florida, June 25, 1777-June 24, 1778, CO 5/559.

were to be meted out to violators and also to blacks who congregated and danced after 10:00 P.M.²³

One searches almost in vain to know what blacks thought about the growing crisis between the American colonies and the mother country concerning taxation and parliamentary sovereignty. Probably these issues, so crucial for white American Whigs, had a low priority among East Florida blacks. Nevertheless, from the very beginning the war was brought home poignantly to East Florida Negroes, and they could not ignore that conflict regardless of what they thought of it.

In 1776, 1777, and again in 1778 Georgians stormed across the St. Marys River in unsuccessful efforts to capture St. Augustine. Exposed plantations on the St. Marys River and Amelia Island were ravaged. Floridians rushed their slaves toward St. Augustine for security, while Georgians captured others and whisked them away to the north. Jermyn Wright hurried his Negroes southward from his several plantations on the St. Marys River. In the ensuing weeks twenty-four slaves roaming about the woods with little to eat died of starvation.²⁴ After Spain came into the war in 1779 crews from her privateers landed above and below St. Augustine and carried off slaves.²⁵ Near the end of the Revolution Elias Ball from South Carolina brought 175 Negroes into East Florida and within one month alone over thirty died.²⁶ These mortality figures help justify the assumption that East Florida was like Jamaica and that the local slave population did not sustain itself in wartime, nor probably at any period.

But one merely has to look at the military sick list in East Florida or at the hundreds of Minorcan deaths at New Smyrna to realize that whites as well as blacks died at an alarming rate in British East Florida. In fact, the "sickle-cell trait," threatening twentieth century black children with anemia, gave Negroes in the eighteenth century a relative advantage over white indentured servants by affording more immunity against malaria.

Despite a high death rate, the scarcity of females, and wartime disruptions, the Negro population in East Florida almost quintupled during the Revolution. This was not due to any ad-

23. *East Florida Gazette*, February 22, 1783.

24. Jermyn and Charles Wright to Lord George Germain, n.d., CO 5/116.

25. Memorial of Bisset, March 27, 1787, AO 12/3.

26. Memorial of Elias Ball, London, August 1, 1784, AO 12/3.

vantages of the "sickle cell trait" nor natural increase, but because of war time immigration. William Panton, a Georgia exile and, Indian trader, Jermyn and Charles Wright, brothers of Georgia's last royal governor, James Spalding from St. Simons Island, and many other Georgians and Carolinians fled to East Florida with their slaves during the early years of the Revolution. Their blacks were immediately set to work building Negro houses, growing indigo, rice, and sugar cane, producing naval stores, and packing deerskins for export. Whether blacks also continued to reach East Florida from the West Indies and Africa in appreciable numbers is uncertain.

One new source of slaves was from the sale of Negroes captured aboard ships flying the United States, French, or Spanish flags. St. Augustine had an admiralty court, for long periods the only one in the South, and condemned slaves were routinely auctioned off in the East Florida capital.²⁷ If any of the admiralty court records ever turn up it may be possible to estimate the numbers and to learn details about the background of the blacks involved and exactly where and how the auction was conducted.

Immediately after the fighting at Lexington and Concord broke out, East Florida lay exposed. Less than 100 untrained militia, neighboring Indians of unpredictable reliability, and a royal navy sloop or two represented the total available force. Minorcans comprised the largest single group of potential white militiamen. But they were Catholics, and it was unclear, particularly after France and Spain came into the war, on whose side they would fight. This made East Florida authorities more aware than ever that blacks were in the majority and that if the province was to be defended Negroes must assist.

One obvious way was by laboring on fortifications. In the neighboring southern colonies pre-Revolutionary laws had stipulated that all able-bodied male slaves between sixteen and sixty years of age must be listed with a local officer. In an emergency they could be called up for service. Owners were paid one shilling a day per slave or were relieved from having to provide labor for construction of public roads.²⁸ East Florida had no militia law

27. East Florida Commons House Journal, St. Augustine, July 20, 1781, CO 5/572.

28. An act for repairing and rebuilding the forts, June 4, 1760, in Allen D. Candler, comp. and ed., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, 26 vols. (Atlanta, 1904-1916), XVIII, 433-34.

or Negro law until 1781. But even at the beginning of the Revolution it is clear that the governor and council and sometimes individual planters made slaves available to help construct provincial defenses as had been customary in other colonies during the colonial period. The earthen walls surrounding St. Augustine, the parallel lines north of the town, the powder magazine, the redoubts on the St. Johns River, and Fort Tonym on the St. Marys in part were all constructed by slave labor. Square, wooden Fort Tonym mounting swivel guns was thrown up in a rush in 1775-1776. Considering the paucity of regular soldiers and militia alike, it is reasonable to assume that blacks provided much of the labor. Tory planters on the exposed St. Marys River likely volunteered their slaves with gusto and did not quibble about prompt reimbursement.

In 1775 white Floridians assumed not only that slaves should be impressed to labor on fortifications but also that if need be they should be armed and employed as ordinary soldiers. Considering the debates during the 1860s in Jefferson Davis's cabinet over arming slaves and the fact that not until a month before Appomattox did the Confederacy agree to enlist slaves as regular soldiers, East Florida's willingness to employ black soldiers at the outset of the Revolution appears surprising. But East Florida's conduct was unique only if it were compared with Confederate policies almost a century later and not with those of Britain's North American colonies earlier in the eighteenth century. South Carolina in the first part of that century had used blacks to fight Indians and Spaniards alike. After slavery became legal in the 1750s, Georgia made provisions for arming slaves in an emergency.²⁹ Florida planters, who frequently had come from South Carolina and Georgia, instinctively looked to slaves for assistance when rebels threatened their property. It would have been strange if Jermyn Wright on the St. Marys River and Lord Egmont's overseer on Amelia Island had not done what limited sources indicate other Florida planters did in similar emergencies: i.e. arm and train slaves to defend their lands.³⁰ At an early date

29. Militia Act, January 24, 1755, *ibid.*, 38-44; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority, Negroes in Colonial South Carolina, From 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York, 1974), 126-29.

30. When the Americans invaded West Florida Adam Chrystie armed and uniformed twenty-two of his slaves. Memorial of Adam Chrystie, Suffolk St., March 4, 1784, AO 13/99.

blacks enlisted in the East Florida Rangers and helped garrison Fort Tonyn and protect the St. Marys frontier.³¹ When in 1779 Colonel Lewis Fuser counted the number of regular and militia soldiers available to defend the province he found that over one-seventh of the total were black.³²

In 1781 East Florida's first assembly finally met and passed a militia act which generally duplicated earlier militia laws in other American colonies. An unlimited number of slaves could be drafted and used as a labor force or soldiers. Militia captains were to be furnished lists of all able-bodied slaves in their districts, and recalcitrant plantation managers were to be fined fifty pounds. Slave owners received one pound monthly for impressed slaves. For breaches of military discipline slaves were to be whipped rather than fined like their white contemporaries, though for sleeping on duty or betraying the password blacks were treated equally with whites: both were to be executed. For acts of bravery slaves were to be awarded clothing, money, medals, and some relief from service.³³

Except for provisions authorizing enlisting an unlimited number of slaves and for making no specific mention of freeing slaves who performed outstanding acts of bravery, the East Florida militia act contained no unusual features and merely copied earlier codes of Georgia and South Carolina. When East Florida had refused to revolt in 1775, it had followed precedents, because loyalty to the mother country was the colonial norm. It was the thirteen colonies who, by rebelling, had broken with tradition, and it was these same colonies, i.e. Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, who had departed from colonial custom during the Revolution by refusing to arm slaves to any significant degree. The Revolution held many paradoxes. One was that the southern states for the first time considered it dangerous ever to trust slaves with arms. This was another step in dehumanizing the institution of slavery and depriving blacks of a measure of dignity and independence. It was almost inevitable that blacks and whites, fighting side by side against a determined enemy,

31. East Florida council minutes, February 2, 1776, CO 5/571.

32. Lewis Fuser to Henry Clinton, September 11 to October 6, 1779, Sir Henry Clinton Papers, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

33. An act for the establishment and regulation of the militia of this province, St. Augustine, June 7, 1781, CO 5/624.

must have accorded one another a measure of respect. East Florida blacks, fighting for the white man's liberty, despite the omission of a specific provision in the militia act, in a variety of ways had the opportunity of winning their own freedom.

With neighboring Georgia again under royal control in 1779, with the arrival of many loyalist refugees in East Florida, and with the crushing or expulsion of his most vocal political opponents, Governor Patrick Tonyn assumed that it was safe to hold elections for a representative assembly. It, along with the appointed council (the upper house) and the governor, would share authority. The first assembly was seated in the St. Augustine state house in March 1781, and it met intermittently until the end of 1783. The assembly concerned itself with a multitude of routine affairs— regulating markets and public houses, licensing pilots, building roads, collecting small debts, along with framing a militia law and a law authorizing the governor to impress slaves to work on fortifications. But drawing up a slave code took more time and engendered more controversy than any other issue. Governor Tonyn in a huff even dissolved the assembly in November 1781 on account of this quarrel.

Two centuries later this controversy seems puzzling, because in most respects East Florida's slave code was similar to South Carolina's and Georgia's. It provided that all Negroes, mulattos, and mestizos who could not prove they were free were to be regarded as slaves. Children followed the status of their mother. Negroes and mulattos who were not slaves were to wear a silver armband engraved with "free." Slaves needed a ticket from their master to be absent from the plantation or to carry a firearm in peace time, and masters were to be fined for cruelty to slaves. Authorities compensated any owner of a slave who was legally executed. Companion laws provided for white patrols to keep slaves in check.

The East Florida slave code differed from all others in North America concerning trials of slaves in capital offenses. In the other colonies an accused slave customarily could be tried by two justices of the peace and several local freeholders. They were to meet no later than three days after the commission of the felony, and they had the authority to impose the death sentence and to require that it be swiftly carried out. Based on their knowledge of practices in neighboring colonies, East Florida council members

argued that there was no assurance that justices of the peace or freeholders would know much about the law, that torture might be used, and that there was a serious risk of miscarriage of justice. The council demanded that in capital cases the accused slave be brought to St. Augustine and tried before a twelve-man white jury. The presiding judge could properly instruct the jury, and the defendant would be afforded more, but not all, of the protections under the English law.

Members of the lower house, a majority of whom were slave-owners, retorted this was unjust and that nowhere else on the American mainland were slaves afforded such guarantees. Assemblymen complained that the accused, representing a valuable investment, might spend six months or more in jail and that witnesses must make a costly trip to St. Augustine to testify. Whether they were white overseers or Negro slaves, the witnesses would not be able to work for long periods. Moreover, assemblymen charged such a lenient slave code would discourage loyalist slave-owning planters from immigrating into the province and might prod those already in the colony to leave.³⁴

But members of the council were also slave owners, and it is confusing to explain their stance. Few possessed more Negroes than John Moultrie, president of the council and master of Bella Vista on the Matanzas River. The Reverend John Forbes, councilman since 1765, owned fifty-nine slaves, and councilmen Henry Yonge, James Hume, and John Holmes each owned considerably more.³⁵ All of them would be equally inconvenienced and would suffer financially if slave trials were conducted in St. Augustine. Thomas Brown, colonel of the East Florida Rangers and a slave-owning refugee who joined the council in 1778, might have been the one who suggested that a lenient slave code would help make blacks in his rangers and in the provincial militia more reliable.

There are a number of possible motives to justify the council's action. When the council criticized the assembly's slave code and charged that swift executions and the possible use of torture

34. East Florida assembly minutes, July 25, 1781, CO 5/572; East Florida council minutes, July 27, 1781, CO 5/572.

35. Memorial of John Murray in behalf of Dorothy Forbes, London, December 15, 1786, Great Britain, Public Record Office, Treasury 77/6. The totals of Yonge's, Hume's, and Holmes's slaves are based primarily but not exclusively on documents in Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, II.

smacked of Turkish despotism, it may have been thinking less of unfortunate blacks and more of Andrew Turnbull, the proprietor of New Smyrna, and his supporters in the lower house. Turnbull, whose wife was from Turkey, was a leader of the political faction opposed to most if not all council members. Moultrie, Forbes, Yonge, and other councilmen, including Governor Tonyn who agreed with them also must have taken satisfaction in trying to make East Florida's slave code the most humane in America and contrasting it to the thirteen colonies where "liberty" was supposed to be flourishing. Throughout the Revolution Tories delighted in denouncing Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry for mouthing liberty while practicing the vilest slavery.

Probably the best explanation of the council's action is that its members were influenced by the growing British abolitionist movement. Slavery had been abolished in the mother country in 1772. Councilman John Forbes had been sent over to East Florida by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts which had something of an anti-slavery tradition. Thomas Brown, who had led black and white soldiers into battle, may have assumed that justice demanded that black soldiers should have the same status as whites not only when bullets were flying but also in peacetime.

Confronted by opposition of the assembly which refused to make any appropriations until the council altered its position and encouraged by authorities in London to become conciliatory, the upper house made concessions. Local justices of the peace and freeholders could still try and convict offenders promptly, but trial proceedings had to be reviewed by the governor and capital punishment administered in St. Augustine.³⁶

Near the end of the Revolution East Florida authorities made provisions for building a workhouse. Its primary function was to serve as a jail for fugitive slaves and for itinerant blacks of questionable legal status. Slaves were to be kept in the workhouse until redeemed by their masters; in the interim they labored to help pay for their keep. Whites, such as runaway indentured servants, may also have been assigned to the workhouse. Because East Florida's workhouse was built so late, most fugitive slaves

36. An act for the better government and regulation of Negroes and other slaves in this province, St. Augustine, May 31, 1782, CO 5/624.

were incarcerated in St. Augustine's jail on the plaza or elsewhere.³⁷

East Florida's black religious and medical practices are little understood partly because it is not certain whether Florida blacks were recent arrivals from Africa or had been in the New World for some time. If they had been born in North America, at least a veneer of Christianity represented part of the acculturation. But whether Christ or obeah-men had the greatest influence or whether the white master or the black medicine man treated sick Negroes is unclear. The few surviving records of the Anglican church do not indicate that Anglican ministers overly concerned themselves with black salvation. In fairness to ministers of the Society for the Gospel in Foreign Parts it must be recognized that this missionary arm of the Church of England was overtaxed in East Florida. The needs of white civilians and the garrison were barely attended to, and the Reverend John Forbes, a member of the council, judge of the vice-admiralty court and the court of common law, acting chief justice, and a large planter, had little free time. Anglican priests served as schoolmasters, though there is no record of their ever teaching a black pupil.³⁸

At the end of the Revolution the German traveller Johann D. Schoepf visited St. Augustine and discovered a black Baptist minister preaching to a Negro congregation in a cabin outside town.³⁹ The only fact known about this minister is that he had to be one of the first of his kind in North America. Just before the Revolution Baptists had made numerous converts among Southerners, black and white alike. Negro Baptist churches at Savannah, Georgia, Silver Bluff, South Carolina, and at Williamsburg, Virginia, were all founded in the mid-1770s.⁴⁰ Two questions come to mind in connection with the St. Augustine Baptist preacher. Had he established his church in East Florida soon after the British arrived in 1763, or was he a South Carolina or Georgia exile who arrived in the province with thousands of loyalists in 1782-1785? The other unanswered puzzle is was the Baptist con-

37. Act for granting to the crown £3000 in aid of the support of the government of East Florida, CO 5/624.

38. Wright, *Florida in the American Revolution*, 100, 101.

39. Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Confederation, [1783-1784]*, transl. and ed. by Alfred J. Morrison, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1911), II, 230.

40. Walter H. Brooks, "The Evolution of the Negro Baptist Church," *Journal of Negro History*, VII (January 1922), 15-16.

gregation typical and were most East Florida blacks if not Baptists at least Christians? This again raises the fundamental issue of language and culture. Were East Florida blacks essentially transplanted Africans or acculturated Americans?

East Florida's Negro population spurted at the end of the Revolution after Britain evacuated Charleston and Savannah. In 1782 and 1783 ships laden with 100 to 300 Negroes each brought approximately 8,300 blacks into the province, a figure almost three times larger than the entire pre-war population, black and white combined.⁴¹ The status of many of these blacks in East Florida was confused, though there was no doubt about their condition as far as South Carolina and Georgia Whig plantation owners were concerned. They charged that the departing British had spirited away thousands of Whig-owned slaves in violation of the peace treaty and basic justice. But it was not that simple, because British commanders had promised freedom to southern blacks who deserted their rebel masters and came into British lines to serve George III.⁴² Thousands who had accepted the British offer regarded themselves as free and assumed they had won their liberty at the same time United States republicans had received theirs. Georgians and South Carolinians visited St. Augustine at the end of the Revolution to recover their property but with little success. East Floridians refused to return hardly any blacks partly as a matter of honor—because many slaves had been promised their freedom—and partly out of spite. Southern Whigs had confiscated large amounts of loyalist property, and East Florida loyalists reciprocated by ensuring that few blacks ever returned to Whig owners.⁴³

The 1783 peace treaty stipulated that East Florida must be handed over to Spain, and this brought to the forefront the future of East Florida's 11,000 blacks. A majority left, and one can follow the broad pattern of the evacuation. The largest single group went to the neighboring Bahama Islands. Benjamin West, an American expatriate artist in London, painted the *Reception*

41. Mowat, *East Florida*, 137.

42. Alexander Leslie to Carleton, Charleston, June 27, 1782, Great Britain, Public Record Office, Sir Guy Carleton (Dorchester) Papers, 4916, microfilm copies in Robert Manning Strozler Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee.

43. James Clitherall to John Cruden, St. Augustine, May 25, 1783, *ibid.*, 7766.

of the *American Loyalists by Great Britain in 1783*.⁴⁴ Some of his figures were black, and it is safe to assume that at least a few East Florida Negroes ended up in the mother country. Whatever their previous status, they were definitely free after reaching Britain because of Parliament's abolition of slavery in 1772. That Florida masters could not retire with their slave property to the mother country's free soil posed a dilemma for some white loyalists. Other blacks, as slaves, freemen, and indentured servants, went to Nova Scotia, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and the Mosquito Shore in Central America.⁴⁵ At least some East Florida blacks who were sailors spent years at sea with no place to call home. A considerable number of Negroes and whites remained in East Florida after the Spaniards returned in 1784. John Leslie and Francis Philip Fatio both stayed, cooperated with the Spaniards, and employed blacks in their St. Augustine houses, on their plantations, and in their trading stores. An undetermined number of blacks fled into the Indian country— sometimes on the same day their surprised white masters sailed away— and the percentage of black "Seminoles" increased in the wake of the Revolution.⁴⁶ The fate of St. Augustine's black Baptist minister is unknown, though one might speculate that he moved to Jamaica or the Bahamas like Baptist ministers George Liele and Brother Amos who evacuated Georgia.⁴⁷

One can hope that in the Bahamas, in musty attics or in public archives, papers have been preserved which will illuminate the black experience in British East Florida. Perhaps buried in some Scottish castle or manor house are plantation records and personal correspondence which will better disclose the rhythm of life on an East Florida plantation and tell more about the culture of East Florida blacks. The potential of oral history cannot be overlooked. Among black "Indians" in Florida and Oklahoma, black Bahamians, blacks in Nova Scotia (or Sierra Leone where many subsequently moved), or in black communities in scattered

44. Hugh E. Egerton, ed., *The Royal Commission on the Losses and Services of American Loyalists 1783-1785* (Oxford, 1915), reproduces this picture in the frontispiece.

45. The standard account of the loyalist evacuation of East Florida is Siebert, *Loyalists in East Florida*, I, 137-79.

46. Porter, "Negroes and the Seminole War, 1817-1818," 251-52.

47. "An account of Several Baptist Churches, Consisting Chiefly of Negro Slaves: Particularly of One at Kingston, in Jamaica: and Another at Savannah in Georgia," *Journal of Negro History*, I (January 1916), 70-73.

port cities there may be oral accounts of how their ancestors labored and fought for George III in East Florida.⁴⁸ From widely scattered written sources, oral traditions, linguistic studies, and archeological investigations scholars in time may discover more about those Floridians who during the American Revolution comprised a majority of the population. Whenever the story of blacks in British East Florida is fully told— and of Spanish Florida as well— it is likely to be an interesting one that will illuminate not only the history of colonial Florida but of the entire Southeast.

48. Alex Haley is an example of a writer who has utilized oral tradition in his unique forthcoming work, *Roots*.