

# Florida Historical Quarterly

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Volume 55  
Number 1 *Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol 55,  
Number 1

Article 4

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1976

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### Recommended Citation

Granada, Ray (1976) "Slave Unrest in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 55: No. 1, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol55/iss1/4>

## SLAVE UNREST IN FLORIDA

by RAY GRANADE\*

**W**HITE FLORIDIANS, like other Southerners in the years before the Civil War, usually spoke of slave revolts in low, fearful voices. While their words indicated concern for the security of the group, their interest was essentially a personal one. They wondered how really safe they and their families were in the constant presence of vast numbers of servile blacks. Yet slave unrest involved more than insurrection. Murders, burglary, arson, rape, trespass were all crimes that an individual slave might commit even though he was not involved in an organized revolt. Floridians recognized these threats to their lives and property, yet their greatest fear was the possibility of slave insurrection.

Before Florida became an American territory in 1821, slave unrest occurred largely outside her borders. Carolina and Georgia residents complained of intruders from Florida enticing blacks to escape, and runaways often sought sanctuary among the Indians in the Spanish borderlands.<sup>1</sup> The aborted attempt to seize East Florida in 1812-1813 by Americans was fomented in part by the desire to control this slave refuge.<sup>2</sup> Southern whites warned: "Our slaves are excited to rebel, and we have an army of negroes raked up in this country . . . to contend with." Spanish Florida, they claimed, dispatched "emissaries" to encourage "a revolt of the black population in the United States."<sup>3</sup> Andrew Jackson later stated that the area was filled with a "desperate clan of outlaws" who had "drawn into their confederacy many runaway negroes."<sup>4</sup> The persistent American effort to acquire

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1. Kenneth Wiggins Porter, "Negroes on the Southern Frontier, 1670-1763," *Journal of Negro History*, XXXIII (January 1948), 58, 62, 64. M. Foster Farley, "The Fear of Negro Slave Revolts in South Carolina, 1690-1865," *Afro-American Studies*, III (December 1972), 199, mentions the problem of Florida and Spanish proclamations offering freedom to fugitive slaves.
2. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943), 30.
3. Kenneth Wiggins Porter, "Negroes and the East Florida Annexation Plot, 1811-1813," *Journal of Negro History*, XXX (January 1945), 24.
4. Quoted in Nicholas Halasz, *The Rattling Chains* (New York, 1966), 107. Brevard's background for Jackson's activities in Florida is especially im-

Florida, amounting "almost to a disease," was motivated by Southerners who sought to protect their economic interests and to guard against armed maroons.<sup>5</sup>

Once the sovereignty of Florida passed from Spain to the United States in 1821, the problem of slave unrest became an internal one. Despite this, it did not admit of an easy solution. The juxtaposition of white, black, and Indian caused many of Florida's troubles. Anti-American Seminoles proved a major source of aggravation. A slave could easily slip into the woods or swamps and make his way to one of their camps. The Indians offered refuge, and their presence encouraged runaways.

The black-white ratio was another difficulty. In 1845, the year Florida became a state, slaves outnumbered their masters in five of the twenty-six counties, and a significant minority of blacks existed in ten other counties.<sup>6</sup> The Tallahassee *Floridian* in 1846 provided statistics: white males over twenty-one in Marion County numbered 247, slaves of all ages, 523; in Gadsden County only 746 whites were old enough to help oversee 4,150 bondsmen.<sup>7</sup> The 1850 census revealed 39,310 slaves in a total population of 87,445; a decade later, there were 77,747 whites and 61,745 slaves.<sup>8</sup> The seven counties which contained over half of Florida slaves in 1860 (Alachua, Gadsden, Jackson, Jefferson, Leon, Madison, and Marion) had overwhelming black majorities, and in eleven others slaves formed a significant percentage of the population.<sup>9</sup>

R. B. Smith and W. Barlett, editors of the Tallahassee *Southern Journal*, noted in April 1846, "there will never be a heavy slave population throughout the state" because the character of

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portant, considering the rumor that the Seminoles and Negroes would unite under Lieutenant Ambrister, seize St. Marks from the Spanish garrison, and fortify themselves as the band of Garcia had done earlier in the St. Marys River "Negro Fort." Caroline Mays Brevard, *A History of Florida, From the Treaty of 1763 to Our Own Times*, ed. James Alexander Robertson, 2 vols. (DeLand, 1924-1925) I, 49.

3. Porter, "Negroes and the East Florida Annexation Plot," 9.

6. Dorothy Dodd, "Florida's Population in 1545," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXIV (July 1945), 29.

7. Tallahassee *Floridian*, March 14, April 18, 1846.

8. U. S. Bureau of the Census, *A Century of Population Growth, From the First Census of the United States to the Twelfth, 1790-1900* (Washington, 1909), 223; U. S. Census Office, *Population of the United States in 1860; Compiled from the Original Returns of the Eighth Census, Under the Direction of the Secretary of the Interior* (Washington, 1864), 51, 53.

9. *Eighth Census, 1860, Population*, 50-53.

the land "insures us just the population which we desire. There will be a preponderance of whites."<sup>10</sup> Though technically correct about a statewide numerical superiority of whites, Smith discounted transportation difficulties which denied whites in some sections the safety of ruling numbers. Another reason for Smith's and Bartlett's error was the sparseness of the population. Florida remained frontier throughout the era of slavery. As late as 1850, only three counties— Dade, Holmes, and Wakulla— could claim more improved than unimproved land within their borders.<sup>11</sup>

Runaways found large areas everywhere in the state in which to hide. The relation of people to specific portions of Florida, and the relative scarcity of white inhabitants throughout the state, meant an ease of escape unmatched in most other regions of the South.

Faced with population and physical problems, white Floridians worked to insure continued control. The first territorial legislature established a strict legal system to minimize the effects of unrest, and subsequent legislatures increased the slave code's severity.<sup>12</sup> Bondsmen were not allowed to move about freely— it was too easy for them to slip into the wilds and join other maroons in troubling isolated plantations.<sup>13</sup> Blacks could not possess transportation, and a written pass was prerequisite to off-plantation movement.<sup>14</sup> Slaves could not engage in riots, routs, unlawful assemblies, commit trespass, or make seditious speeches.<sup>15</sup> The main deterrents to violence were prohibitions against the possession of firearms or any type weapon, and a system of patrols— the chief method of enforcing slave code stipulations.<sup>16</sup>

10. Tallahassee *Southern Journal*, April 21, 1846.

11. U. S. Census Office, *Statistical View of the United States, Embracing Its Territory, Population— White, Free Colored, and Slave— Moral and Social Condition, Industry, Property, and Revenue; The Detailed Statistics of Cities, Towns, and Counties; Being a Compendium of the Seventh Census* (Washington, 1854), 208.

12. *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at Their First Session, 1822* (Pensacola, 1823), 181-85.

13. *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at Their 6th Session, 1827-8* (Tallahassee, 1828), 99-100.

14. *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at Their Third Session, 1824* (Tallahassee, 1825), 291.

15. *Ibid.*, 290.

16. Thelma Bates, "The Legal Status of the Negro in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VI (January 1928), 163.

Florida legislators provided for a system of patrols in late 1825 and again in early 1831. Composed of male volunteers from various neighborhoods, the patrols were supposed to visit each plantation at least once every two weeks. Any slave outside the owner's fence or cleared ground would be questioned, and the patrol could search slave houses for firearms and disperse any gathering of seven or more bondsmen.<sup>17</sup> The law, however, did not guarantee that the patrols would remain active. It was a time-consuming duty. Often whites became complacent, and patrols almost ceased to function. Newspapers constantly chided the citizenry to keep the search parties alive. The Tallahassee *Floridian* pointed out that local stores were open until church services began at ten o'clock Sunday mornings to "avoid the greater evil" of slaves going to town at night, or under cover of darkness bartering with stolen property "at half its value" for things like coffee and sugar in "disreputable establishments." The paper implied that patrols should insure that the system fulfilled its purpose by carefully accounting for all slaves.<sup>18</sup> Just before the Civil War, William Babcock of the *East Floridian* noted the ease with which blacks obtained illegal rum. Fernandina "needs a corrective in this respect," he wrote, calling for increased surveillance.<sup>19</sup>

At times, government officials or an alarmed populace acted on the patrol question. The Benton County grand jury in the spring of 1846 called for adherence to the patrol law "as we are of the opinion that that important law is much neglected." The report warned citizens and officials that slaves had "too much privilege in carrying arms, and more particularly violating the Sabbath day."<sup>20</sup> As in Leon County in 1835, vigilance committees

17. *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at Their Fourth Session, 1825* (Tallahassee, 1826), 52-56; *Acts of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at Their Ninth Session, Commencing January Third, and Ending February Thirteenth, 1831* (Tallahassee, 1831), 23-25.

18. Tallahassee *Floridian*, March 8, 1834.

19. Fernandina *East Floridian*, December 8, 1859. Under laws of 1828 and 1853, intoxicating liquors were taboo. *Acts of the Legislative Council, 1827-8*, 104; *Laws of Florida, 1852-1853*, 117.

20. Tallahassee *Floridian*, June 13, 1846. Benton replaced "Hernando as the name of the twenty-second county from March 6, 1844, until December 24, 1850, when the former name was restored. Named for Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1853), U. S. senator from Missouri for 30 years (1821-51). His vociferous opposition to paper money and a national bank earned Benton the nickname 'Old Bullion.' Florida's recognition of Benton was,

were occasionally formed. to supplement regular patrols.<sup>21</sup>

The vigilance committee proved particularly active just prior to 1861. During the two years before the war, "suspicious individuals" supposedly lurked in Florida, enticing slaves to flee or revolt. These people were sought with a vengeance. Speaking for Floridians, one newspaper urged: "If they are caught, let them be consigned instanter to the tender mercies of Judge Lynch."<sup>22</sup> Editors warned the committees of any rumored agitator and reported the formation of committees throughout the state.<sup>23</sup> Tensions of the times and worries over slave unrest were demonstrated by one Florida editor who criticized the New York *Tribune's* "gloating over the expectation of a servile insurrection at the South." "If any individual is convicted of tampering with our slave population," the Florida man wrote, "let him die the death of a felon." Such punishments as whipping and tar and feathering "do not incapacitate the offenders from renewing their dangerous efforts." He concluded that "such scoundrels should be 'wiped out.' If they are ambitious of wearing the crown of martyrdom, place it upon their brows. If they furnish necks, hemp is cheap and live-oak limbs numerous."<sup>24</sup>

Other efforts were made to implement and facilitate control measures. In 1844, a letter in the *Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser* voiced concern over slaves being sent to town by owners who "allow them to act as free." This communication reminded readers that "Negro slaves are forbidden, by the ordinances of this city, from living separate and apart from their owners, employers or overseers."<sup>25</sup> Alone or in large groups, Negroes caused

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however, the result of his sponsorship of the Armed Occupation Act of 1842, which opened central Florida to settlers." Allen Morris, *Florida Place Names* (Coral Gables, 1974), 23.

21. Tallahassee *Floridian*, October 3, 1835.

22. Fernandina *East Floridian*, December 15, 1859.

23. *Ibid.*, January 5, 1860; Fernandina *Weekly East Floridian*, October 4, 1860.

24. Fernandina *Weekly East Floridian*, October 24, 1860. Such actions by northern papers may have been one reason for the silence over slave unrest in southern journals. Northern exaggerations could fuel abolitionist sentiment and undercut southern defenses of the peculiar institution. The "extremely delicate character" of the information could also produce "unnecessary excitement" at home. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, December 13, 1856. Such excitement might prove useful, however, in trying to unify southern public opinion against the "enemy" in the North.

25. *Apalachicola Commercial Advertiser*, March 11, 1844. For more insight

additional precautions, as in the Pensacola Navy Yard, where the numerous Negro laborers were quartered near the gate, where the marine guard was stationed.<sup>26</sup>

To whites, the presence of the free black posed one of the major obstacles to control. So clearly was his very freedom a threat that many efforts were made to curtail that freedom. The Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal* echoed the *Alabama Journal* in calling free Negroes "the most dangerous incendiary element to our existing institution of society," whose influence was "prejudicial on the slaves."<sup>27</sup> This paper had already denounced the freeman's "abandoned and dissolute lives" and their bad example for the slaves.<sup>28</sup> The greatest threat posed by the free black was the possibility that slaves "should grow to a sense of equal rights" on seeing freemen and "should become more restive under the chains of servitude, and thus become less valuable to their owners, and more troublesome and dangerous to the community." The aim was to prevent the "evil" of contact between free Negroes and slaves.<sup>29</sup> Occasionally Floridians handled the problems without recourse to the law. At Fernandina, the local jail was forced late in 1860, and three free Negroes, part of the crew of a brig then in port, were "removed and have not since been heard of." There were rumors about their fate, and the fate of six blacks seized from the bark *N. W. Bridge* a short time before, but no one really knew what had happened to them.<sup>30</sup>

News of slave unrest outside Florida sometimes added to the white fears. Reports of revolts in Jamaica and Puerto Rico circulated widely.<sup>31</sup> Yet the prospect of such violent deeds in Florida

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into this situation, see Peter D. Klingman, "A Florida Slave Sale," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LII (July 1973), 62-66.

26. Ada Lou Cherry, "The United States Navy Yard at Pensacola, Florida, 1823-1862" (M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 1953), 57.

27. Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, January 11, 1851.

28. Tallahassee *Floridian*, September 25, 1832.

29. Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser*, January 25, February 1, 1849.

30. Fernandina *Weekly East Floridian*, November 21, 1860.

31. Tallahassee *Southern Journal*, September 11, December 25, 1848. While some historians believe that Florida, along with the rest of the South, panicked after the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, such does not appear to have been the case. The new laws either reenacted earlier measures or were one more step in the gradual, constant tightening of restrictions throughout the era. Evidently Virginia seemed far away. Local newspapers gave no indication of undue alarm. Of the periodic revisions of the Florida slave code, none took place immediately after Nat Turner's revolt, and the legislative records (although not recording debate) indicate no great concern. Perhaps John W. Cromwell realized this when

was usually discounted. Prior to the 1840s, the attitudes of most Floridians were ambivalent. In 1829, Governor William P. DuVal warned of both slave insurrection and of "predatory excursions of the Indians." Floridians should always be ready to defend themselves, he cautioned.<sup>32</sup> A Tallahassee editor noted that "unless they [Northerners] aim to kindle a civil and servile war amongst us— unless they intend . . . to hurl the midnight torch into our dwellings, unsheath the relentless dagger against men, women and children, reposing in defenceless sleep, and wave the flag of humanity drenched in blood over a desolated land they had better cease their clamors."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, an Apalachicola paper claimed, "No! no! we have nothing to fear from that source— the idea is ridiculous and not worth noticing." It would be best, both papers did agree, to be ever "on the alert."<sup>34</sup>

The concern of Floridians over abolitionist activities had increased by 1844. The Apalachicola paper warned its readers against their treacherous depredations. Hopefully, Southerners will "wake from this lethargy in time to save themselves from a general massacre," a letter signed "Patriot" observed. Abolitionists are merely awaiting the proper moment, the author claimed, and "They are every day exciting the slaves to discontent and disobedience."<sup>35</sup> As sectional tensions increased and abolitionists intensified their work, Florida's equanimity on the topic of slave unrest declined. Outside agitators were constantly decried as the cause of slave unrest. John Brown's 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry received much attention in Florida. An editor queried, "Can we any longer shut our eyes to the glaring fact, that a large and influential portion of our Northern brethren, would heartily rejoice to see the negro elevated, even should it be necessary, to shed the *blood* of the people of the South. . .?" All persons convicted of inciting slave insurrection should receive punishment "prompt and certain, 'a short shift and a stout cord.'"<sup>36</sup> A public

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he excluded Florida from his list of those states which did significantly strengthen their slave codes in his "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection," *Journal of Negro History*, V (April 1920), 208-34.

32. Quoted in Tallahassee *Floridian & Advocate*, October 13, 1829.

33. "Southern Times," quoted in Tallahassee *Floridian and Advocate*, May 11, 1830.

34. Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser*, September 30, 1844; Tallahassee *Floridian*, August 8, 1835.

35. Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser*, September 30, 1844.

36. Fernandina *East Floridian*, November 10, 1859.



meeting in Fernandina warned after the Harper's Ferry episode, "that in the most safe and quiet places in slave territory, our homes and homesteads are unsafe." The citizens agreed that "it is fit and proper that we should throw around us such afeguards as our means will allow."<sup>37</sup>

By the time of the 1860 elections, most Floridians overreacted to every mention of abolitionists. Newspapermen called for the South to arm "to resist every form of insurrection and incendiary-ism which Northern hatred can inflict."<sup>38</sup> The ladies of Broward's Neck near Jacksonville sent a post-election address to the *Weekly East Floridian* and warned of abolitionists "illuminating our country occasionally from Texas to Florida."<sup>39</sup> Rumors of insurrection flourished amid such fears. Late in 1860 the *Madison Messenger* contradicted reports that an uprising was imminent there.<sup>40</sup> Most rumors centered on the nefarious deeds of abolitionists who would stop at nothing, the paper claimed, to free slaves. Reporting a servile revolt in Texas under the heading "Abolition Outrages," the Fernandina *Weekly East Floridian* noted the activities of "certain white miscreants," and warned that such "fiendish designs" were plotted to reenact on American soil the "sanguinary scenes" of the St. Domingo insurrection.<sup>41</sup> Fear of abolitionists had definitely risen-fear of losing property as well as of facing insurrection bred by "fiends."

Though Florida never faced a full-blown slave insurrection, many of its citizens believed they had cause to fear. The Second Seminole War was sometimes called the Negro War by some participants. Reportedly there had been an uprising in March 1820, put down by American troops when the "Patriots" of Talbot Island called for help.<sup>42</sup> Despite these two examples of direct violence, fear of slave revolt generally remained groundless. A letter to the Cincinnati (Ohio) *Citizen* in May 1846, and sub-

37. *Ibid.*, January 5, 1860.

38. Fernandina *Weekly East Floridian*, October 31, 1860.

39. *Ibid.*, December 5, 1860.

40. *Madison Messenger*, quoted in *ibid.*, November 28, 1860.

41. *Ibid.*, August 16, 1860.

42. Helen Tunnicliff Catterall, ed., *Judicial Cases concerning American Slavery and the Negro*, 5 vols. (Washington, 1926-1937; facsimile edition, New York, 1968), II, 327-28. A lack of records makes the reality and extent of this uprising seem questionable. Both Harvey Wish, "American Slave Insurrections Before 1861," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (July 1937), 318n; and Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 266n, get their information from Catterall.

stantially reproduced in the June 5, 1846 issue of the *Boston Liberator*, spoke of slaves conspiring to rebel as soon as "a sufficient number" of white men went to the Mexican War. The letter mentioned many arrests and the Pensacola Navy Yard's strictures under Commodore Latimore's proclamation of martial law. "Everybody is armed, and some of the ladies are so frightened that they keep pistols loaded," the missive concluded.<sup>43</sup> Florida newspapers contained no reference to this incident. Yet the Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal* noted similar occurrences as "links in the chain of passing events," and indicated that unrest was not unusual and rumors frequent.<sup>44</sup>

Local as well as northern papers recorded the greatest fright of the antebellum period in 1856. That September, the town of Elba, Florida, was shaken by turmoil, and reports of disquiet continued for several weeks.<sup>45</sup> The main panic occurred in December, sparked by stories of revolt in Texas. The *Floridian and Journal* noted that the "alarm occasioned at certain points in distant States by vague rumors of negro insurrections widens and amplifies as a natural result."<sup>46</sup> The editor should have included his own state: James Stirling, traveling in Florida in 1856, observed white uneasiness in Jacksonville.<sup>47</sup>

An anonymous letter from Quincy, Florida, in 1856, brought news that "a bloody conspiracy is now ripening with a certain class of the population of this State," allegedly to occur some time between Christmas Day and January 1.<sup>48</sup> The *New York Tribune* version was particularly lurid.<sup>49</sup> In the original, the tone was largely disbelief, mingled with warning: "We frankly confess that we place but little confidence in the statement, yet such a thing is possible." *Floridian* editor James S. Jones had received a letter from a dozen of "the most respectable citizens" of Gadsden County denying the validity of the anonymous letter signed "Flo-

43. *Boston Liberator*, June 5, 1846.

44. Tallahassee *Floridian & Journal*, August 31, 1850.

45. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 111. Aptheker's source is the *Richmond (Virginia) Daily Dispatch*, September 30, 1856, citing "local newspapers." See also, Harvey Wish, "The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1856," *Journal of Southern History*, V (May 1939), 206-22, for an overview.

46. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, December 27, 1856.

47. James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857; facsimile edition, New York, 1969), 299.

48. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, December 6, 1856.

49. *New York Tribune*, December 20, 1856.

ridian." They wrote that the subject was "one of an extremely delicate character," and bandying it about in the public prints was "calculated to produce unnecessary excitement." They regretted the letter's publication even more "from the conviction that the 'conspiracy' alluded to has not the slightest foundation." Adding a comment, Jones noted the communication with satisfaction, reminding his readers that he had "placed no confidence in the real or imaginary revelations of an unknown correspondent." Excusing himself for mentioning the letter at all, he perhaps unconsciously emphasized the thoughts in Floridians' minds: "The specifications were distinctly made in the letter, and had they been verified, without a premonition from us, we should have felt afterwards self-reproved, and doubtless, would have incurred the condemnation of all."<sup>50</sup>

Fear of slave unrest in Florida continued throughout the Civil War. In April 1862, Confederate Brigadier General R. F. Floyd appealed to Governor John Milton to declare martial law in Clay, Nassau, Duval, Putnam, St. Johns, and Volusia counties "as a measure of absolute necessity, as they contain a nest of traitors and lawless negroes."<sup>51</sup> The problem intensified as slaves deserted their plantations for Union lines.<sup>52</sup> In August 1864, Confederate General John K. Jackson observed that "Many deserters . . . are collected in the swamps and fastnesses of Taylor, La Fayette [*sic*], Levy, and other counties, and have organized, with runaway negroes, bands for the purpose of committing depredations upon the plantations . . . of loyal citizens and running off their slaves."<sup>53</sup>

During the period of the Seminole Wars, more slave problems had existed than were even feared during the Civil War. As soon as hostilities broke out in 1835, blacks began joining the Seminoles.<sup>54</sup> Osceola recognized the validity of the American officer's observation that ten "resolute negroes, with a knowledge of the

50. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, December 6, 13, 1856.

51. Quoted in Herbert Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," *Journal of Negro History*, XXIV (April 1939), 183.

52. Catterall, *Judicial Cases*, III, 125. To avoid this problem, many owners sent their slaves to the interior. See John E. Johns, *Florida During the Civil War* (Gainesville, 1963), 146.

53. Quoted in Aptheker, "Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States," 183.

54. Edwin L. Williams, Jr., "Negro Slavery in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVIII (October 1949), 104.

country, are sufficient to desolate the frontier," and worked to make it a reality.<sup>55</sup> Early in 1835, General Duncan L. Clinch foresaw the danger and warned that without sufficient military protection, "the whole frontier may be laid waste by a combination of the Indians, Indian negroes, and the negroes on the plantations."<sup>56</sup> By October, Clinch was reporting that "some of the most respectable planters" feared "a secret and improper communication" between the three groups.<sup>57</sup> The planters had cause to worry, for Osceola, actively recruiting, had detailed a war chief, Yaha Hajo, to coordinate slaves' escape and enlistment.<sup>58</sup>

Recognizing Negro participation in the war, the Florida legislature in January 1836 passed an act to sell blacks caught working with the Indians.<sup>59</sup> All available force was utilized to prevent Indian-slave communications and cooperation. During the first week of 1836, Captain F. S. Belton advised the adjutant general from his post at Fort Brooke: "This place is invested by all the Florida Indians in the field, with a large accession of Negroes, particularly from the plantations of Tomoka & Smyrna."<sup>60</sup> Six months later Major Benjamin A. Putnam informed Secretary of War Lewis Cass: "Many have escaped to and joined the Indians, and furnished them with much important information and if strong measures were not taken to restrain our slaves, there is but little doubt that we should soon be assailed with a servile as well as Indian War."<sup>61</sup> General Thomas Sidney Jesup informed his superiors that "depredations committed on the plantations east of the St. John's were perpetrated by the plantation negroes,

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55. John T. Sprague, *The Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War* (New York, 1849; facsimile edition. Gainesville, 1964), 309. For further information, see Kenneth W. Porter, "Osceola and the Negroes," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXIII (January-April 1955), 235-39. There were perhaps between 250 and 800 slaves with the Seminoles. Sprague, *Origin, Progress, and Conclusion of the Florida War*, 19, 97.
56. Quoted in Kenneth Wiggins Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War, 1835-1842," *Journal of Negro History*, XXVIII (October 1943), 393.
57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*, 394.
59. *Acts of the Governor and Legislative Council, of the Territory of Florida. Passed at the Fourteenth Session. Begun and Held at the City of Tallahassee, on Monday January 4th, and Ended Sunday February 14th, 1836* (Tallahassee, 1836), 13-15.
60. Quoted in Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War," 395.
61. *Ibid.*, 398.

headed by an Indian Negro, John Caesar . . . and aided by some six or seven vagabond Indians."<sup>62</sup> In what proved one of the best assessments of the war (aside from Joshua Giddings's figure of a slave hunt carried on by the United States Army), Jesup noted at the end of 1836: "This, you may be assured, is a negro, not an Indian war; and if it be not speedily put down, the South will feel the effects of it on their slave population before the end of the next season."<sup>63</sup> A large portion of the militia remained at home to guard against just such a sudden uprising.

St. Augustine illustrated the tension resulting from fear of slave unrest during the Second Seminole War. Inside the town resided several hundred Negroes who had once lived with the Seminole and had spoken with him daily in his own tongue. Occupants of St. Augustine feared that slaves would fire the town, then admit Indians to the scene while defenders fought the flames.<sup>64</sup> Residents attempted to institute an active patrol system. However, an ordinance issued June 23, 1836, to strengthen the patrols was not put into force until May 1839.<sup>65</sup> Patrols were organized, but few arms and little ammunition were available; in the preceding weeks the Seminoles had, unnoticed, purchased nearly all available munitions.<sup>66</sup> Protective measures occasionally proved insufficient. Two free Negroes, Stephen Merritt and Randall Irving, were accused of selling arms to the Indians, but were cleared of the charge. Merritt's son Joe was not so fortunate; caught in the act, he paid with his life.<sup>67</sup> In early 1840, several of John M. Hanson's slaves were arrested for supplying the enemy with powder and information.<sup>68</sup>

Aside from these few instances, Florida was not troubled by major slave violence. In this respect, Governor Richard Keith Call had nothing to fear, and could correctly boast on the eve

62. *Ibid.*, 409.

63. Quoted in Russell Garvin, "The Free Negro in Florida Before the Civil War," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XLVI (July 1967), 6.

64. Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War," 397.

65. *Ibid.*, 416. Two years later, the city council was forced to decrease night patrols because of "general unwillingness" to participate. *Ibid.*, 419.

66. *Ibid.*, 397. The purchases continued despite a January 23, 1837, city ordinance forbidding such sales—especially ammunition—to slaves, free blacks, or mulattoes. *Ibid.*, 402.

67. *Ibid.*, 414-15. The question which most needs answering is why a free Negro would risk the consequences of such an act. Perhaps in the answer lies another clue to slave unrest.

68. *Ibid.*, 416-17.

of the Civil War: "I sleep soundly with my doors unlocked, unbarred, unbolted, when my person is accessible to the midnight approach of more than two hundred African slaves." Call then spoke of "some few individual cases of shocking murders of masters and overseers by slaves," but decided they were "by no means so frequent, nor have they been marked by greater treachery and ferocity, than the murders committed by white men on both races within the same time."<sup>69</sup> Here was the crux of the slave unrest matter. Most slave unrest in Florida took the form of runaways, theft, arson, and personal violence. Yet, the result was the same, whether the violence was protest against enslavement or a very personal kind of individual retribution directed, not against an enslaving master, but against another man.

Theft was so common that Floridians were even able to joke about it. Except for the nuisance, pilfering was easier overlooked than punished. Viewing two evils— theft and literacy— with equanimity, Florida papers avidly copied the humorous tale of a pilfering slave.<sup>70</sup> Arson was another matter; few persons laughed at its frequent and often tragic occurrence. Incendiaries ignited houses, public buildings, stores, gin houses, warehouses, corn cribs, corn, and cotton. Florida papers often commented on these incidents. On September 8, 1829, an editor noted Tallahassee's "combustible nature," and the next year called for the organization of a fire department.<sup>71</sup> For thirty years before the Civil War, many Floridians viewed most fires as the work of arsonists. For example, when Tallahasseans read of plantation fires in 1834 and the great Apalachicola holocaust of 1846, they laid the blame on incendiaries.<sup>72</sup>

69. Quoted in Brevard, *History of Florida*, II, 224-25.

70. Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser*, September 2, 1844. "A slave was brought before a magistrate charged with pilfering; the magistrate began to remonstrate: 'Do you know how to read?' 'Yes massa, little.' 'Well, don't you never make use of the bible?' 'Yes, massa, *I trap my razor on it sometime.*' "

71. Tallahassee *Floridian & Advocate*, September 8, 1829; Tallahassee *Floridian and Advocate*, May 4, 1830. Arson was made a capital offense in 1840. *Acts and Resolutions of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida, Passed at its Eighteenth Session, Which commenced on the sixth day of January, and ended on the second day of March, 1840* (Tallahassee, 1840), 39-40. An 1848 law distinguished between misdemeanors (minor dwellings) and felonies (public buildings) and set new penalties— thirty-nine lashes and one hour in the pillory, and up to 100 lashes plus one-half hour with ears nailed to posts. *Laws of Florida, 1847-1848*, 10-11.

72. Tallahassee *Floridian*, March 22, 1834, October 24, 1846.

Fear of arson was one reason for Floridians' concern over runaways. In the eyes of slave owners and their supporting society, the problems of slave stealing, runaways, and personal violence were heinous and interrelated. Absent slaves were economic debits for the owner; worse was the runaways' threat to property and person. Often banding together in outlaw areas, maroons caused consternation throughout the region.

Runaways were generally blamed on slave-stealers. Whites believed that blacks were not intelligent enough to leave on their own, nor would they forsake their carefree existence unless lured away. And if a slave had to be lured away, he certainly could not find his way back. Examples of "scapegoating" were rampant. Governor Call wrote of the problem of Negro-stealing: ". . . if the white man will not corrupt the virtue, or seduce the fidelity of the faithful African slave," slaves would never leave their masters. They were too dependent.<sup>73</sup> According to Southerners, however, slaves were constantly importuned by Negro-stealers. The Apalachicola paper in 1844 told of "Samuel Walker," who supposedly had helped seven Negroes escape and lived with a price of \$1,000 on his head.<sup>74</sup> Two years later the *Pensacola Gazette* reported the lynching of the "notorious negro thief Yeoman." An assembled mob had voted, sixty-seven to twenty-three, to hang and had summarily executed the culprit at noon because of "the insecurity of their jails, and the fact of his having a band of accomplices in the community."<sup>75</sup> As the antebellum period drew to a close, Floridians began blaming almost all slave disappearances on lurking Negro-stealers. Denunciation of the thieves also increased in venom. In 1859, the *East Floridian* berated such "enemies— those who are not only attempting the destruction of our interests, but applying the torch to our homesteads, exciting insurrections and murdering our people."<sup>76</sup>

73. Quoted in Brevard, *History of Florida*, II, 224-25.

74. The Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser's* July 6, 1844, reference to "Samuel Walker" was probably an error. The story is most likely based on the experience of Jonathan Walker, a Massachusetts native who took seven slaves from the Pensacola area on June 22, 1844, and headed for the Bahamas in his boat. The \$1,000 reward was offered by the owners of the slaves. For the complete story, see his *Trial and Imprisonment of Jonathan Walker, at Pensacola, Florida, for Aiding Slaves to Escape from Bondage* (Boston, 1845; facsimile editions, New York, 1969, Gainesville, 1974).

75. *Pensacola Gazette*, January 24, 1846.

76. Fernandina *East Floridian*, December 8, 1859.

Floridians recognized the ever-present runaway problem. Florida planter George Noble Jones's papers include numerous references to runaways.<sup>77</sup> Florida's newspapers contained many evidences of and advertisements for runaways. Judging from casual references, the fugitive population was much larger than anyone acknowledged. In 1830, the Tallahassee *Floridian and Advocate* admonished the citizens to watch their kitchens more closely; runaways could obtain food too easily. Lax planters not issuing proper passes compounded the problem. Only a "more strict observation of every individual over his own premises" could solve the problem.<sup>78</sup> Again in 1834, the paper called citizens' attention to this evil, and chided masters for not being more active in securing slaves who disappeared. Plundering the public "with singular audacity in their predatory expeditions," runaways must be curtailed.<sup>79</sup>

Runaways had to be caught because they represented danger. Plundering was one thing; increased personal violence was another. In 1844, the *Commercial Advertiser* complained that British authorities had refused to extradite some runaways who had murdered and stolen in East Florida, then fled to the Bahamas: "our negro slaves are not only encouraged to commit murder and theft, but every facility is offered them for escape, and protection extended to them when they are successful." Such activities, the paper held, would only encourage other slaves to commit atrocities and run for British territory.<sup>80</sup> Floridians may have remembered an earlier incident which supported this contention. Christopher Smith, living about seven miles from Magnolia, had been attacked in 1837 "by a straggling party of Seminoles, or by a gang of runaways, of whom it is reported there are a number out from some of the frontier plantations." The house and its contents were burned.<sup>81</sup> Florida faced violence from maroons throughout the period, but during the 1860s this proved a particular problem. Either violence increased or it was more faith-

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77. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips and James David Glunt, eds., *Florida Plantation Records from the papers of George Noble Jones* (St. Louis, 1927), passim.

78. Tallahassee *Floridian and Advocate*, October 5, 1830.

79. Tallahassee *Floridian*, January 18, 1834.

80. Apalachicola *Commercial Advertiser*, March 11, 1844.

81. Tallahassee *Floridian*, July 1, 1837.



fully reported.<sup>82</sup> Regardless of the reason, violent fugitive slaves received more attention.

Runaways were incidental to the possibility of unexpected slave violence. Often runaways and violence were interrelated, as James Stirling indicated in his 1856 warning to the South that repression would merely increase "the explosive force" of slavery and change "complaint into conspiracy."<sup>83</sup> Examples to prove Stirling's point surfaced throughout the era of slavery. At El Destino Plantation in Leon County, overseer Moxley whipped four female slaves who had run away, then been caught and returned. Aberdeen, the brother of one, seized an axe and tried to kill Moxley.<sup>84</sup> George Evans, Chemonie Plantation's overseer, had his life threatened under similar circumstances.<sup>85</sup> In 1829, Hagan, Governor Call's plantation overseer, was stabbed in the back by a slave when Hagan attempted to chastise him. A second man, answering Hagan's calls, was likewise stabbed before the slave fled.<sup>86</sup> In another instance, William Pierce, a Madison County slave-owner, was murdered when he started to whip a slave. Presumably as Pierce approached, the Negro uncovered an axe he had hidden and "split in twain the head of his master, scattering the brains in every direction."<sup>87</sup>

Often a slave's violence occurred in conjunction with another crime, most often theft. Examples proliferated during the antebellum era. Thomas P. Trotter and Richard Bolton, two Negro-traders from North Carolina, were murdered in Georgia by a pair of their own slaves. As the men slept, the blacks cut their owners' throats with razors, though Trotter had to be axed when he refused to die. The slaves took money, burned the papers which proved them chattel, then fled toward Florida.<sup>88</sup> In another instance, an unnamed slave murdered Fish, driver of the

82. See, for example, the *Fernandina East Floridian*, March 15, 1860, *Fernandina Weekly East Floridian*, August 23, 30, 1860. Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1851 may have encouraged reports of runaways.

83. Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States*, 301.

84. Kathryn T. Abbey, "Documents Relating to El Destino and Chemonie Plantations, Middle Florida, 1828-1868. Part I," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VII (January 1929), 196.

85. Edwin L. Williams, Jr., "Negro Slavery in Florida," Part II, *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXVIII (January 1950), 191.

86. *Tallahassee Florida Advocate*, March 14, 1829.

87. Julia H. Smith, "The Plantation Belt in Middle Florida, 1850-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1964), 138-39.

88. *Tallahassee Southern Journal*, February 14, 1848.

Tallahassee-Quincy stage, but lost most of the stolen loot to Holloman and Caruthers, two white accomplices.<sup>89</sup> In 1860, Albert Clark of Hernando County was shot when he returned from taking his daughter to school in Brooksville. Hampton, one of Clark's slaves, had secreted himself in a hammock near the road, shot his master, and robbed the body.<sup>90</sup> In another instance, a seaman named Curry had his throat cut and "a considerable sum of money" taken from him. A slave of Colonel J. Gamble had given the sailor a ride from St. Marks in Gamble's wagon, then murdered him.<sup>91</sup> Another case occurred when Joe and Crittenden, two slaves, murdered a Mr. Roundtree near the Georgia line. The editor of the *Floridian* claimed that "The object of the perpetrators is supposed to have been money, of which the deceased was known to have a small sum."<sup>92</sup>

Murder for money and violence to escape punishment were understandable; murder without apparent motives was not. Perhaps officials felt constrained to provide solutions for open cases and obtained admissions of guilt from slaves. A stranger named Ferguson was found dead in a Calhoun County pond in 1859. No clues existed, but the *Fernandina East Floridian* intimated that perhaps a slave should be questioned.<sup>93</sup> Equally mystifying were the murders of masters known to be kind, or of respected overseers.

M. D. Griffin, overseer for Major Watts of Madison County, was murdered by eleven of his charges in March 1860.<sup>94</sup> Just the previous month, Lewis, slave of Dr. W. J. Keitt, had cut his master's throat. Local authorities near Ocala claimed that Allen, Issac, John, Zelius, and Melvina, all Keitt's slaves, had participated in the murder. Kitt was known as a kind man, gentle with his chattel, and people across the state wondered at his killing. No one could, or would, offer any explanation for the murder.<sup>95</sup>

In Florida, favorite slave weapons were axes, razors, knives, and occasionally guns. Poison was less frequently employed, per-

89. *Ibid.*, September 22, 29, 1846.

90. *Fernandina Weekly East Floridian*, October 18, 1860.

91. Tallahassee *Floridian*, July 22, 1837.

92. *Ibid.*, March 29, May 3, November 15, 22, 1834.

93. *Fernandina East Floridian*, July 28, 1859.

94. *Ibid.*, March 15, 1860.

95. Ocala *Fla. Home Companion*, quoted in *ibid.*, March 3, 1860; Ocala *Home Companion*, quoted in *ibid.*, March 8, 1860; *Home Companion*, quoted in *ibid.*, March 29, 1860.

haps because of its scarcity. As in the attempt to poison John Harris's whole wedding party in Georgia in 1837, the measure often failed.<sup>96</sup> American slaves, like their masters, seemed to prefer a more personal, face-to-face violence. Slaves might murder masters in a fit of temper or to escape punishment. Runaways might simply be escaping the consequences of earlier actions. Murder might be for money, arson for revenge, and non-production due to chronic laziness. Suicide and the murder of one's family might signal insanity, as freemen sometimes committed the same irrevocable act.

One proof of causation appeared in the Florida papers in 1856. A slave woman in Cincinnati had cut the throat of one child, and told slave catchers that she wished she had been able to do the same to her others. She had rather kill her children than have them return to slavery.<sup>97</sup> The *Florida News* told of James E. Humphrey's Negro woman and her two children. Though Humphrey was a "lenient and kind" master, the woman had drowned her five-year-old son and three-year-old daughter in a nearby well. She then returned to her house, burned it, and fled. No motive other than insanity could be assigned to the "unnatural and diabolical act."<sup>98</sup> Insanity was one possible explanation for suicide too, but "fatal accident" was more common. Such was the verdict when one of S. B. Thomas's slaves was found dead a short distance from Fernandina. Supposedly the gun he was carrying discharged accidentally as he stepped over a log, although the lead hit his forehead.<sup>99</sup>

Causation was not a primary concern to antebellum Floridians— violence was. Rationally, Floridians seemed to realize that an insurrection was only remotely possible; the evidence of 1820, the Seminole wars, and continuing slave unrest shook their assurance. Ambivalence toward the probability of black revolution was the result. When warned that England might send black regiments to the Gulf states in case of war, a Tallahassee editor echoed the *Montgomery Journal's* belief that, "Three or four thousand negroes to be had for the catching" would only prove "the tallest sort of hunt."<sup>100</sup> This was Florida's answer to the

96. Tallahassee *Floridian*, September 9, 1837.

97. Tallahassee *Floridian and Journal*, February 9, 1856.

98. Fernandina *Florida News*, February 10, 1859.

99. *Ibid.*, March 10, 1859.

100. Tallahassee *Southern Journal*, February 24, 1846.

belief that abolition was the cure for unrest. What Floridians could not easily understand was the daily resistance to the institution. Slaves seldom fought openly in revolt, despite the Seminole wars. The razor or axe was most liable to drip with the master's blood in an individual act, either out of pique or a search for freedom. Theft, arson, fugitive slaves, murder, suicide, and slave-to-slave violence should have convinced Floridians that they would have no rest so long as slavery existed. Despite the adaptation of the black to servitude, the willingness to take freedom by "pulling foot" or express his emotions by violence was always below the surface, waiting for expression.