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The SEMINOLE FREEDMEN

A History

by **Kevin Mulroy**

Analysis and review by **Lee Young, Texas Ranger Sergeant (retired)**

Retired Texas Ranger Lee Young is a descendant of Black Seminole scout Sergeant John Ward, a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and of John Kibbetts, Chief of the Black Seminoles.

A study of the relationship between African Americans and Seminole Indians can be very complicated. The connection has sustained a variety of interpretations, oftentimes dependant upon the writers, their motivations, and the historical time period of the study. In this article, I analyze Kevin Mulroy's book, *The Seminole Freedmen: A History*. I have conducted the analysis utilizing historical data from several comparative sources such as scholars, researchers, and demographers. Many of these are designated as experts in their subject matter.

I find that Mulroy's book is an excellent scholarly research that transports the reader on the complicated historical trail of relationships between Africans and Seminole Indians from 18th century Florida to the Oklahoma Indian Territory. Some confusion may occasionally occur due to the use of

Above: Drawing of a Black Seminole fighter, artist unknown. All photos courtesy of Lee Young.

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some terms that Mulroy applies to the Black Seminoles and Seminole Freedmen.

The Seminole Freedmen is volume two in the series, *Race and Culture in the American West*. It was written to continue from the end of volume one, *Freedom on the Border: The Seminole Maroons in Florida, the Indian Territory, Coahuila, and Texas*, which failed to complete the interesting saga of the Black Seminoles.

Mulroy has assembled a significant amount of information on African American and Seminole Indian relationships. This data has enabled him to perform an analysis of these complicated affiliations. He reasons that the Seminole Freedmen are not Seminoles, Africans, or Black Indians. Mulroy proposes that they are Maroon descendants who inhabit their own racial and cultural identity, which he calls Seminole Maroon. He relates that the historical data demonstrates that these Maroons, although allied with Seminoles, formed independent communities that interacted differently with white American society than did the Indians or African Americans.

Compared to other Native American Indian groups, the Seminole Indians are of fairly recent origin. During the 17th century in the southeastern United States, nearly every Indian not a Cherokee, Choctaw, or Chickasaw was believed to be a Creek. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Spanish and English were engaged in a struggle for control of the Southeast. The English formed an alliance with the Creeks and encouraged them to make war on the Indian tribes in Florida. After the conflict ended, many Creeks relocated into the Florida areas previously occupied by other Indian tribes and became known as Seminoles around the beginning of the 18th century.

The term *Seminole* is said to be of Spanish origin, derived from *cimarron* or *cimarrones*, meaning “wild and untamed.” It referred to hostile nonwhites and Africans whom the Spaniards had to contend with on their frontiers. There is no “R” in Hitchiti or any of the Muskogean languages, so when Indians attempted to identify themselves as Cimarrones, “R” became “L,” *Cimarron* became *Cimallon*, and *Simallone* eventually became *Seminole*.

Often, when Southeast Indians were attempting to identify themselves to Europeans, they were trying to say they were not Creeks. To further complicate matters, the British designated all Florida Indians as Seminole Creeks during the American Revolution. However, the Spanish continued to refer to them as Cimarrones. The traditional founding Indians of the Creek Nation were Cowetas, Kasihtas, Coosas, and Abihkas. When interacting with whites, they often referred to themselves as Creeks.

Mulroy refers to the Seminole native language as Creek. Several other terms are frequently utilized in the text, and it is appropriate to attempt an explanation of them. Muskogee is the language spoken by most Creeks. Muscogulges are Southeastern Indians who were usually known as Creeks and Seminoles. Muskogean refers to the dominant linguistic family in the Southeast, which includes Muskogee, Hitchiti, Choctaw, and other distinct languages and dialects.





Osceola, Seminole leader in Florida, where he died. Therefore, he did not go to the Indian Territory.

By the 18th century, Muscogulge culture had evolved into a blend of Indian, European, and African customs. While it is impossible to assign percentages to the principal Muscogulge racial mixture, all of these cultures were represented as integral parts of the Creeks and Seminoles. As an example, observe Southwestern culture, which has developed into an admixture of European (white), Mexican (Spanish), and Indian ways of life. When cultures interact, there is often an exchange of some traits between the participants.

European society can probably be held responsible for most of the tribal name confusion. There was no mention of Creeks in 17th century accounts of interactions with Indians. The term *Creek* is of European origin, and it developed in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The name was originally applied to Southeastern Indians who lived on the fertile regions that included many rivers and streams. *Creeks* was applied to these Indians just as Alabamians, Mobilians, and Apalachicolas designate Indians living on those rivers.

Over a period of approximately two hundred years, slaves in neighboring states fled to Florida, where many found refuge among the Seminole Indians. They migrated into Florida from Georgia and Alabama and settled on lands abandoned by earlier Indians, many now extinct. An Indian in Alabama might be called a Creek and the same Indian called a Seminole in Florida. Another source of confusion was the fact that in the late 18th century, a close examination of many of these Indians revealed that they dressed in the usual native fashion. However, their skin was black and they had Negroid features. The African influence among the Southeastern Indians had already become significant during this period.

Maroon is a term which has historically been utilized to refer to runaway slaves and government-wary free Blacks who formed communities in North and South America from the early 1500s through the late 1800s. The English word *maroon* also comes from *cimarron*, the Spanish term for “wild and untamed.” Maroon settlements once dotted the edges of plantation lands from the southern part of the United States to Brazil and Peru. The Maroons who escaped to the Everglades region of Florida integrated with the Seminole Indians and assimilated their culture.

As reported in some historical data, the relationship between Blacks and Seminole Indians suggests the Seminoles, in the estimation of whites, practiced a modified form of slavery. Maroons essentially lived in their own villages, farmed their own crops, controlled most aspects of their existence, owned property, possessed weapons, and had their own leaders.



Black Seminole Maroon women

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An example of the property accumulated by a Maroon is that of John Horse. He had a herd of more than ninety head of cattle. On his last journey from Florida to the Indian Territory, he was part of a group of over one hundred Seminole captives. Because of low water in the Arkansas River, continued travel there was halted. Horse loaned \$1,500 to Lieutenant Canby for the costs of transportation in order that the journey to the Indian Territory could continue.

The Maroon culture was a mixture of Seminole, African, and white customs. The only obligation Maroons had to their Indian owners was the payment of an annual tribute, which was a percentage of their crop. Not many Black Seminoles became part of Seminole clans. However, membership was extended to some leaders such as John Horse (Juan Caballo) and John Kibbetts (Sitteetastonachy, a Seminole warrior name meaning Tearing Warrior).

Black Seminoles were influential in military and political matters. The Seminoles utilized the Maroons as interpreters and intermediaries in negotiations with whites because they spoke English and Spanish.

Some intermarriage did occur between the neighbors. More significantly, both groups shared the common burdens of continual resistance to white intrusions into their homelands and their tenacious fight for independence.

Were the first Maroons to come into contact with Indians slaves or allies? Or did the Indians begin to refer to the Maroons as slaves following the intrusions of whites attempting to capture Blacks and place them into slavery? A prevalent thought of whites during this period of time was that a Black person could only be a slave—not a free person. Could this ideology have prompted the Seminoles, in their protection of their allies and relatives, to refer to the Blacks living near them as slaves?

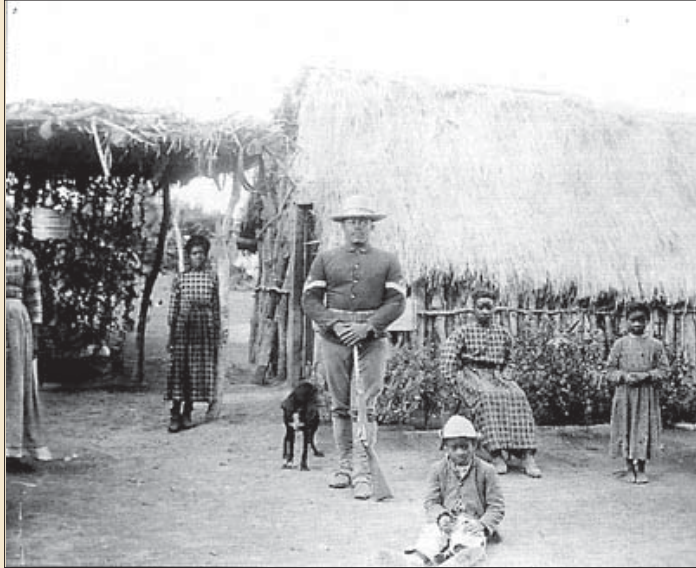
The Black Seminoles joined with the Seminoles as soldiers against the United States in the Second Seminole War (1835-1842). Their involvement proved instrumental in the longevity of the conflict. At one time, US Army General Philip Jessup said that the Second Seminole War was “against the Negro, not the Seminole Indians.” Many former slaves fought alongside the Seminoles in wars against the United States.



Black Seminole scouts

Sgt. John Ward, front row, left; and Trumpeter Isaac Payne, second row, far left. Both were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for rescuing Lt. John Bullis in an 1875 campaign on the Pecos River. The Seminole-Negro Indian scouts were well regarded by their officers. Lt. John French referred to them as his “old warriors,” an indication of respect.

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Seminole-Negro Scout Detachment
1st Sergeant Ben July, my great-grandfather, standing at parade rest, armed with his Springfield carbine. The site is the Seminole camp on the Fort Clark Military Reservation, circa 1896. The scouts were then operating out of Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass but returned frequently to the camp to visit their families. July's only child was my grandmother, Cerilla July, born October 4, 1896, at Fort Ringgold. She would have been an infant at the time of the photograph. In all likelihood, Sergeant July's children and his home are also pictured.

Following the First and Second Seminole Wars (1817-1818 and 1835-1842), some Maroons sought refuge in the Bahamas. Others were removed with their Native American allies to the Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). Years later, some of them moved to Mexico, where their descendants, known as Indios Mascogos, still live today.

In the mid-1800s, the Seminoles and many former slaves who had fought alongside them in wars against the United States were relocated to Oklahoma and given a reservation. In 1866, the Seminoles in Oklahoma signed a treaty with the United States government under which the blood Seminoles and the Black Seminoles were accorded equal rights. Thereafter, the Black Seminoles of Oklahoma were known as Seminole Freedmen.

Many Black Seminoles appear to have lived in a relationship distinctly different from what is portrayed by Mulroy in *Seminole Freedmen*. This traditional interaction between Seminoles and Blacks began to deteriorate following their forced relocation to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma.

The Creek acculturation consisted of the adoption of the white attitudes towards Black relations. In 1861, Creeks in Oklahoma allied with the Confederates, who fought to keep their slaves and save the Southern plantation lifestyle. The terms *slave*, *Black*, and *Negro* were used interchangeably by whites and eventually by some wealthy Creeks and Seminoles. Both Seminoles and Blacks suffered harsh treatment at the hands of the slave owners and oppression from the Creeks in the Indian Territory. They began to contemplate their relocation from the Indian Territory to a place where they could live in freedom.

In the late 1840s, runaways from the Seminoles, Blacks, and others began migrations into Mexico. In 1850, the Seminole leader Wild Cat (Coacoochee) and Black Seminole Chief John Horse (Juan Caballo), lead a party of Seminoles and Black Seminoles on a year-long journey from the Indian Territory across Texas and into Mexico. During this flight, they camped near Waco along the Llano River and at Las Moras Springs near Fort Clark and Brackettville. They hunted and raised crops when possible, for they were continually pursued by slave hunters.



Apache Chief Costelitos and Teresita

Apache Chief Costelitos and his daughter Teresita. On May 18, 1873, Col. Ranald MacKenzie led 34 Black Seminole and Lt. John Lapham Bullis on a surprise attack on the Indian village at Remolino, Mexico, which was defeated and burned to the ground. Black Seminole Scout Renty Grayson roped Chief Costelitos. Several Indians were captured; one was Teresita, the chief's daughter. She and the chief made their home in a jacal on the compound at Fort Clark (as pictured). Teresita married Black Seminole scout James Perryman and assisted the scouts on several occasions as a tracker. I grew up knowing Warren Perryman, the son of Teresita and James Perryman and attended school with his grandchildren.

In June 1850, a group consisting of more than three hundred Seminoles, Black Seminoles, and some Kickapoos who had joined the group in Texas crossed the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass, Texas. The Mexican government granted the Black Seminoles, Seminoles, and Kickapoos titles to land (*sitios*) in the state of Coahuila and provided them with supplies, farm implements, and provisions. Because of their reputation as fierce fighters, horsemen, and expert marksmen, the Black Seminoles and Seminoles were obligated to the Mexican government to provide protection from Indian raids along the Mexican northern border. Many fought in the Mexican Army, where John Horse was commissioned a captain.

The group originally settled on land south of Piedras Negras, Mexico, enjoying being free people in Mexico. However, their peaceful existence was soon destroyed by the greed of a slave hunter and a serious error in judgment committed by a Texas Ranger captain.

In 1855, the Texas treasury was in dire straits. The state called for rangers to take to the field, supplying their own weapons, ammunition, and horses, and the state legislature promised pay sometime in the future. Indian raids along the frontier prompted the formation of approximately six companies of Texas Rangers. One of the first organized was commandeered by Captain James Hughes Callahan.

On a scout near Eagle Pass, Texas, Captain Callahan's company encountered a band of men lead by William R. Henry. Henry was a slave hunter who claimed to be a former Ranger—which he was not. Actually, he was a soldier of fortune who was willing to fight on either side of the Rio Grande.

On October 2, 1855, Callahan and Henry staged a raid into Mexico to recover runaway slaves. They were defeated at La Maroma by Mexican forces aided by the Black Seminoles and Seminoles. In order to cover their escape and plundering, Callahan ordered the burning of Piedras Negras. As a result of that unwarranted action, Governor E. M. Pease dismissed Callahan from the Texas Ranger service.



Fay July, a brother of my great-grandfather Ben July. Date unknown.



Scout Fay July and family in Las Moras.

Following this raid to forcefully remove them from their freedom, the Black Seminoles realized they had not escaped the continual efforts of slave hunters or the anti-abolition sentiment that dominated Southern culture. The Mexican government, fearing a breach of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, decided to move both the Black Seminoles and the Seminoles to a tract of land at the Hacienda de Nacimiento, located in the interior on the Rio San Juan Sabinas. They formed a community called Nacimiento at the headwaters of the river, northwest of Muzquiz, Coahuila. One leader of the Black Seminoles in Mexico said, "When we came fleeing slavery, Mexico was a land of freedom, and the Mexicans spread out their arms to us." The Mexican government officially began to refer to the Black Seminoles as Mascogos, a term still used today to describe the inhabitants of Nacimiento.

Upon their arrival in Coahuila, the Black Seminoles discovered that they had been preceded by a group of Black Creeks, mostly of the Warrior and Wilson families, and a family of Biloxi Indians. These groups eventually joined and became a prominent part of the Black Seminole community. By 1861, all of the Seminoles had returned to Indian Territory, ending the alliance with the Mascogos.

During the 1860s, the Black Seminoles in Mexico experienced internal problems resulting in dividing the group into three groups. Separate groups settled at the Laguna de Parras, Nacimiento, and Matamoras. Another band, led by Elijah Daniels, settled across the border in Texas. In the sparse and rough terrain along the border, the Black Seminoles quickly adapted to the land and learned their way around. They soon made a name for themselves as expert trackers, marksmen, and horsemen. The United States Army admired their swift and effective style of fighting and began negotiations to recruit them as scouts.

Talks began with John Kibbetts, the leader of the Black Seminoles at Nacimiento, to employ his men as Indian scouts and fighters in Texas. At Fort Duncan on August 16, 1870, Kibbetts was

commissioned a sergeant, and ten of his followers enlisted as privates. The Black Seminoles entered into a treaty with the United States to fight in exchange for land, food for their families, and compensation for their efforts.

On August 16, 1870, Kibbetts and his original group of ten Black Seminoles were recruited by Major Zenas Bliss to come to Texas to fight Native Americans. They served as the Seminole Negro-Indian Scout Detachment of the US Army out of Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass, and Fort Clark at Brackettville. Performing reconnaissance duties, they tracked the movements of American Indians who refused to go to reservations. Another area scouted was out of Fort Ringgold at Rio Grande City (birthplace of my grandmother Cerilla July, born in 1896, granddaughter of Chief Kibbetts). The scouts' knowledge of English, Spanish, and other Indian dialects proved valuable to the Army.

In 1873, Lieutenant John Lapham Bullis joined the 24th Infantry. He promptly saw the potential of the scouts as a mobile force that could quickly strike the enemy. Bullis was a military officer who had developed a successful record for his work with special troops, including the US Colored Troops, during the Civil War. The scouts served under Bullis's command for eight years and saw combat during twenty-six expeditions, engaging in twelve battles without losing a single scout in combat. The old former scouts said they always prayed for protection and safe return before going into battle. They fought on and expertly tracked in some of the most arduous terrain along the border between the United States and Mexico. Many of their actions are noted through anecdotal history.

The Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts entered Mexico with the 4th Cavalry, commandeered by Colonel Ranald MacKenzie. They saw action against the Lipan Apaches and Kickapoos at Remolino and also accompanied MacKenzie against the Southern Plains tribes at Palo Duro Canyon in 1874.

Never numbering more than fifty at a time, the scouts distinguished themselves in the Indian Wars. Four of them were awarded the Medal of Honor: John Ward, Isaac Payne, Pompey Factor, and Adam Payne. The first went to Adam Paine, who performed admirably at the Battle of Canyon Blanco in 1874. The second, third, and fourth went to a group comprised of Sergeant John Ward, Trumpeter Pompey Factor, and Isaac Payne for their valiant efforts in the rescue of Lieutenant Bullis after he was separated from his horse during a battle in 1875 on the Pecos River West of Del Rio, Texas.

Originally, the Army classified the scouts as Indians and thought they could be settled in the Indian Territory, but Indian agents questioned their ethnicity. Some mixing did occur between the Black Seminoles and Seminoles, but the Black Seminoles had always maintained their individual separate identity. The ensuing battle between the Army, Indian Bureau, and Department of the Interior left the Black Seminoles with an unfulfilled treaty.

As a boy growing up in Brackettville, I recall hearing a story told by one of these last remaining



Pompey Factor
Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient

scouts. He said they had been pursuing Indians for several days when they came upon a water hole that they expected to use for themselves and their horses. They found a polluted carcass of a dead horse placed there by the Indians. Finishing this story, the scout said that they just got down to the water, cleared a spot with their hands, drank, and filled their canteens.

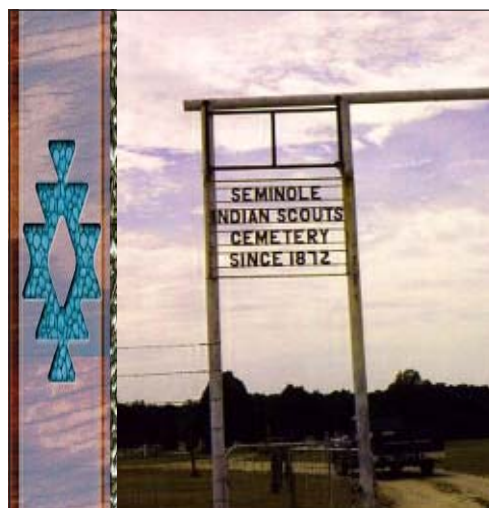
Another account related the mental and physical endurance the group sustained as a unit. Lieutenant Bullis and twenty-nine mounted scouts tracked Apache warriors for over a month in the desert, their journey lasting over a thousand miles.

Educator and Black Seminole spokesperson Charles Emily Wilson was my first grade school teacher at the George Washington Carver School in Brackettville, Texas. She wrote in the 1992 Festival of American Folk life catalogue:

Our people, the Black Seminoles, have lived in Texas for over one hundred years. Before that we were in Mexico, where some of us still live, and before that we were in Oklahoma, and even earlier than that, Florida. And before that, we came from Africa. As far as we've come, in all our travels, we have never lost an awareness of our identity and a pride in freedom, because it is our freedom which makes us different from other Americans of African descent.

The scouts amassed an impressive record as warriors on the frontier. In spite of their successes, however, their families endured racial violence, discrimination, and governmental indifference. Oral accounts say the Black Seminoles were promised land in return for their service to the Army as scouts. No written record of that agreement has been discovered, but oral accounts relate that it once existed. As the officers and officials involved moved on and commands changed, so did the details of the agreement.

In spite of the harsh treatment from local citizens and the indifference of bureaucrats, the scouts maintained a high level of effectiveness. They remained loyal to the Army, and more importantly, proud of themselves and their accomplishments. Over one hundred and fifty scouts served the Army until 1914, when the detachment was disbanded and their history of bravery and sacrifice likewise came to an end.



**Seminole Indian Scouts Cemetery, south of Brackettville, Texas.
Pompey Factor is buried here. His headstone is dated 1872.**

SEMINOLE FREEDMEN

Lee Young

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Seminole Negro Indian Scouts



Group of scouts in 1910.