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Fort Mose: Colonial America's Black Fortress of Freedom

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Fort Mose: Colonial America's Black Fortress of Freedom

Fort Mose: Colonial America's Black Fortress of Freedom, Kathleen Deagan & Darcie MacMahon, University of Florida Press/Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, 1995. 54 pp. Plates, index.

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This volume presents the story of the many freed and escaped blacks that inhabited a small, Spanish-sanctioned, outpost north of St. Augustine more than 250 years ago. Very detailed historic research is combined with the results of test excavations at the site of the second Fort Mose. The volume is lavishly illustrated and written for a general audience.

As the presentation of a traveling museum exhibit in text form, the volume is divided into many short sections, each detailing particular aspects of the history of African-Americans in the Spanish colonies. The book begins with sections detailing the period prior to the establishment of the fort. These sections include: "Spanish Sanctuary," "African Origins," "Africa and Iberia: Precedents of American Slavery," "Slavery in Iberia After the Moors," "Coming to America: Africans in the Early Spanish Colonies," "Slaves of Disease: Victims of Health," "Black Explorers and Conquistadors," "Palenques and Cimarrones: Black and Red Resistance on the Spanish Frontier," "A New Social Order," "African People in the Colonial Southeast," "Neighbors to the North: The Black Community in South Carolina," and "Giving Liberty to All." Through the extensive use of historic records, including numerous illustrations and paintings from the period, and photographs of appropriate items from museum collections, these initial sections depict the active and vital role played by African-Americans in the early history of Spain and the Spanish colonies.

The volume then moves on to the history of the establishment of Fort Mose. In "The Establishment of Mose: A Fortress of Freedom" we learn that there were two Fort Moses. The first fort was established in late 1738 after more than 100 African fugitives reach St. Augustine. This fort and an adjacent community, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, were built about two miles north of St. Augustine. As word of Fort Mose spread it came to represent freedom to the more than 40,000 slaves in South Carolina and the Spanish were blamed for the Stono Rebellion of 1739. For the Spanish, the fort represented a vital defense as the fugitives there knew the region well and would fight to the death if invaded from the north.

The first Fort Mose was destroyed in 1740 when English forces attacked St. Augustine. In Urban Interlude, 1740 - 1752 we learn that all of the inhabitants reached the safety of the city where they resided for the next twelve years. "Fort Mose

Resurrected" presents the rebuilding of the town and fort in a slightly different location in 1752. The former residents, by then used to the city, reluctantly moved back. This section includes extensive records and maps of this second fort as well as artifacts from recent archaeological excavation there.

Again, based primarily on documentary sources but augmented by archaeological data, descriptions of the lives of the residents of Fort Mose are explored in sections concerning "Black Militia in the Spanish Colonies," "Life at Mose: A Cultural Crossroad," "Home and Family," "The Mose Family Tree," "Daily Bread," "African Cowboys on the Spanish Frontier," and "Catholic Converts." In the section titled "Abandonment and Decline" we learn that this second fort was occupied for eleven years. Fort Mose was abandoned in 1763 when Florida became an English colony.

The Search for a Lost Fort describes the methods used to locate the first Fort Mose (now underwater in a marsh) and to locate and investigate the second Fort Mose (now an island). The actual excavations themselves were confined to a number of small trenches placed to identify potential structural components of the fort. Because the fort is not in any immediate danger, this limited excavation was adequate to answer the immediate questions of location and date as well as providing other information concerning lifeways and subsistence activities.

Several sections address the methods by which the Fort was documented. "A Thin Slice of Time" interprets the site's stratigraphy. "Reconstructing the Food of the Past" explains floral and faunal analysis, and food preparation. "Bits and Pieces of History" presents photographs of some of the artifacts, conservation techniques, and the final exhibit.

The volume presents a lively, detailed, positive interpretation of the lives of Africans in the Spanish Colonies. It is very well-suited to a general audience, but also presents information of interest to a professional reader.