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OSCEOLA AND THE NEGROES

by KENNETH W. PORTER

Osceola, if not the most important Indian leader in the Seminole War (1835-1842), is certainly the best known. His fame is largely due to the circumstances of his capture and death, but the Abolitionist movement of his own day also contributed. That Osceola was driven into hostility to the United States by the seizure and reduction to slavery of one of his wives, the daughter of an Indian chief and a runaway Negro woman, is one of the best-known and most generally accepted "facts" of his career. Actually, the story, so far as it concerns Osceola, is unsupported by trustworthy contemporary evidence. Apparently it was either sheer fabrication by an Abolitionist propagandist or else was inspired by a kidnapping which involved a woman unconnected with Osceola. The kidnapping into slavery of a part-Negro Seminole woman was entirely possible. Runaway slaves and their descendants, who legally were still slaves, were an important element in the Seminole tribe; slavers frequently seized Negroes and part-Negroes living among the Seminole and spirited them away into servitude. Old Econchattemicco (Red Ground King), an important Seminole chief, lost a part-Negro granddaughter in this way; it is possible, indeed, that it was her kidnapping which gave rise to the story of Osceola's wife.¹

Osceola's actual Negro connections, although well authenticated, are, however, little known, probably because they lack romantic appeal. The runaway slaves and their descendants among the Seminole were almost unanimous in their determination to resist removal from Florida; they were convinced that if the Seminole were assembled under military control for transportation to the Indian Territory, the Negroes would be

1. Kenneth W. Porter, "The Episode of Osceola's Wife: Fact or Fiction?," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, vol. 26 (1947), pp. 92-98.

seized and enslaved. The great majority of the Seminole Indians were also, for various reasons, opposed to removal; Osceola was the most conspicuously militant and outspoken of a number of hostile chiefs. His uncompromising attitude toward Seminole removal brought him into close relations with such Negro leaders as Abraham, head-chief Mikonopi's principal interpreter and adviser.²

When the Seminole War broke out in December, 1835, one of its most alarming features, to the whites, was the prominence and activity of the Seminole Negroes and the extent to which the plantation slaves hastened to join the hostiles.³ When, early in March, 1837, Gen. T. S. Jesup succeeded in negotiating a removal treaty with a number of Seminole chiefs, it was only on condition that their "property" should be safeguarded and their "allies" permitted to accompany them to the Indian Territory. The Indians understood that these rather cryptic expressions signified their Negroes, some of whom were actually their *bona fide* property, although the majority were fugitive slaves or their descendants. Gen. Jesup, however, was immediately besieged by angry planters in search of runaway slaves, and decided, under great pressure, to attempt to recover the Negroes who had joined the Seminole since the outbreak of the war. He succeeded in winning the support of Coi Hajo, second chief of the St. Johns River Seminole.

A good many Negroes, who had accompanied the Seminole unwillingly or unenthusiastically or who had found the hardships of Indian life more than they had bargained for, promptly took advantage of the cessation of hostilities to "come in." Other runaways, however, were less amenable. A band of

2. Kenneth W. Porter, "The Negro Abraham," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, vol. 25 (1946), pp. 1-43.

3. Kenneth W. Porter, "Florida Slaves and Free Negroes in the Seminole War, 1835-1842," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. XXVIII (1943), p. 390. Kenneth W. Porter, "John Caesar: Seminole Negro Partisan," *JNH*, Vol. XXVIII (1943), p. 53.

Negroes on Cedar Creek defiantly informed Coi Hajo's emissaries that they had not captured them and could not return them.

Osceola put himself at the head of opposition to the surrender of runaway Negroes. When Coi Hajo announced in council that runaway Negroes should be returned, Osceola, rising in a rage, declared that so long as he was in the nation it should never be done.⁴ Osceola was moved by both public and personal considerations. He had never accepted the agreement of March, 1837, and therefore opposed any action which would deprive the tribe of warriors or workers. Osceola, moreover, who was not a Seminole chief but a Red Stick Creek from Georgia, had no hereditary claims to leadership. His band consisted of warriors who were without close ties to hereditary leaders and who were attracted by his personal qualities of militancy, courage, and intelligence. Negroes, the element most strongly opposed to removal and with the loosest allegiance to the hereditary chiefs, were naturally most susceptible to Osceola's appeal. His early personal following especially, therefore, was recruited in good part from among the Negroes, altho it also included some of the hot-headed and particularly recalcitrant Mikasuki.

Early in January 1837, Osceola was surprised and his band disrupted, he himself escaping with only three warriors. As his headquarters at the time of this disaster were a Negro village in the Panosufkee Swamp, of the fifty-five prisoners captured from his band only three were Indians.⁵ Osceola was thus confronted with the necessity of building up his band again from the beginning, and runaway Negroes such as the defiant fugitives on Cedar Creek were his most promising candidates. Small wonder that he was enraged at Coi Hajo's proposal to

4. Florida Historical Society Library (photostats): Lieut. R. H. Peyton, May 24, 1837, to Harney.

5. *American State Papers, Military Affairs*, vol. VII, pp. 825-826

deprive him of such recruits by turning them over to the whites.

Osceola's opposition to the surrender of runaway Negroes and the resistance of freedom-loving Negroes themselves naturally checked the Seminole, and particularly the Negro, movement toward the emigration camp at Tampa Bay. Even the "Indian Negroes" - Negroes born or long domiciled among the Seminole - who had already assembled at the camp became uneasy at the appearance of slave-hunters. After the recent runaways had been surrendered, would the next step be the seizure of the "Indian Negroes"? Osceola, the young chief Wild Cat, and the young Indian Negro chief John Cavallo diligently cultivated these suspicions. Finally, early in June, most of the Indian Negroes and many Indians fled the camp.⁶ Gen. Jesup's plan for the termination of the Seminole War had split on the rock of Osceola's opposition to the surrender of any Negroes, whatever the date of their capture or flight.

The break-down of the agreement and the flight of the Negroes gave Osceola the time and opportunity for fresh recruiting. By October his following included sixty or seventy Negroes, mostly, it seems, recent runaways; his Indian followers must have been comparatively few. The spokesman of seventeen Negroes, nearly all slaves of Major Heriot, who surrendered early in October, said that he was from "Powell's [Osceola's] town, . . . on a large lake above Lake Monroe." He had been permitted to leave in order to make salt, and reported that there were still "about fifty negroes with Powell. . . they all want to get away as the Indians half starve them. . . they . . . live almost exclusively on the pounded root of the Palmetto."⁷ The informant, of course, may have been ascribing his own personal sentiments to Osceola's fifty Negroes, and it is even

6. ASP, MA, VII, 871.

7. National Archives, AGO, Capt. Harvey Brown, Ft. Marion, Oct. 8, 1837, to Lieut. J. A. Chambers (196/447).

more probable that he was telling his white masters the news which he thought they would most enjoy.

Osceola was seized shortly after, and his Negroes, presumably, either surrendered or attached themselves to other chiefs.

The story about the enslaving of Osceola's part-Negro wife is probably untrue, but that his importance as a Seminole war-chief was partly as a commander of Negro warriors is well-substantiated by contemporary documents.