

The Seminole Wars

Native Americans & African Americans Find Common Cause

Sergio Hyland

In America, dominant culture shapes perception. This is particularly true when one thinks of the contributions of Native Americans. The entertainment industry – Hollywood in particular – has typically portrayed Native Americans in a negative light. They’re savages, warlords, or alcoholics. In most cases, these characters are played by white men, wearing heavy make-up and flashy costumes. This illusion has resulted in the white-washing of some of the greatest cultures in U.S.

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to go north, where slavery had been – for the most part – abolished. We rarely, however, hear about escaped slaves making their way south! After all, the south was made up of slaveholding states, and common sense dictates that any former slave – freed or escaped – would do all in their power to avoid recapture. So why would escaped slaves go to Florida? Easy! Because they knew that there were many Native Americans there who were willing to help them in their fight for freedom.

One such tribe was the Seminoles. Coming from the Creek Indian word *simano-li*, Seminole actually translates to “fugitive.” In fact, the term Seminole describes escaped slaves who travelled

history. Here, I’ll attempt to revive just one small part of the history of one group – the Florida Seminoles.

When we talk about slavery and the “underground railroad” in America, the narrative is mostly about escaped slaves attempting

to Florida and mixed with Native Americans, thus merging cultures and creating an important alliance between people of Native American and African heritage.

This alliance would be tested through the first half of the 19th century, by what history has termed the “Seminole Wars.”

In truth, these wars were attempts by

the U.S. government to recapture fugitive slaves. Plantation owners knew that their escaped African slaves were finding refuge with the Seminoles in Florida, so they petitioned the U.S. government to assist them in claiming their “property.”

Consequently, the U.S. government began to send stern warnings to the Seminoles that if they didn’t cease in their assisting escaped African slaves, they would themselves become targets of U.S. military aggression. By this time, the African slaves and the Seminoles were so intermixed that they all had an interest in continuing to resist slavery. They were no longer just friends; they were relatives. When the Seminoles continued to protect their African family, the U.S. respond-



Black Seminole leader, John Horse. Engraving by N. Orr, 1858. Source: <johnhorse.com>.

Punctuation Tip:
Study the author’s use of em dashes. Read those sentences out loud. What role does the em dash play?

ed by sending Andrew Jackson—who had a fierce reputation as an “Indian killer.” What ensued was the Seminole Wars.

How amazing is that?! The most powerful military on the planet, taking a Native American tribe to war, over that tribe’s assistance to—and defense of—escaped African slaves!!

Unfortunately, the military onslaught was too much. Many Native and African Seminoles were forced to leave Florida altogether, which is why, in today’s society, one can find African and Native American Seminole descendants living far from

Florida in places like Mexico and Oklahoma.

Armed with this knowledge, I think we can all agree that Native Americans did their part to undermine slavery.

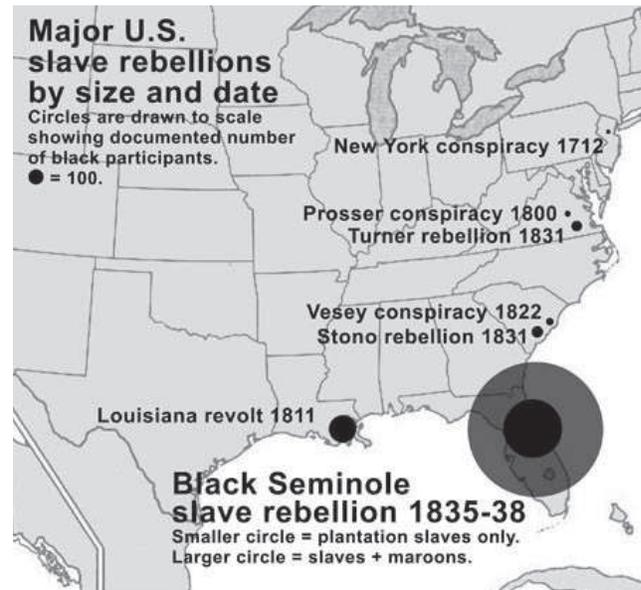
But the struggle was far from over! Numerous slave owners had attempted to serve fugitive slave warrants, arguing that because they owned the ancestors

of African Seminoles, they should rightfully own their descendants! But the Native American Seminoles had a trick up their sleeve! Spain—which was in possession of Florida at that time—had granted Native American Seminoles their freedom as a result of helping Spain defend certain territories. In a cunning move, the Native American Seminoles took “possession” of the African Seminoles, officially claiming them as their own slaves! But in reality, they weren’t slaves at all.

Amazingly, at the same time, this tactic was being utilized in the Underground Railroad by

Black Seminoles

To learn more, watch this 9-minute video, “Forgotten Rebellion: Black Seminoles and the Largest Slave Revolt in U.S. History” <tinyurl.com/blackseminoles>.



This map, created for <johnhorse.com> and based on original research, shows the relative size of the largest slave rebellions in U.S. history based on the best estimates from credible sources.

whites who were also helping to liberate slaves throughout the rest of the south and into the north! They would act as if they were slave owners, when they were actually abolitionists.

Armed with this knowledge, I think we can all agree that Native Americans did their part to undermine slavery. Many of us African Americans have Native American blood running through our veins. Often, that blood is the result of an alliance that ultimately led to the liberation of slaves and their descendants. So, when we watch television or go see a movie, and we see Native people being mocked, stereotyped, or cast in a negative light, remember the proud history of their people, and remember that it’s more likely than not that their history and ours are intertwined.

Sergio Hyland is currently incarcerated at SCI Chester, in Pennsylvania, where he is working on earning an Associate’s Degree in General Studies.

AFTER YOU READ: What do you find surprising about this essay? What would you like to know more about?