

A Petition From Some Latin-American Fishermen; 1838

Edited by JAMES W. COVINGTON

During the seventeenth, eighteenth and early part of the nineteenth centuries, a lively commerce developed between Cuba and the Southwestern coast of Florida. Some Spanish vessels brought to Florida trade articles like knives, axes, trinkets and cloth which were exchanged for hides and skins of all types. Sometimes, the Calusa Indians took a twenty-four hour canoe trip across dangerous waters in order to sell fish, amber, bark, fruit, furs and valuable "cardinal birds" in Havana.¹

When the Seminoles moved into the southern part of the peninsula, they visited Cuba via the fishing and trading vessels.²

These early visitors carried word back to Cuba that the Florida coastal waters abounded with vast schools of edible fish. During the eighteenth century fishing companies from Havana sent vessels into the area. These fishermen worked from September to March and salted and dried their catch in their semi-permanent camps, known as ranchos, which were established on the islands along the coast.³

Anglo-Saxon visitors to the section noted in their accounts the presence of some Indians who were known as Spanish Indians.⁴ Many of them worked for the various companies during the season and when the fishing operations had ceased, they cultivated small garden plots which were located near the ranchos. Some later-day observers felt that these Spanish Indians were the result of intermarriage between the Calusa or Seminole Indians and the Cuban fishermen. Due to the inroads of the slave hunter and the whiteman's diseases, the number of full-blooded Calusa Indians by 1800 must have been very few indeed.

One recent study made by William Sturtevant has been most exhaustive. He suggests that "these Spanish Indians were perhaps Choctaw, perhaps Calusa remnants or perhaps a more independent Seminole band." Sturtevant found that the present day Seminoles considered Chakaika and his band of Spanish Indians, who lived in the Everglades, to be a Seminole group.⁵

The Second Seminole War which blazed forth in 1835 brought to an end the Cuban fishing ranchos and the Spanish Indians in Florida. Several military leaders were certain that the Spanish Indians really were Seminoles and had assisted in the warfare against the whites. Some Seminole leaders, when captured, claimed the fishermen as their tribesmen and stated that if this group were allowed to remain in Florida, the uncaptured Seminoles would not surrender and be deported to Oklahoma.⁶

Two respected white men came to the defense of the Spanish Indians. Captain William Bunce, proprietor of several fishing ranchos, admitted that there had been some intermarriage between the Seminoles and the fishermen but stated that most of the Indians spoke Spanish, lived on the islands and rarely visited the mainland.⁷ Augustus Steele, pioneer county judge, postmaster and deputy customs inspector explained to Jessup that the Spanish Indians were never recognized by the Seminoles as their fellow tribesmen and permitted to collect annuities.⁸ In spite of the protests by these two respected citizens, the ranchos were systemically closed and the inhabitants, together with the Seminoles, were removed from Florida.⁹

Facts concerning the Cuban fishermen and the Spanish fishermen have been very meager since American and English visitors to the ranchos did not go into detail concerning their life and activities. One of the best clues as to the background of the Cuban fisherman and early relations between Cuba and Florida was discovered in the records of the Office of Indian Affairs at the National Archives in Washington, D. C. This evidence was recorded in a petition from a group of fishermen to the Secretary of War Joel Poinsett.¹⁰

To The Honorable Joel Poinsett,
Secretary of War

The memorial of the undersigned
Respectfully represents

that your memorialists were located on the Gulf Coast of the peninsula of Florida as fishermen and seamen at the time of, and long prior to the cession of the territory to the United States, that it has been a long established custom among the class to which your memorialists belong, and one which was recognized by the Spanish Government at Havanna (*sic*) as legal to intermarry with the Indian women of the country. Many of the children, offspring of these marriages were baptised and *educated there and recognized as legitimate* by the authorities of that city and country. Some of them are now

residing there in respectable situations and enjoying all the rights and priviledges (*sic*) of Spanish subjects.

Your memorialists further states that at the change of Flags they became lawful citizens of the United States by virtue of the provisions of the treaty and have since that period exercised the right of suffrage and all other privileges and immunities of American citizens.¹¹

That at the commencement of the present war that portion of your memorialists who resided at Charlotte Harbor were driven from their homes and pursuits by the Indians, their property plundered and destroyed and that with their wives and children they sought safety on one of the Islands in the mouth of Tampa Bay, and uniting with those of their own class residing there for common defense they pursued their usual avocations as far as their exposed situation would permit.¹² That your petitioners have been long and intimately acquainted with the Gulf Coast of Florida, and have cheerfully rendered their services to the Government as Pilots when no others could be found of sufficient knowledge of its navigation to render that service, that while many of them were thus engaged in serving the country an order from the Commanding Officer forced from their homes their wives and children and has driven them to the West sparing none in whom any Indian blood was found, thus visiting on them punishment for the murders and devastation committed by their enemies. This order which by a single blow has severed from them their families and blasted at once their happiness and all their prospects in life, your memorialists solemnly believe has been the result of deep and malignant misrepresentation and falsehood contrived by their enemies to wreak their vengeance upon those who refused to join them in the *atrocities* (*sic*) which they have perpetrated.

In the year 1836 the wives of two of your petitioners were claimed by the friendly Chief Holat [or Holahte] Emathla as descendants of his tribe with the intention of removing them with his party to the West.

Your memorialists appealed to General Scott then at Tampa. The case was submitted to Colonel James Gadsden the framer of the Treaty of Payne's Landing who declared these people not to be embraced in the terms or meaning of the treaty, and General Scott decided that they should not be removed.

The present Commanding General though entertaining different views in relation to them founded either upon motives of policy or resulting from misrepresentations did nevertheless after the violation by the Indians of their solemn compact and pledge in 1837 and his assurance that inasmuch as they had thus treacherously violated their engagements they had forfeited whatever

claim they might have had to their people and that said claim should not again be heard. As some evidence that these people have been considered as distinct from the Indians embraced by the terms of the Treaty, it might not be improper to state that a number of those who have *removed of Indian blood have been* recognized and recorded as American Seamen at the Custom house at Key West as may be seen by the roll of equipage of the Sloop Enterprise in the year 1830, '34 and '35.

Your memorialists respectfully urge that neither they nor their families have lived within the Indian boundaries, nor have they been subject to the Indian laws, that their associations—mode of life are all actually different from those which characterize that people. That their families are incapable (*sic*) of gaining a subsistence by the means usual among the Indians, and that their removal to a strange country when their long accustomed occupations and only means of support could not be pursued must inevitably subject them to hopeless destitution and wretchedness.

That having continued true and faithful to their allegiance and hold themselves at all times in readiness to serve the country in any manner in which their services could be required while those who sought to destroy them have spread ruin and desolation over it, they feel that they have just claims on the protection of the Government for themselves, their wives and children.

They therefore earnestly pray that the order of removal may be rescinded and that they may at least be permitted to return to their homes when the Seminoles shall have been removed and the only shadow of a cause for their present position shall cease to exist, but if their prayer is denied they earnestly entreat that they may be permitted to remove to some other country where heir families can be supported and protected from the vengeance of a people from whom forgiveness is rarely extended.¹³

Signed:

Bonifacio Crusado	Jose Bromudos	Domingo Alvarez
Maximo Hernandez	Manuel Benitez	Jose Suqones
Pedro Felis	Felipe Sevilla	Iviculas Bara
Gabriel Ferrera	Antonio Herrera	Felipe Orta
Gregorio Montes de Oca	Juan Castojima	Peter Weaver
Jose Rudriquez	Juan Diego Morales	Antonio Carpechamo
Joaquin Caldes	Juan Montes de Oca	Santos Domingues

A true copy

W. G. Ferrand

Lt. 4th Artillery.

- ¹ Anthony Kerrigan, ed; *Barcia's Chronological History of the Continent of Florida* (Gainesville, 1950), 345.
- ² Captain Isaac Clark of the Sixth Infantry visited Charlotte Harbor in 1825 and found many Seminoles visited Havana in order to secure rum and presents. He also noted that many runaway slaves fled from the United States via the fishing vessels. Agent George Humphreys to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, March 2, 1825, *Florida Seminoles*, 1825, Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives, hereafter cited as O. I. A.
- ³ In 1769, Bernard Romans noted that the Spanish fishermen used about thirty vessels and salted about a thousand tons of fish each year. Karl H. Grismer, *Tampa* (St. Petersburg, 1950), 42.
- ⁴ Generally speaking, these Indians were found along the coast of southwestern Florida. William Bunce to General Wiley Thompson, January 9, 1835, *Florida, 1835*, O. I. A.
- ⁵ William C. Sturtevant, "Chakaika and the Spanish Indians", *Tequesta*, XIII (1953), 64.
- ⁶ General Thomas Jesup to Secretary of War Joel Poinsett, April 22, 1838, *Florida, 1838*, O. I. A.
- ⁷ Bunce to Thompson *op. cit.*
- ⁸ Augustus Steele to Thompson, January 10, 1835, *Florida, 1835*, O. I. A.
- ⁹ The Story of Captain Bunce's ranchos was related in the article by Dorothy Dodd, "Captain Bunce's Tampa Bay Fisheries 1835-1840", *Florida Historical Quarterly* XXVI (January, 1947). Bunce's heirs received \$1,000 from the United States Government as compensation for the unjust destruction of the fishing establishments.
- ¹⁰ Memorial to Poinsett, no date, *Florida, 1838*, O. I. A.
- ¹¹ Article VI of the Adams-Onis Treaty guaranteed this right. Henry S. Commager, ed. *Documents of American History*, I, (New York, 1935), 224.
- ¹² One of Bunce's ranchos was located at Palm Island which is very close to the present site of Sarasota.
- ¹³ One Arkansas newspaper reported that about 150 Spanish Indians had been removed from Florida. Seven Spaniards were allowed to remain at New Orleans until the close of the war. Grant Foreman, *Indian Removal*, (Norman, 1953), 365.

This Page Blank in Original
Source Document