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Fortified Against America: The Rise and Destruction of Black Forts

For three centuries, Black Americans built fortified communities to survive. America destroyed every single one.



William Spivey Follow 9 min read · 21 hours ago

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Fort Pilaklikaha — Bushnell, Florida https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/Pilaklikaha.png?utm_source=commons.wikimedia.org&utm_campaign=index&utm_content=original

I live about thirty miles from Fort Mose in St. Augustine, FL, which still operates as a state park. I've been there several times. I recently learned that a Fort Negro once existed, just North of Tampa, FL, about 100 miles from my home.

Fort Negro: The Free Black Fortress America Erased | by William Spivey | The Polis | Sep, 2026 | Medium

I've now found that the number of Black forts far exceeded what I knew. In a slightly different direction, 100 miles away, was Fort Pilaklikaha, also known as Abraham's Town, in Bushnell, FL. I've seen signs to Bushnell from the

Florida Turnpike and even lived in Sumter County where it existed. I'd never once heard of the Fort.

Black Seminoles established Fort Pilaklikaha in 1813. Meaning “many ponds” in the Mikasuki language, Pilaklikaha was the largest and most prosperous Black Seminole town in Florida, with a population of 100 men, women, and children. Many Black Seminoles were formerly enslaved peoples of African descent who fled bondage to Spanish Florida following the American Revolution. Driven into the Alachua and Suwannee regions by Georgia and Tennessee militias, they joined and mingled with the native Seminoles. Black Seminoles, though not formally adopted into the Seminole Tribe, formed a relationship with the native Seminoles who protected them from slave catchers in exchange for military aid and a portion of their crops as tribute.

At its peak, Pilaklikaha contained timber, thatch-and-daub homes, corn cribs, and fences. Residents may have accumulated few possessions beyond simple dishes, arms, beads, and hand-made brushed pottery. In the 1820s, two American officials, Horatio Dexter and Lt. George McCall, visited the settlement and reported herds of cattle and horses, along with fields of rice, beans, melons, pumpkins, and peanuts.

On December 28, 1835, Seminole Indians not associated with Fort Pilaklikaha, ambushed and killed 108 U.S. soldiers under Major Francis Dade near present-day Bushnell — just miles from Pilaklikaha. It was the deadliest single strike against U.S. forces in the Seminole Wars. The U.S. Army assumed Abraham and Pilaklikaha were connected. That assumption was never proven. It didn’t matter. The town was marked for destruction.

The Burning — March 30, 1836

Brigadier General Abraham Eustis led U.S. Army forces to Pilaklikaha and burned it to the ground. Every structure — the timber and thatch-and-daub

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between Seminole, Spanish, and American worlds, had given the community enough warning to evacuate everything they could carry and vanish into the Florida interior. The soldiers burned an empty town.

The story of American forts is, in the popular imagination, a story of brave settlers behind wooden walls, of cavalry soldiers holding the line against wilderness and foreign threat. From Fort Sumter to Fort Apache, the American fort has been romanticized as a monument to civilization's advance. A place where Americans drew a boundary between themselves and danger. That mythology is not entirely false. It is, however, deeply incomplete. Because running parallel to the well-documented history of white American fortifications is another history, largely erased, of forts built not to protect Americans from outside threats, but to protect Black people from America itself. These were not outposts of empire. They were sanctuaries of survival. The story of how they were built, how they flourished, and how every single one was ultimately destroyed tells us something fundamental about the nature of American power.

The first and perhaps most remarkable of these sanctuaries was the one closest to me, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mosé — Fort Mose — established in 1738, two miles north of St. Augustine in Spanish Florida. Its founding was itself an act of geopolitical resistance. Spain, recognizing that the threat of freedom could destabilize British Carolina more effectively than any army, issued royal decrees offering liberty to any enslaved person who escaped British territory, converted to Catholicism, and pledged service to the Spanish Crown.

Hundreds of men and women made that dangerous journey south, through swamps and past slave catchers, and in 1738 Governor Manuel de Montiano

formally granted them land and arms. Fort Mose became the first legally sanctioned free Black settlement in what would become the United States — a community of roughly a hundred people who farmed, worshipped, and stood guard against the very British colonists they had once been forced to serve.

The men of Fort Mose proved their military value immediately. In 1740, when British General James Oglethorpe launched a major assault on St. Augustine, the Black militia of Fort Mose fought alongside Spanish forces and participated in a daring counterattack that helped drive the British back to Georgia. For a generation, Fort Mose endured. But its fate was never determined by its own strength. Empires determined its fate through negotiations, viewing Black freedom as a useful weapon in peacetime and an inconvenient complication in times of treaty.

When Spain ceded Florida to Britain in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, the roughly four hundred Black residents of Fort Mose, free people who had built lives, families, and institutions, were compelled to evacuate to Cuba with the departing Spanish settlers. The fort they had defended for a quarter century was abandoned, and then forgotten. It did not fall in battle. It was surrendered in a diplomatic exchange between two colonial powers who never considered its residents in their calculations.

The pattern that destroyed Fort Mose, the pattern in which Black freedom communities were never given the right to determine their own fate — would repeat itself across the following century with increasing violence. By the early nineteenth century, the Florida interior had become a refuge for thousands of freedom seekers who had escaped the plantations of Georgia and the Carolinas. They formed communities alongside the Seminole Nation, cultivating the fertile hammocks of central Florida, herding cattle, and building fortified towns. The alliance was mutually beneficial: the Seminoles received military support and tribute crops; the Black Seminoles

received protection from the slave catchers who crossed state lines with legal impunity. Together, they created something the United States government could not tolerate, living proof that Black people could govern themselves, defend themselves, and thrive.

The settlement at Pilaklikaha, in what is now Sumter County, was the crown jewel of this world. Known also as Abraham's Town, named for the brilliant Black Seminole leader and strategist Abraham — who served as chief interpreter in treaty negotiations, counselor to Chief Micanopy, and a figure so politically formidable that he was taken to Washington to meet American officials — Pilaklikaha was the largest and most prosperous Black Seminole town in Florida. Visitors in the 1820s, including U.S. government agents sent specifically to assess the situation, reported herds of cattle and horses, fields of rice, beans, melons, pumpkins, and peanuts, and timber homes with corn cribs and fences. markers.. This was not a refugee camp. It was a civilization. And precisely because it was a civilization, it was targeted.

On March 30, 1836, U.S. Army forces under Brigadier General Abraham Eustis burned Pilaklikaha to the ground. The residents had escaped weeks before the soldiers arrived — Abraham's intelligence networks were that effective. But the burning itself was the message. The Second Seminole War, the most expensive Indian war in American history, was in substantial part a war fought to destroy the Black Seminole communities and return their members to slavery. Planters in Georgia and the Carolinas had been lobbying Washington for years, arguing that the existence of armed, prosperous free Black communities in Florida was an existential threat to the slave economy. They were right. Every successful Black settlement advertised freedom, and every year it stood was a year more enslaved people might risk escape. The U.S. Army was deployed not to protect Americans from a foreign threat, but to protect the institution of slavery from the example of Black self-determination.

The same logic had governed the destruction of the most dramatic of these fortifications twenty years earlier. The fort at Prospect Bluff — known in American records with contemptuous simplicity as "the Negro Fort" — had been constructed by British forces during the War of 1812 on the Apalachicola River in Spanish Florida, intended to support a never-executed British campaign against the American Gulf Coast. When British forces withdrew, they left the fort fully stocked: approximately 2,500 muskets, 400 pistols, and a large powder magazine. More than 300 freedom seekers — men, women, and children — occupied it, along with Seminole and Choctaw allies. They had organized themselves into a functioning military community, the largest independent armed settlement of free Black people in pre-Civil War North America.

General Andrew Jackson — who would later become the seventh president of the United States and a celebrated champion of American democracy — ordered the fort destroyed. His stated justification was that it harbored "fugitive slaves," people who had freed themselves from bondage. In July 1816, American gunboats moved up the Apalachicola River and began firing. The ninth cannonball, heated red-hot in a ship's furnace, struck the powder magazine. The resulting explosion was heard more than a hundred miles away in Pensacola.

Of the approximately 330 people inside the fort, around 270 were killed instantly. Many of the surviving sixty were mortally wounded. The commander, a man known as Garçon, was executed by firing squad. The survivors were returned to slavery. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams — another future American president — would later justify the massacre by calling the settlement "a seat of banditti and the receptacle for runaway slaves." These were free people living in a structure on Spanish soil, beyond American jurisdiction. The United States government killed them anyway, and its senior leadership celebrated the killing.

The destruction of Prospect Bluff did not end Black resistance. The survivors scattered and rebuilt. Communities formed along the Suwannee River and around Tampa Bay, in the bayous west of New Orleans, and deep in the interior hammocks of central Florida. Each was a variation on the same profound human project: Black people organizing land, arms, agriculture, and governance to live free. Each was also, in the eyes of American law and American power, a problem to be eliminated. The Second Seminole War, launched in 1835, was the full military response. Thousands of soldiers, at a cost of tens of millions of dollars — an extraordinary sum for the period — were deployed across Florida to destroy the Black Seminole world. Towns were burned. Fields were salted. People were captured and re-enslaved or forcibly removed to Indian Territory in Oklahoma, where the threat of slave catchers followed them even there.

Those who refused removal crossed the Rio Grande. In 1849 and 1850, John Horse, the greatest Black Seminole military leader, led several hundred Black Seminoles into Mexico, where the government of Coahuila granted them land at Nacimiento de los Negros in exchange for military service against Comanche and Apache raiders. They excelled at that work, as they had excelled at every military task they had ever been given. A generation later, some of their descendants were recruited back across the river to serve as Seminole Negro Indian Scouts for the U.S. Army at Fort Duncan, near Eagle Pass, Texas. Four of them would earn the Congressional Medal of Honor. The U.S. government would never honor the land grant promises it made to them in exchange for that service.

The arc of this history is not complicated, though it has been deliberately obscured. Black people in America built forts for the same reason any people build forts — because they faced an enemy capable of destroying them, and they chose to fight back. The enemy they faced was not an external power or a foreign nation. It was the American state and the economic system that state was constructed to protect. Diplomacy between

empires ended Fort Mose. Prospect Bluff was ended by a massacre that two future American presidents enthusiastically endorsed. The U.S. Army burned Pilaklikaha on the false pretext that its inhabitants were somehow connected to a military engagement they had nothing to do with. The Suwannee River communities were burned in Jackson's campaigns. Angola was destroyed. Barataria was disrupted. The pattern holds without exception: every Black fort that was ever built in America was eventually destroyed by America.

White forts, by the mythology we have inherited, protected Americans from the wilderness, from Indigenous nations, from Mexico and Spain. Black forts protected Black people from the United States of America. From its armies, its laws, its slave-catchers, and its presidents. That is the distinction that American historical memory has worked hardest to erase. To remember these places; Fort Mose, Prospect Bluff, Pilaklikaha, Angola, Nacimiento, is to recognize that the threat Black people faced was never abstract. It was official. It wore a uniform. It came with artillery. And it never stopped coming until there was nothing left to destroy.

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Written by William Spivey

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16 hours ago

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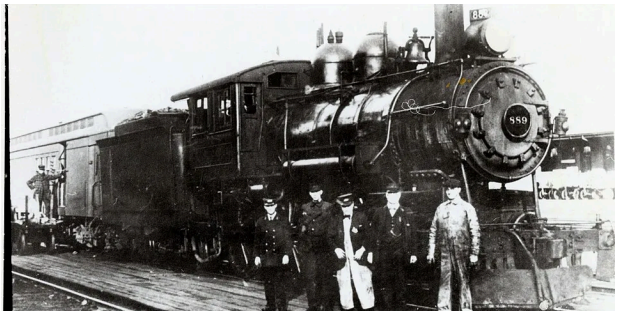
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I was struck by how easily entire histories can disappear from public memory, It made me think about how much strength and self determination can be hidden in places we rarely learn about

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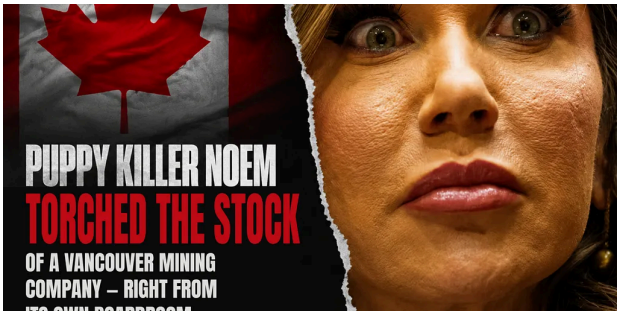


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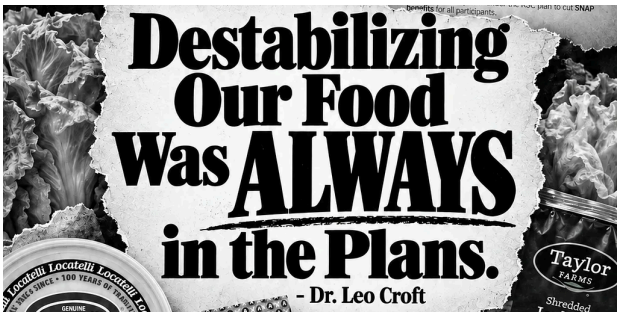


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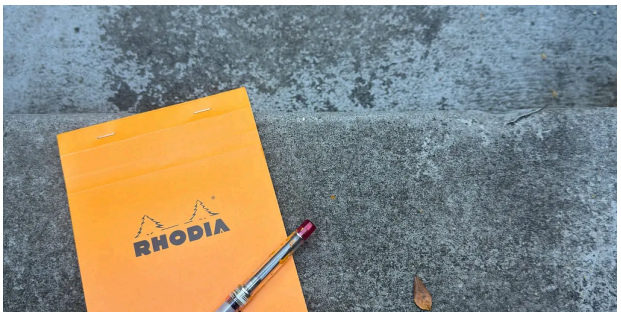


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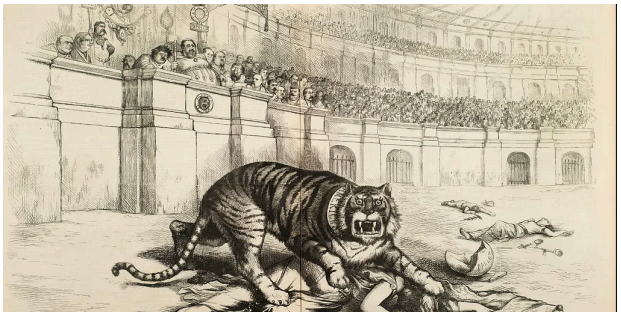
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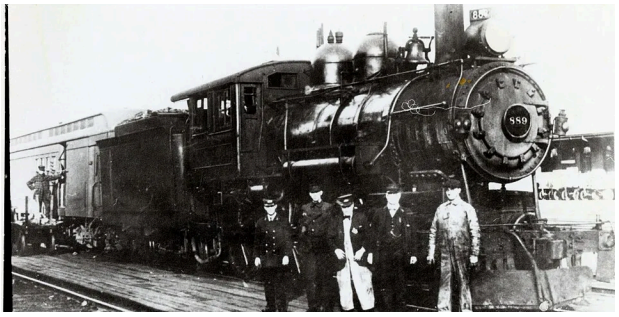


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