INTRODUCTION

Had this thing happened during the war, it would have resounded from one end of the continent to the other, to the honor of those concerned in it; for it yields in gallant daring and complete success to no incident that happened in the late contest.

—Niles’ Weekly Register, 1816

In the spring of 1816, Major General Andrew Jackson wrote the governor of the Spanish colony of West Florida. His letter addressed events that had taken place below the southern border of the United States since the War of 1812 had ended a year earlier. It began, “I am charged by my government to make known to you that a negro fort erected during our late war with Britain has been strengthened since that period and is now occupied by upwards of two hundred and fifty negroes many of whom have been enticed away from the service of their masters—citizens of the United States.” Because the fugitives at the fort were armed, disciplined, and daily increasing their numbers by encouraging slaves from the southern states and territories to join them, the general insisted that the Spanish government return “those negroes now in the said fort and which have been stolen and enticed from” their American owners. A refuge for fugitive slaves near the republic’s southern boundary was entirely unacceptable, Jackson explained, and if the Spanish government refused to eliminate it, then the United States would do so.¹

Despite its apparent diplomacy, Jackson’s gesture was purely symbolic. The military marvel, who fifteen months earlier had led
American troops to a decisive victory over the British at the historic Battle of New Orleans, had already decided to assault the heavily armed fortress that sheltered as many as one thousand fugitive slaves from both the United States and Spanish Florida. “I have very little doubt of the fact that this fort has been established by some villains for the purpose of murder rapine and plunder and that it ought to be blown up regardless of the ground it stands on,” Jackson had written Brigadier General Edmund Gaines two weeks before reaching out to the Spanish governor. The hero of New Orleans then added forcefully, “If your mind should have formed the same conclusion, destroy it and restore the stolen negroes and property to their rightful owners.”

The result of Jackson’s directive was the Battle of Negro Fort, a deadly clash involving hundreds of American troops, Indian warriors, and black rebels that took place in the Florida wilderness from July 15 to July 27, 1816. Occurring a year and a half after the Treaty of Ghent brought the War of 1812 to an end, the historic encounter was a remnant of the lengthy imperial struggle between Britain and its former American colonies. But it was also part of the larger fight over freedom and slavery that raged throughout the Americas at the turn of the nineteenth century. Though it is rarely remembered alongside the legendary battles of early American history like Bunker Hill, Yorktown, and New Orleans or the unforgettable slave revolts and conspiracies led by Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner, the Battle of Negro Fort marked an important milestone in the history of the early American republic.

Understanding the battle’s importance requires acknowledging that the American government had always sanctioned slavery. During and immediately after the American Revolution, the Articles of Confederation placed no restrictions on the practice and allowed the thirteen individual states to deal with the issue as they saw fit. The United States Constitution, which replaced the Articles
in 1789, legitimized slavery by counting three-fifths of enslaved people when determining congressional representation and direct taxes. It also authorized the federal government to suppress slave insurrections and recognized fugitive slaves as the legal property of their owners even if they escaped to free states and territories. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 further committed the republic to slavery. As historian David Waldstreicher puts it, “In growing their government, the framers and their constituents created fundamental laws that sustained human bondage.”

Still, the new government’s stance on slavery was contradictory. In July 1787, while still operating under the authority of the Articles of Confederation, Congress adopted the Northwest Ordinance, banning slavery in the territories north and west of the Ohio River. That same summer, delegates meeting at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia empowered the federal government to abolish the Atlantic slave trade in twenty years, which it eventually did. The delegates also agreed to exclude the word “slavery” from the Constitution. As James Madison explained in his notes from the convention, it was wrong “to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men.” Though a lifelong slaveowner, Madison at times displayed the same ambivalence over slavery as the nation he helped establish.

And he was not alone. Before becoming the first president of the United States, George Washington confided to a friend about slavery, “There is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it.” The Mount Vernon planter was a harsh taskmaster who routinely used violence to secure a tractable labor force. At the same time, he contemplated ways to liberate his slaves while providing them with the skills required to succeed as free people. Long incapable of finding an ideal solution to the problem of slavery, Washington, in his last will and testament, stipulated that his slaves be emancipated upon the death of his wife, Martha.
Thomas Jefferson was also ambivalent about slavery. In addition to enslaving hundreds of black people at his Monticello estate, he suspected that African Americans were inferior to European Americans “in the endowments both of body and mind.”\textsuperscript{8} Yet he fathered several children with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves, and communicated strong antislavery sentiments throughout most of his political life. Jefferson was particularly outspoken against the Atlantic slave trade, which he referred to in the first draft of the Declaration of Independence as a “cruel War against human Nature itself.”\textsuperscript{9} More than two decades later, while in the White House, President Jefferson proudly signed the bill outlawing the transatlantic trade to the United States.\textsuperscript{10}

In many ways, Jefferson embodied the paradoxes and complexities not only of American slavery but of American antislavery as well. While admitting the institution’s immorality, he recommended gradual abolition along with colonization, meaning the removal of freed slaves from the United States to Africa, the West Indies, or some other place beyond the republic’s borders. As historians of the colonization movement have amply demonstrated, early white antislavery activists generally despised black people and dreaded their presence in the new republic, whether slavery existed or not.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, Jefferson revealed a racism that was common in both the North and the South when he famously used a disturbing metaphor to describe his own fear of slaves: “We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go.”\textsuperscript{12}

Madison, Washington, and Jefferson were incapable of imagining a society in which African Americans and European Americans lived together peacefully and as equals—but they still considered slavery an evil. Consequently, they rarely spoke out or wrote strongly in defense of the practice lest they impede what they hoped and assumed was its inevitable demise. But many of their contemporaries were far less patient. Fearful of leaving such an important matter to chance,
they decided to act. Slaveowners across the republic, who were taken with the enlightened rhetoric of the American Revolution, manumitted thousands of their slaves in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. At the same time, every northern state passed legislation against slavery, and thus began the slow and deliberate process of abolishing the institution throughout the region. Despite these developments, slavery did not disappear from the new republic.¹³

To the contrary, the demand for slave labor increased in the decades following American independence. After Eli Whitney invented his cotton engine, wide-eyed entrepreneurs from the eastern seaboard headed south and west, hoping to turn the rough country that stretched from the Georgia backwoods to the Mississippi River and beyond into a slave society ruled by King Cotton. To make this happen, settlers needed unfettered access to the waters that flowed south from these territories to the Gulf of Mexico, so they could more speedily bring their product to market. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 helped in this regard by doubling the size of the republic and transferring control of New Orleans—and the massive river that flowed past it—from France to the United States. Yet a significant obstacle remained below the United States’ southern border: Spain refused to part with the immense colonies under its control, what the explorer Ponce de León had referred to centuries earlier as the Land of Flowers, or La Florida.¹⁴

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Florida consisted of two separate colonies on the northern edge of Spain’s American empire. West Florida stretched more than one thousand miles from the lower Mississippi River along the northern Gulf Coast to the Apalachicola River, which forms at the confluence of the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers in Georgia and cuts through the Florida panhandle before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. East Florida extended from the Apalachicola River to the Atlantic Coast and included the entire Florida peninsula. Over time, the outer portions of both colonies
Figure I.1. The southern frontier of the United States in 1816.
resembled the American South. At Baton Rouge on the Mississippi River and St. Augustine near the St. John’s River, a small group of wealthy white planters, including many who had migrated from the United States, established large plantations that employed hundreds and eventually thousands of slaves.\

The rest of Spanish Florida, on the other hand, remained a frontier inhabited by groups of people opposed to American expansion. Among them was the colony’s free, Spanish-speaking, Catholic population, which included a diverse group of European- and African-descended people known as Creoles. Multiethnic polyglots who resided primarily in coastal seaports like Mobile, Alabama, and Pensacola, Florida, they were artisans, shop owners, and shipbuilders. Joined by a significant immigrant population that derived from the breadth of Spain’s Atlantic empire, they struggled for survival in a harsh and unforgiving colonial world. Because of their isolated position, however, they enjoyed a modicum of social, political, and economic freedom. They also experienced a fluid racial system, which they knew would disappear should the United States extend its boundary southward.

Native Americans also resisted the spread of southern people, institutions, and ideas into Florida. During the four decades of Spanish rule following the American Revolution, indigenous people claimed much of the land along the United States’ southern border. Most numerous were the Creeks, an ethnically diverse, Muscogee-speaking people considered “more powerful than any nation” at the time. By the turn of the nineteenth century, a confederation of several dozen Creek towns had divided into two separate societies. The Upper Creeks inhabited land along the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers in the eastern Mississippi Territory (present-day Alabama). The Lower Creeks resided primarily in southwestern Georgia between the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers. Because of their proximity to foreign people and cultures, some Creeks experienced “a new order of
things” and altered their customs and traditions accordingly. Others did not—and they would sacrifice their lives rather than suffer the loss of their land or culture to the United States.\textsuperscript{18}

In Florida, Creeks who migrated southward into the Spanish territories joined other militant Indians to create a new people known as the Seminoles.\textsuperscript{19} In many cases, they had originated in the volatile and hotly contested borderlands between the southern United States and northern New Spain, and then established themselves in the dense woods and nearly impenetrable swamps that European colonists and American settlers normally avoided. Violently predisposed to resist any threat to their way of life, they were “the most savage Indians of the South,” according to one frontiersman, “and also the most hostile.”\textsuperscript{20}

The Seminoles derived not only from indigenous people but also from fugitive slaves who had escaped from their Spanish and American owners over the course of many years. Though slavery existed in colonial Florida, Spanish law granted enslaved people rights that were often unthinkable in the United States, including the ability to marry, to own property, and to purchase one’s own freedom. Through the last decade of the eighteenth century, Spanish officials offered freedom to escaped slaves and their families in exchange for military service. As a result, Florida became, in historian Jane Landers’s memorable words, “a haven for runaways” who fled from Britain’s North American colonies and, later, the South.\textsuperscript{21} By the opening of the nineteenth century, African Americans living independently in Spanish Florida earned the moniker “maroons,” a corruption of “cimarrones,” the Spanish term used to describe fugitive slaves. Allied and in many cases integrated with the Seminoles, the maroons similarly posed a significant challenge to anyone threatening their freedom.\textsuperscript{22}

British Loyalists were the final group that challenged Americans’ ambitions in Florida. During the War of Independence, several
**Figure I.2.** This engraving reflects the conspicuousness of fugitive slaves among Florida’s Seminoles. *The Seminoles in Florida.* From Caroline Mays Brevard and Henry Eastman Bennett, *A History of Florida* (1904). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
thousand inhabitants of England’s thirteen rebellious colonies fled to East Florida and West Florida, as both then belonged to Great Britain. After the war, some of these partisans—who reviled the United States and stayed loyal to the British Empire—remained in the Floridas despite Spain’s reacquisition of both colonies as part of the Treaty of Paris of 1783. Though initially unsure of how to treat these Loyalists, the colonial governments of East and West Florida eventually welcomed their arrival and offered them incentives to stay. In 1783, for example, Spanish officials granted a monopoly on Indian trade throughout its colonies to the Loyalist-owned trading firm Panton, Leslie & Company, thwarting the efforts of most American merchants to secure a foothold in the Florida colonies.

With Spanish Creoles, Native Americans, African Americans, and British Loyalists opposed to American expansion into Spanish territory, US officials struggled to find a way to acquire East and West Florida peacefully. Among those offering a solution was Thomas Jefferson. In 1791, the then secretary of state informed President George Washington of his desire to see “a hundred thousand of our inhabitants” settle in the sparsely populated Spanish colonies, as their presence would “be the means of delivering to us peaceably what may otherwise cost us a war.” The migration scheme never materialized, so with every passing year, the likelihood of a confrontation between the United States and Spain increased. However, because the ideology of Manifest Destiny—the idea that the United States had the God-given right to conquer the continent—had not yet taken hold, national support for southern expansion into Spanish Florida was neither automatic nor assured. As a result, southern slaveowners came to believe that in order for the United States to acquire Florida, they had to convince the federal government to use military force on their behalf. In the end, they were successful because of two separate but related events.
First was Andrew Jackson’s emergence as a national and sectional leader. When war broke out between the United States and Great Britain in 1812, the middle-aged Tennessee militiaman saw an opportunity for the young republic to secure and expand its southern border. In order to accomplish this, Jackson spearheaded American intervention in the Creek Civil War (1813–1814), which resulted in the United States’ acquisition of millions of acres of the Indians’ land. The Creeks’ demise proved of great benefit to many Americans but especially slaveowners, whose dreams of expanding their peculiar institution into Florida were on the verge of becoming a reality.

Jackson’s attainment of slaveowners’ ambitions is a reminder that despite his much-deserved reputation as a frontier nationalist, he was also “truly a southerner.” From his earliest days in the North Carolina and South Carolina backwoods to the eight years he spent in the White House, Jackson strongly identified with southern interests and ideas. Because he shared none of the ambivalence over slavery that troubled the first generation of national leaders from the South, contemporaries considered him “SOUTHRON—a slaveholding man, from a slave holding State,” whose interests aligned with theirs. Inspired by a love of both country and section, the “Hero of the South” would prove indispensable in persuading the federal government to use military force on slaveowners’ behalf.

The second event was the rise of Negro Fort. When Great Britain withdrew the balance of its forces from the northern Gulf Coast in 1815, it left its recently built defensive fortification atop a steep bluff overlooking the Apalachicola River to several hundred armed and determined fugitive slaves. In the coming months, the fort’s founding black population welcomed hundreds of additional American and Spanish maroons into their community, while allying themselves with the Creeks, Choctaws, Seminoles, and other indigenous people throughout the region. Having in many cases won
their freedom by serving in the British Colonial Marines during the late war, these black veterans and the community they defended vowed to resist any effort to refasten the shackles of slavery around their limbs.

That being said, Negro Fort’s denizens were not slave revolutionaries out to destroy the nefarious institution that sought to keep them in bondage. Nor were they determined to restore or recreate a traditional way of life recalled from their youth or inherited from their African ancestors. Instead, like other maroons who struggled to survive in the southern United States or adjacent territories, “Their actions show that self-determination, self-reliance, and self-rule were their key objectives.”

While American slaveowners abhorred Negro Fort because it drew fugitive slaves from their own homes, farms, and plantations, they exploited its existence by using it as a pretext for war. Playing on white racial fears, they portrayed the fort as the base of operations for rebellious slaves, Indian savages, and foreign emissaries, who threatened the peace and security of the United States’ southern border. With federal officials and military personnel prominent among those disseminating this imperialist pro-slavery propaganda, the federal government embraced the idea that Negro Fort needed to be eliminated. Therefore, it did nothing to stop Jackson when, in his capacity as the commander of the United States’ southern forces, he ordered an illegal joint army-navy expedition into Spanish Florida to destroy the fort and reenslave or kill its defenders.

Given these objectives and the unprecedented use of the military to achieve them, the assault on Negro Fort provided early evidence of what came to be known as the Slave Power—that is, a political alliance of southern slaveowners and their northern allies who used the federal government to promote and protect slavery. From the late eighteenth century, northerners feared losing political power to southerners as a result of the Three-Fifths Compromise and
other constitutional provisions. Thomas Jefferson’s victory over John Adams in the presidential election of 1800 confirmed these fears, as the slaveowning southerner would not have defeated the antislavery northerner without the benefit of the “Negro votes” in the Electoral College.\textsuperscript{35} Decades later, abolitionists’ resistance to what they termed the “Slave Power” helped raise tensions between the North and the South to a boiling point. This led some historians, who derided the abolitionists for their radicalism, to dismiss the idea of a federal government dominated by slavery’s supporters as just another absurd antebellum conspiracy theory. Yet the destruction of Negro Fort proves that the Slave Power existed long before the sectional conflict erupted into civil war.\textsuperscript{36}

Though largely forgotten, the Battle of Negro Fort formed a crucial chapter in the history of the early American republic. By eliminating this refuge for fugitive slaves—the largest that ever existed within the borders of the present-day United States—the federal government closed an escape valve that African Americans had utilized for generations. While slaves would continue to run away, they would never again find a sanctuary so close to the nation’s borders and so secure. At the same time, the government intensified the subjugation of southern Native Americans. Forced to choose sides in a conflict between an emerging nation and a small but determined group of fugitive slaves, Creeks, Choctaws, and Seminoles responded in a variety of ways, from leading the joint army-navy assault on Negro Fort to sacrificing their lives to resist it. However, no strategy proved effective in stopping American expansion into their lands.

The battle was important for another reason as well. During its year-long existence, Negro Fort was a powerful symbol of black freedom that subverted the racist foundations of the slave society being expanded across the southern frontier. That the US government felt compelled to destroy this symbol proved the nation’s growing
commitment to slavery while illuminating the extent to which ambivalence over the institution had disappeared since the nation’s founding. Indeed, four decades after declaring that all men were created equal, the United States destroyed a fugitive slave community in a foreign territory for the first and only time in its history. In so doing, it accelerated its transformation into a white republic, which served both the interests and the ideology of an emerging Slave Power.