



By Richard Procyk

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## The Great Escape

Long before the Seminole Wars, the Black Seminoles, living in Florida, made one last desperate attempt to live in freedom by crossing a dangerous ocean to the Bahamas in dug-out canoes. During the War of 1812, the British had promised to reward the Seminoles with economic support and the Black Seminoles with land and freedom in the Bahamas for their loyalty during the siege of New Orleans. The promises, however, were never kept.

At this time, two British citizens, Alexander Arbuthnot and Robert Ambrister, were arrested and charged as Seminole sympathizers. They were found guilty and were quickly executed.

Jackson's action alarmed the U.S. and British governments and especially the Seminole leadership who decided to seek help from the British in the Bahamas. Seminole Chief, Kenhadjo's (Kenadgie) was selected to travel to New Providence (Bahamas) for the purpose of stating their grievances and soliciting assistance from the British.

Chief Kenhadjo, along with his companions crossed the Gulf Stream in a traditional Seminole sail-rigged canoe that could hold as many as twenty people and arrived at New Providence Island, Bahamas, on September 29, 1819. Using a Black Seminole as an interpreter, the complained to the British that the Americans were set on annihilating their tribe. The British, however, refused aid of any involvement, citing the recent peace treaty signed with the United States. The Chief and his followers were quickly returned to Florida via the British schooner Primrose with their canoe in tow.

Two years later, another group of Seminoles arrived on New Providence with hope that they could stay. One member of the group displayed his certificate of Gallantry with Good Conduct, awarded for service with the British troops in Florida during the War of 1812. Once again, the Seminoles were sent back to Florida.

A third group of Black Seminoles also arrived in 1821. They embarked from Cape Florida (Key Biscayne) as others had done before them. The escape from Florida continued through the Second Seminole War (1835-1842.)

Instead of sailing for New Providence (Nassau) to lobby the British, however, this group landed on the northwest shore of Andros where they established Red Bays. Between 1821 and 1837, over one hundred and fifty Black Seminoles and Seminoles sailed to Andros, about one hundred and sixty miles from Florida.



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Today, over three hundred descendants of the original settlers live in Red Bays. Their occupations on this sparse land are sponging, fishing, crabbing, wood carving and basketry. "Red Bay baskets afford the remote settlement some relative notability as they are said to be the best baskets made anywhere. People come from all over the world for these baskets," said the Rev. Bertram A. Newton.

Although the Black Seminoles of the Bahamas never experienced the Trail of Tears, many lost their lives crossing The Devils' Triangle in their quest for peace and freedom in a new land.