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SAINT PETERSBURG BRANCH

ASALH - African American History - Front and Center: MAROON COMMUNITIES IN AMERICA

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The English word "maroon" derives from the Spanish word *cimarrón*, which comes from an Arawakan Indian word. *Cimarrón* referred at first to American Indian slaves who escaped from the Spaniards on the Caribbean islands. By the mid-1600's, the word was used to refer to African American runaways from enslavement in the United States. Maroons could not bear to be enslaved, so they ran away and established their own communities, often deep in the woods, swamps, and nearby hidden waterways. The word has continued to mean a type of fierceness, independence, wildness and the possession of an *unbroken spirit*. (See Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine, "*Maroons In The Americas: Heroic Pasts, Ambiguous Presents, Uncertain Futures.*" December 2001).

Sylviane A. Diouf, in the collection of essays, "Four Hundred Souls, A Community History of African America. 1619-2019," Edited by Ibram X. Kendi

and Keisha N. Blain, wrote about the maroons in America in the 1700's. Diouf states:

Between 1700 and 1724, marronage, revolts, and more than fifty insurrections aboard slave ships caused much alarm throughout the British colonies. In the thirteen North American colonies, maroons --"runaways who hid[e] and lurk in obscure places," also called outliers --drew attention for the potential threat they posed.

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During the Revolutionary War, the British often armed rebellious free, enslaved, and runaway Black men; trained them in military warfare; and taught them how to use the weapons of war. After that war, many Black men stayed in America and continued their rebelliousness by establishing maroon areas and resisting re-enslavement. After the maroon communities were established, women and children joined the runaways and lived in the maroon communities. Knowledge of the maroons is an important part of African American history. It has been written that during the Civil War, after the Union Army began the active and open recruitment of Black troops, many men from maroon communities joined the Union Army and fought against the Confederacy.

Maroon colonies were established in the Southern United States, South America, and the islands of the Caribbean. In the United States, prior to the abolition of slavery, maroon communities existed in South Carolina, Virginia, North Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama and probably other Southern states. Historians generally agree the largest maroon colony in the United States was in the Great Dismal Swamp, on the border between Virginia and North Carolina. Other well-known maroon sites include the out islands of Georgia and South Carolina. The word "maroon" clearly refers to Black people who freed themselves from enslavement by running away and living in their own isolated communities. The maroons sought to ensure their freedom and maintain their African cultural beliefs. They came from many diverse

African tribes and often may have initially spoken different languages as they came together. They survived by developing, securing and creating for themselves ways of survival in the wilderness. They made or acquired

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necessary tools; shelter; weapons; established small farms and developed ways to fish and hunt for food. Maroons used self-governance, for their communities and maintained peace among themselves. They found ways to safely trade with outsiders and others and keep the location of the maroon colonies as secret as possible for as long as possible. They often took in other runaways. Betrayal or discovery by enslavers would lead to death and destruction of the maroon communities. When located, maroon colonies would be burned to the ground and those who failed to escape would be tortured and killed. Maroons posed the threat of insurrection to plantation owners because of their intense hatred for the institution of slavery. Although they sought to secretly engage in trade for necessary items, they mostly depended upon themselves for survival. Maroons were constantly on the alert to defend themselves from their potential enslavers. They lived as free people, beyond the sight, sound, and control of the plantations.

In Florida, there were Black and Seminole communities, built by maroons who allied themselves with Seminole Native Americans. These settlers were often called "Black Seminoles" and found refuge in central Florida swamps or hidden riverways. (See Thought Co., "Maroons and Marronage: Escaping Enslavement. Towns for the Self-Liberated Camps and African States in the Americas" by K. Kris Hirst, February 3, 2019.). In fact, since at least 2005, local archeologists and anthropologists have been excavating a maroon site in Manatee County, FL called "ANGOLA". Dr Uzi Baram of New College of

Florida and Dr. Sharon Howard, scholar and author, have been tirelessly working with local volunteers to bring that site the recognition it deserves. It was recently named a stop on the Underground Railroad by the National Park

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Service. The public is welcome to view the site at the Manatee Mineral Springs Park in Bradenton, Florida.

Finally, author Diouf, (*Op. Cit.*), describes maroons in this way:

Tenacious. Creative. Self-confident. Fearless. Resilient. They, (the maroons), displayed all these qualities and more to their enslaved admirers. Maroons became folk heroes...Maroons created an alternative to life in servitude, a free life in a slave society, a free life in a free state. Free Blacks and runaways were still subjected to white supremacy; only maroons were self-ruled.

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