

Forging a New Identity in Florida's Refugee Missions

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Abstract

By 1706, the once-extensive mission system of Spanish Florida had been reduced to a handful of refugee communities near the two remaining colonial Spanish settlements at St. Augustine and Pensacola, largely in consequence of demographic collapse and English-sponsored slaving during the 17th century. Over the next decades, these communities consolidated into an increasingly smaller number of refugee missions, the last inhabitants of which chose evacuation and exile with Spanish colonists in Cuba and Mexico in 1763. This paper explores the process through which indigenous political and ethnic subdivisions were ultimately minimized in favor of a single "Florida Mission Indian" identity.

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In 1587, when the Franciscan mission effort in Spanish Florida began in earnest with the distribution of the first group of nine friars among populations surrounding St. Augustine, the vast landscape that would eventually be encompassed by Florida's mission provinces was inhabited by dozens of indigenous societies comprising many tens of thousands of inhabitants divided into a diversity of political, ethnic, and linguistic groupings, including Mocama, Guale, Timucua, and Apalachee, among others. By 1706, just 119 years later, most of this same region had been transformed into an uninhabited war-zone, and surviving remnants of Florida's mission populations numbered not much beyond 500 individuals distributed in a handful of refugee communities clustered around the city of St. Augustine and the recently-founded Pensacola presidio of Santa María de Galve. Demographic collapse during the intervening period is documented to have exceeded 95%, resulting from a combination of factors including epidemic disease, diminished health and decreased birthrate in the context of Spanish colonialism, fugitivism, and English-sponsored slave-raiding.

In the end, however, it was the Indian slave trade that literally pushed the mission residents out of their homelands and toward the two Spanish ports at either end of the Florida territory. As a result, throughout most of the 18th century, Florida's missions were almost exclusively inhabited by individuals whose ancestors had lived somewhere else, and who had been forced to take refuge in the immediate environs of Spanish military posts as a consequence of the broader Southeastern borderlands struggle between Spain, England, and France. What had once been a thriving Florida mission system inhabited by indigenous populations numbering in the tens of thousands was during the 18th century a largely uninhabited frontier zone regularly traversed by hunters and warriors from tribes allied to English or French colonists. Florida's 18th-century missions were refugee missions precisely because their more distant homelands

were no longer safe in the context of European struggles for empire in the American South. The inhabitants of these refugee missions were almost wholly constrained by the vagueries of European politics, commerce, and warfare, unable to settle freely in prime locations, and unable to choose freely their neighbors and trading partners. As a consequence, their identity over the course of the 18th century became more and more linked to that of Spanish Florida, and the broader Spanish colonial world, so much so that when the Spaniards abandoned Florida, the remaining Florida mission Indians ultimately accompanied them into exile. In 1763, a total of 202 of these Florida Indians voluntarily chose to accompany the Spanish evacuating to Havana and Veracruz under the terms of the Treaty of Paris ending the Seven Years War, including 89 from St. Augustine, 108 from Pensacola, and 5 from San Marcos de Apalache. By that time, most of these evacuees had been born in the refugee missions adjacent to St. Augustine or Pensacola, having never known their original homelands. In many ways, they seem to have become so accustomed to life on the periphery of the Spanish colonial world that they were substantially Hispanic in addition to their core Amerindian identity, which was increasingly more generic than localized, more homogenous than heterogeneous. They were still, however, clearly distinct from their Spanish neighbors in terms of residence, governance, ethnicity, and language. With few exceptions, Florida's mission Indians never truly assimilated into the urban or quasi-urban life of the Spanish presidios and outposts they neighbored. Indeed, it was only when they left Florida that the process of assimilation became truly complete for the few that survived the transition to exile. Even in this context, however, it is also clear that indigenous tribal identity had not completely disappeared in this more homogenous cultural context, and that Native American ethnicity was still recognized at the level of the individual, at least until intermarriage erased all traces of their descendants' Florida ancestry. For this paper, an

examination of these processes as they unfolded in Florida should provide some insight into the nature of cultural adaptation and transformation not just in the context of Florida's 18th-century refugee missions, but also in other colonial contexts both within and beyond the Spanish empire.

For Spanish Florida, a comparatively rich documentary record is available regarding the identity and nature of indigenous Amerindian societies that were eventually assimilated into the colonial system based principally in the colonial port city of St. Augustine, founded in 1565. Beyond this, archaeological investigations over the past decades have also added considerable depth and dimension to the record of these Native American groups both during and before the colonial era. In particular, recent archaeological analysis of patterns of change in the domestic material culture of Florida's mission Indians during the 17th century provides important clues as to the nature of broader cultural transformations operating in the context of the Spanish colonial system, and sets the stage for understanding the refugee missions of the 18th century. At the start of the mission period during the late 16th century, the broader region that would ultimately be assimilated into the expanding colonial system of Spanish Florida was characterized by a markedly heterogeneous indigenous cultural landscape, incorporating a diversity of discrete communities organized into a range of local and regional chiefly political jurisdictions, all falling within one of several broader linguistic and material culture areas. From an archaeological standpoint, many of these material culture areas, defined largely on the basis of domestic utilitarian pottery styles, seem to have had considerable antiquity, with geographic boundaries between such zones extending well into prehistory, reflecting long-term barriers to social interaction based on a combination of natural and cultural features of the landscape. In this sense, the long-term heterogeneity of the cultural landscape was reflected in the spatial and chronological patterns of variation in material culture, particularly ceramics.

Recent syntheses of archaeological data regarding historic-era changes in these ceramic style zones have provided evidence for what appears to be comparatively rapid shifts in human social interaction patterns across much of Spanish Florida. During the first few decades after the initial assimilation of indigenous societies north and west of Florida's colonial capital at St. Augustine, an increasing degree of ceramic homogeneity can be seen across this formerly heterogeneous cultural landscape, suggesting that newly-fluid social boundaries within the assimilated mission chiefdoms of Spanish Florida tended to reduce diversity in favor of uniformity. While geographic factors clearly still played a role in the emergence of two broad regional ceramic style zones corresponding to Atlantic and Gulf coastal-plain populations integrated into a single mission system, there seems little doubt that the emergence of these newly homogenized material culture regions was in some way a reflection of the increasing degree of internal coalescence of social interaction within the broader colonial system of Spanish Florida during the 17th century. While it would be speculative to project a corresponding shift in personal and group identity to reflect long-term patterns of day-to-day social interaction within the Florida mission system, especially since unmissionized groups just beyond the mission frontier were apparently also integrated into these newly-developed ceramic style zones, there seems little doubt based on documentary sources that Florida's previously-diverse mission Indians may have become increasingly less parochial in their outlook and identity over the course of the 17th-century mission period, particularly as mission populations dwindled in the face of common threats such as disease and slave-raiding, aggregating and relocating for mutual defense. Nevertheless, even as late as the turn of the 18th century, the old provincial subdivisions based on political and linguistic affiliation were still evident in the indigenous social geography of Spanish Florida, even when reflected only in the governance of sole remaining communities

by chiefly councils comprised of hereditary chiefs and nobles with neither substantial lands or vassals to their name. As local and regional chiefdoms collapsed from constellations of satellite communities into consolidated mission villages, the persistence of indigenous hereditary titles and leadership positions is actually quite remarkable within the context of these congregated communities.

While these remnants of the formerly-heterogeneous cultural landscape were increasingly challenged by localized population contraction and long-distance movements of entire communities, in the end it was the final devastation and withdrawal of all remaining mission communities to St. Augustine and Pensacola between 1702 and 1706 that truly set the stage for more fundamental transformations in identity for Florida's surviving mission Indians. Forced into close proximity with both Spanish colonists and previously distant Native American communities, the remaining mission Indians of Florida settled into a new existence along the immediate outskirts of Florida's two Spanish coastal presidios, even as continuing raids from English-allied groups forced frequent relocations and resulted in further mortality over the course of the next decades. Of no little significance, the 1715 Yamasee War ultimately resulted in a flood of new refugees into Spanish territory, including a substantial number of formerly-missionized Yamasee Indians, who themselves had slaved the missions regularly during the previous three decades, as well as a considerable number of Apalachee Indians who had been living among the English-allied Creek Indians for some 14 years by the time of their 1718 return to Spanish Florida. With the 1718 construction of Fort San Marcos de Apalache in-between Pensacola and St. Augustine, Florida's surviving mission Indians subsequently huddled around all three Spanish ports over the course of the next half century.

Significantly, throughout this period the residents of Florida's refugee missions still maintained independent communities nearby but distinct from their Spanish neighbors. St. Augustine bordered eight of these communities by the second quarter of the 18th century, while Pensacola and San Marcos bordered no more than one or two such communities at a time. As during the height of the mission period, Franciscan friars ministered to most or all of these mission communities, each of which possessed its own church. While physically within relatively easy walking distance of Spanish colonial settlements (St. Augustine's refugee missions were far more tightly clustered around the city than were those in the vicinity of Pensacola and San Marcos), Florida's mission Indians were still spatially and administratively separated from nearby Spanish communities, maintaining an ethnic identity as "Indians" that clearly demarcated them from their Spanish neighbors.

While the division between Spanish and Indian was more-or-less clearly maintained (despite some limited evidence for occasional intermarriage between the two groups), what seems to have become less and less significant as time passed were the traditional indigenous divisions between earlier political and ethnic subdivisions, at least as regarded marriage and residence patterns within and among the refugee mission communities. A significant part of this process of political and ethnic mixing among Florida's mission Indians was undoubtedly due to the continued aggregation and relocation of many communities in the context of external raiding and internal population decline, which ultimately resulted in a smaller and smaller pool of marriage partners in a tighter and tighter geographic area. Though the earliest refugee missions were generally distinguished by province of origin, and hence differentiated from one another by political, ethnic, and linguistic affiliation, this pattern ultimately did not persist.

Census records from the St. Augustine refugee missions dating to 1752 and 1759 provide important glimpses of this process, demonstrating that what had previously been a small number of internally homogeneous and externally heterogeneous Native American communities was by the mid-18th century an even smaller number of internally heterogeneous missions with numerous examples of multi-ethnic households. By 1759, the last two remaining St. Augustine missions—Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Tolomato and Nuestra Señora de la Leche—comprised a total of 18 households, of which 8 were headed by mixed-marriages including Guale-Mocama, Yamasee-Guale, Yamasee-Mocama, and Yamasee-Timucuan couples. Moreover, of the total of 18 households, 8 included aggregated individuals of other ethnicities than the primary couple or head of household, including individuals of Guale, Mocama, Timucua, Yamasee, Casipuya, Chickasaw ethnicity, as well as a single household of multiple “Coastal Indians” adults. In general, the least-common mission households at this time were those of single ethnicity, comprising only 7 out of 18 households, and including both village chiefs, four widows with children, and a single elderly widower. The overall pattern suggests that while each individual was clearly aware of their original ethnic affiliation, and remained so throughout their life, by 1759 this no longer played as strong a role in marriage and residence patterns among the remaining refugee missions. For the St. Augustine area, a Guale chief ruled a village comprised principally of Guale, Mocama, and some Yamasee Indians, while a Yamasee chief ruled the other village comprised largely of Yamasee and Timucuan Indians, with other minority ethnic groups mixed in.

At the same time in Pensacola, there were likewise two remaining refugee missions—San Joseph de Escambe and San Antonio de Punta Rasa—for which documentation unfortunately fails to reveal individual ethnicities for each family recorded in a 1763 census. Later

documentation, however, makes it clear that these two missions were apparently divided by ethnicity, one Apalachee with an Apalachee chief, and one Yamasee with a Yamasee chief. Importantly, following the destruction and abandonment of both missions during Creek Indian raids in 1761, the two communities both retreated to Presidio San Miguel de Panzacola and combined to form a single pueblo under Yamasee leadership. The extent to which any intermarriage occurred between ethnicities either before or after this unification is presently undocumented, however.

Less is known about Native American communities in the immediate environs of the Spanish outpost at San Marcos de Apalache, and the extent to which they were integrated into the Franciscan mission system still operating in Spanish Florida during the 18th century. Almost immediately after the re-establishment of a resident Spanish presence there in 1718, Apalachee and Yamasee Indians descended from the Creek country and set up one or more communities within Spanish territory, and sacraments are documented to have been administered to them by Franciscan priests stationed at San Marcos or nearby mission posts at various points throughout the decades before the 1763 evacuation. However, the fact that only 5 individuals ultimately departed with the Spanish from San Marcos suggests that 18th-century mission activity in this vicinity was considerably more limited than at St. Augustine or Pensacola.

After their 1763 evacuation to Cuba and New Spain, the process of integration and assimilation of the Florida mission Indians ultimately became complete within a relatively short period of time. The evacuees from St. Augustine and San Marcos, numbering just 94 individuals, were settled in the pre-existing community of Guanabacoa, inland and just east of Havana harbor, where they seem to have been dispersed among existing populations of mixed African and Amerindian ancestry still living in the area. There is no evidence that the Florida

Indians ever governed themselves as a separate entity within the Villa of Guanabacoa, and detailed review of the surviving parish records there indicates that the vast majority of the immigrants did not survive past the first decade in Cuba. Nevertheless, sacramental registries commonly recorded the Florida birthplace community, and sometimes the indigenous ethnicity, of each Florida Indian (sometimes including parents) who was baptized, married, or buried in the church. These records indicate that when this dwindling number of Florida Indian refugees married into the local population of Guanabacoa, it was most commonly to individuals of mixed African and Amerindian ancestry, commonly designated as *pardos* or *indios*, or actually both at different times. While the identity and existence of these immigrants was ultimately lost to memory, at least a few grandchildren of these Florida mission Indians can be traced into the early 19th century in Guanabacoa, and during the 1830s there was evidently still a conscious memory of these Florida immigrants in the vicinity of Havana.

The Pensacola evacuees, totaling 108 individuals, initially relocated to Veracruz, but by 1765 they were granted a tract of uninhabited land along the nearby Chachalacas River in order to form a new town with self-governance. When elections were held toward the end of the year, officials under the Yamasee governor of the new town of San Carlos de Chachalacas included not one but two sets of one *alcalde* and two *regidores*—one Yamasee and one Apalachee—in order to reflect the dual ethnic makeup of the founding population of 47 surviving individuals by that time. While the Pensacola immigrants seem to have fared little better in Mexico than those who settled in Cuba (their numbers had dwindled to 21 by 1781), the new town seems to have survived through the aggregation of predominantly African or mixed African families from the local vicinity. Though parish records from this era have apparently been lost, it seems likely that

some of the modern residents of San Carlos, like those of Guanabacoa, likely descend from Florida Indian immigrants.

Ultimately, this review of the 18th-century refugee missions of Florida suggests that the greatest impact of the contraction of formerly dispersed mission communities around just three Spanish colonial ports was to reduce the distinctions *between* different Native American ethnicities, while simultaneously maintaining or even reinforcing a more generic “mission Indian” identity that distinguished them from their Spanish neighbors. While local or tribal indigenous ethnicity was never truly lost at an individual level until long after the evacuation to Cuba and Mexico, intermarriage and coresidence between different Native American ethnicities within the context of Florida’s 18th-century refugee missions tended to gloss over such parochial differences in favor of a more unified *indio* identity. The retreat of Florida’s mission Indians from their homelands evidently did not result in the loss of Native American identity, or full acculturation into the Spanish colonial milieu of the St. Augustine or Pensacola presidios, but instead seems to have resulted in a subtle reformulation of identity to emphasize a new, more generalized identity as “Florida Mission Indians,” ultimately divided only between eastern and western bands. Historical and archaeological evidence generally coincide in this conclusion, and suggest that the inhabitants of Florida’s 18th-century refugee missions did not passively succumb to full assimilation and acculturation into the Spanish colonial world, but instead actively maintained a distinct cultural identity even in almost direct proximity to Spanish settlements. In this context, their choice to abandon their homelands by 1706 and live near the Spanish looks less like an unwilling defeat and more like a conscious choice. Florida’s mission Indians were not dragged involuntarily toward the coastal Spanish presidios, nor were they forcibly evacuated to Cuba and Mexico. Their actions were voluntary and pro-active, representing one strategic

choice among multiple options designed to ensure the survival of themselves and their descendants. While the memory of Florida's mission Indians is only now beginning to be rediscovered, their choices clearly resulted in the survival of at least a few descendants of these groups outside the Southeastern United States. Perhaps with time and research, living descendants may yet be identified in Guanabacoa or San Carlos, marking at least a small measure of success in the original efforts of their ancestors to live on during the turbulent colonial era.