

A History of Southeastern Indians in Cuba, 1513-1823

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Abstract

Beginning in the early 16th century, small numbers of Florida Indians were sporadically transported to Cuba, which became a staging ground for many Florida expeditions. Cuban vessels also maintained trade with South Florida Indians between the 16th and early 19th centuries, involving indigenous groups and immigrant Creeks after the 1760s. And from 1704 to 1760, several hundred refugees from slave-raiding across South Florida fled on Cuban vessels and settled near Havana, followed in 1763 by 89 surviving mission Indians from St. Augustine. This paper explores the presence and survivorship of Southeastern Indians in Cuba, including avenues for future research.

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The official discovery and naming of Florida by Juan Ponce de León in 1513 marked the beginning of nearly three centuries of Spanish exploration and colonization in the Southeastern United States, which formally ended with the 1821 transfer of Florida to United States control. Throughout that period, the indigenous Southeastern Indians of greater Spanish Florida witnessed varying degrees of contact and interaction with Spanish authorities, centering primarily on the port city of St. Augustine after 1565, except for the 20-year period of British control during the late 18th century. While Spanish-Indian relations within and around the Florida colony have been explored in great depth by a wide range of scholars (recent examples include McEwan 1993; Bushnell 1994; Worth 1998a, 1998b; Hoffman 2002), far less attention has been paid to the relationship between these same Southeastern Indians and the nearby port of Havana, Cuba. The indigenous residents of South Florida, in particular, were far more intimately connected to Havana than they ever were to St. Augustine, making the southern part of the Florida peninsula more a frontier of Cuba to the south than of Spanish Florida to the north. In addition, most of the last remnants of both the Christianized mission Indians of northern Spanish Florida and the unconverted South Florida Indians were ultimately transported to the outskirts of Havana during the 18th century, where it may eventually be possible to discover living descendants of several extinct Southeastern Indian cultures. For these reasons, in this paper I will review the history of Southeastern Indians in Cuba throughout the Spanish colonial era, including not only the results of the most current research in this area, but also the prospects for future work.

The first documented Spanish expedition to reach Florida was of course that of Juan Ponce de León in 1513 (Herrera 1601). Based on the appearance of at least one Spanish-speaking Indian during Ponce's first trip, his expedition was clearly preceded by the arrival in South Florida of at least some fugitive Indians from Cuba, many or all of which ultimately settled in a single town within the domain of the Calusa paramountcy. Descendants of this initial Cuban Indian migration to Florida were reported to have still been living within the Calusa domain as late as the 1560s (Escalante Fontaneda n.d.; True 1945; Worth n.d.). Ironically, while Florida initially served as a haven for Cuban Indian

refugees from the Spanish conquest of that island after 1511, in a curious reversal of fortune it would ultimately be Cuba that served as a final haven for Florida Indian refugees two centuries later.

Though Ponce de León did not return to Florida until 1521, there is clear evidence of early Spanish slaving there long before that date. Cuban vessels dispatched by Governor Diego Velázquez were later accused of having brought back some 300 Florida Indians as slaves prior to 1517, confirming that Southeastern Indians began to be transported to Cuba within just 4 years of “first contact” (Spanish Crown 1517). While the ultimate disposition of these first captives is not presently known, documentary evidence clearly indicates that small numbers of Southeastern Indians were sporadically transported to Havana throughout the early- to mid-16th century, particularly from the western Gulf coastline of the Florida peninsula. Though Ponce de León’s 1521 colonial venture in Calusa territory ended in failure (e.g. Oviedo y Valdés 1851: 320-321), forestalling the initiation of direct Spanish conquest and the planned institution of an *encomienda* system in South Florida, subsequent 16th-century expeditions only served to reinforce the position of Cuba and particularly Havana as an important staging ground for Spanish exploration in Florida and the greater Southeast.

Though the abortive 1526 Ayllón colony along the Atlantic coastline had no connection to Cuba, the subsequent Pánfilo de Narváez expedition wintered in the Bay of Jagua along the southern coast of Cuba before arriving near modern Tampa Bay in 1528, followed by the 1539 landing there by Cuban Governor Hernando de Soto after his own expedition’s winter in Havana (e.g. Cook 1992; Cabeza de Vaca 1989; Hoffman 1993; Clayton et al. 1993; Hudson 1997). And although the subsequent 1549 expedition of Dominican Luís Cances and the 1559 expedition under Tristán de Luna were both outfitted and launched from Vera Cruz, both expeditions also had contact with Havana, including the 1561 re-departure of Luna’s replacement Angel de Villafane from Havana north toward the Atlantic coastline of South Carolina (e.g. Cances and Beteta 1549; Gannon 1965: 9-14; Priestly 1928; Hoffman 1990: 172-201). Even the 1564 expedition of Hernando Manrique de Rojas to

Georgia and South Carolina was launched by Cuban Governor Diego de Mazariegos from Havana (Mazariegos 1564).

In sum, seven of the eight major documented Spanish expeditions that landed on the mainland of the Southeastern United States between 1513 and 1564 either were launched from Cuba, or had at least some direct contact with Havana before or after the expedition, not counting illegal slaving also known to have been launched from Cuba. As a result, the port of Havana became either the temporary or permanent home for at least a handful of Southeastern Indians who were routinely used as interpreters and guides on subsequent voyages. Given the flurry of repeated Spanish landings in or near the Tampa Bay vicinity during the second quarter of the 16th century, it is no surprise that many or perhaps even most of these Indians were originally residents of Florida's central Gulf coast. Such was the case for Luís Cancér's female interpreter Magdalena, who had probably been brought back to Havana during the earlier Soto or Narváez expeditions, and who quickly shed her captor's clothes and religion upon returning to her homeland, leading the Dominicans into a trap that resulted in the murder of Cancér and three other Spaniards (Cancér and Beteta 1549; Gannon 1965: 12-13).

The 1565 establishment of the first permanent Spanish colony in Florida at St. Augustine (Lyon 1976) marked the beginning of even greater and more regular visitation and immigration of Southeastern Indians to the Havana vicinity. Apart from the fact that Pedro Menéndez de Avilés was eventually appointed Governor of Havana in addition to Florida, because of its strategic position in the overall system of Spanish shipping (e.g. Chaunu 1983: 84-88), Havana soon became the principal link between St. Augustine and the rest of the Spanish colonial world. For this reason, just as St. Augustine was the focal point of a colonial system comprising literally tens of thousands of Southeastern Indians affected by the Florida mission system, Havana was likewise the focal point of resupply and commerce for St. Augustine. Moreover, not only did the structural link between St. Augustine and Havana ultimately lead to a sporadic Southeastern Indian presence in Cuba, but Pedro Menéndez also briefly maintained three garrisoned forts in the southern Florida peninsula during the late 1560s, and all three

of these were effectively based in nearby Havana, though technically under the jurisdiction of St. Augustine (Worth n.d.).

The end result of the linkage between the ports of St. Augustine and Havana, and also more directly between the South Florida forts and Havana, was a continuation of the earlier pattern of Southeastern Indians visiting and even residing in and around Havana. One example of this was to be found in the Jesuit college established in Havana in 1566, which housed an assortment of Florida Indians including the Calusa noblewoman Doña Antonia, who ultimately lived out the rest of her life in Havana after the final Spanish withdrawal from South Florida in 1569 (Rogel c1607-1611; Zubillaga 1946; Alegre 1956: 43-87). Other individuals were housed temporarily in Havana during voyages to and from Spain or other locations. Cuba's indigenous Indian population had been reduced by this period to perhaps less than a thousand individuals, many of which lived in the Havana suburb of Guanabacoa alongside other Indian immigrants from Central America (e.g. Mazariegos 1562; Castillo 1570), so the occasional presence of Florida Indians was notable as a continued re-introduction of Native Americans into an island then largely decimated of its indigenous population.

In addition, beginning as early as the late 16th century, and continuing throughout much of the 17th, private Cuban vessels conducted illicit trade with the unconverted South Florida Indians, particularly along the Atlantic coastline where ambergris became a coveted product that attracted the attention of traders in both Havana and St. Augustine (e.g. Spanish Crown 1592). Though outlawed from early on, this commerce probably played a role in the later development of the Cuban fishing industry in this same region, and in the continued occasional visitation of Florida Indians to Havana.

During the 17th century, Florida mission Indians were occasionally incarcerated or even tried criminally in Havana during this period, accounting for yet another Southeastern Indian presence in Cuba. Notable examples include the seven-year imprisonment in the prison of El Morro of two Timucuan Indians from the Vera Cruz visita for a 1628 insurrection, and the 1680 arrest and 1681 trial

in Havana of principal Timucuan chief Don Thomás de Medina for sodomy (Bushnell 1994: 119; Worth 1998b: 138, 218)

Sometime in 1688, the chief of the Calusa Indians along the Southwest Florida coast, who had practiced an official policy of isolationism for virtually the entire 175-year period previous to that time, sent out word of his willingness to accept Spanish missionaries and convert to Christianity (Hann 1991: 85-91; Worth n.d.). Not long thereafter, the Bishop of Cuba dispatched a Cuban fishing vessel to negotiate on his behalf with the Calusa chief, and in response to warnings from his noble counselors that the Spanish actually planned to enslave him in Havana, the chief dispatched an undisclosed number of Calusa Indian families to live in Cuba as a test of Spanish intentions. Marking a precedent-setting event in the history of Southeastern Indians in Cuba, the band of Calusa were settled by Cuban authorities on the bluff called La Cabaña directly across the harbor from downtown Havana, where they lived for a period of fully one and a half years. Though details of this stay are still being sought, upon their safe return to Florida in 1689, the Calusa chief finally agreed to come to Havana himself, where he was baptized during a month-long stay before being returned in early 1690. Though a follow-up Franciscan mission to the Calusa capitol launched from Havana in 1697 resulted in rapid failure and withdrawal (Hann 1991: 40-45, 157-211), the pattern was now set for increased interaction and visitation by South Florida Indians in Havana.

Beginning during the first decade of the 18th century, the existing Havana connection with South Florida served as a catalyst for the inauguration of an entirely new phase in the relationship between Southeastern Indians and Cuba. Probably in part due to the successful temporary resettlement of Calusa Indians during 1688 and 1689, as well as the subsequent and apparently frequent visits by South Florida Indians to Havana during the 1690s and later, Cuban authorities in 1704 granted permission for the permanent immigration of a group of Indians from Cayo de Huesos, or Key West, to the same bluff opposite downtown Havana where others had previously been settled (Guëmes y

Horcasitas 1743). La Cabaña would ultimately serve as the primary refugee camp for immigrant South Florida Indians over the course of the next half century.

These South Florida Indians, along with all that followed through 1760, fled to Cuba in direct response to the depredations of English-allied Indians armed with flintlock muskets (Hann 2003: 179-186; Worth 2003, n.d.). During the initial phase of this penetration of South Florida between 1704 and 1711, the aggressors were principally Yamasee Indians operating as slavers for Carolina traders, but in the aftermath of the 1715 Yamasee War, as the Indian slave trade began to diminish in importance, Creek Indians became the principal military threat to indigenous South Florida Indians. Regardless of the source of the threat to these unarmed South Florida groups, it is possible to document the immigration of at least several hundred individuals to La Cabaña during the period between 1704 and 1760.

Following the first small migration dating to 1704, which is poorly documented, there was a substantial and multi-ethnic migration during the spring of 1711, in which select members of a group of South Florida Indian refugees already aggregated in the vicinity of Miami and the Florida Keys were transported on two Spanish ships to Havana (Valdés 1711; Monaco y Alaña 1742; Guëmes y Horcasitas 1743; Hann 1991: 45-47, 334-347; 2003: 179-180; Worth n.d.). The list of 270 refugees included chiefs, nobles, and commoners, comprising some 50 Calusa Indians along with 220 from other towns and groups including Jove, Miami, Tancha, Muspa, and Rioseco (or Jeaga).

Subsequent documents indicate that the immigrants did not fare well in Havana. Of their original number, more than 200 were later said to have died from rampant plagues of typhus and smallpox within the space of just three months. In the immediate aftermath, the few survivors that remained were dispersed among a number of Cuban residents willing to take them in, including not just the immediate vicinity of Havana but also other regions of Cuba as well. Later evidence implies that at least some of these survivors may even have been relocated to the remote and sparsely-populated southern coast of Cuba in the vicinity of the Bay of Jagua, near modern Cienfuegos (León

1732; Guëmes y Horcasitas 1743). Though it would be purely speculation at this point, this may have been an effort to isolate them from the continual introduction of pathogens from the port city of Havana. At least some of the survivors were ultimately returned to South Florida on Spanish ships, though the number was estimated at only 16 or 18 Indians. These survivors presumably joined several hundred other surviving South Florida Indians still living in the Keys.

Over the course of the next decades, historical information is sparse and ambiguous regarding the number of South Florida immigrants to Cuba. A 1732 mission to retrieve additional refugees was aborted when the rumor spread that adults would be separated from their children and resettled in Jagua, but a small group of 11 arrived successfully in 1738 (León 1732; Laso de la Vega y Cansino 1738; Guëmes y Horcasitas 1743). Some documents indicate that there were only a handful of survivors from the 1711 migration still living in the vicinity of Havana by the early 1730s, but one document states that there were more than two hundred living in a single community across from downtown Havana between 1720 and 1724 (Sayas Bazán 1727). The sacristan of the nearby Guanabacoa parish church, named Don Christóbal de Sayas Bazán, was ultimately assigned by the Bishop to learn the language of these immigrants and act as a missionary to convert, catechize, and administer the sacraments to them, which was said to have met with only limited success during this period. One native Calusa woman, baptized Leonor de Sayas presumably in honor of Christóbal de Sayas' mother and sister, is even documented to have given birth in Guanabacoa to two baby daughters by an unnamed father in 1729 and 1731, indicating at least some survivorship during this period (Díaz 1729; Soto 1731).

Despite the sporadic migrations of South Florida Indians to Havana during the first half of the 18th century, Cuban officials eventually came to realize that a continued indigenous Indian presence in the Florida Keys was very much to their advantage, serving both as a buffer against English-allied Creek raiders to the north, and also as a source of cheap skilled labor for the emerging Cuban fishing industry in the southern Florida estuaries (e.g. Barberi 1760). For these reasons, routine contact was

maintained between Havana and surviving South Florida Indian refugees living from Miami southward to Key West. It is presently unclear whether temporary visitations by Florida-based Indians to Havana during this period were common, or indeed whether the resident population of South Florida Indians living in and around La Cabaña was to some degree a fluid population, fluctuating up and down depending on circumstances in South Florida combined with the availability of Spanish transport.

The dawn of the Seven Years War in 1756 ultimately heralded the end of indigenous Indian habitation of Florida. Beginning in 1757, English-allied Creeks launched an aggressive series of attacks not only aimed at the surviving South Florida Indians living in Miami and the Keys, but even including direct assaults against Cuban fishing vessels on both coasts of the Florida peninsula. Faced with the flight of their remaining indigenous allies to Havana, Cuban authorities gave firearms to these surviving “Keys Indians” and returned them to Florida, even constructing them a vessel with which to transport themselves back and forth to Havana. Despite these efforts, however, a final Creek raid on May 17, 1760 resulted in the final immigration of between 60 and 70 surviving Keys Indians to settle once again in La Cabaña, where the Cuban governor reported they would remain until Spanish authorities agreed to garrison a fort in Miami, which of course never happened (Alonso 1760; Barberi 1760).

Ironically, it was precisely at the site of La Cabaña that British forces set up artillery to bombard Havana during the summer of 1762, and Guanabacoa where a British siege camp was established. The fate of any surviving Keys Indians during this battle on their new home is presently unknown, but in the aftermath of the war, La Cabaña became the site of the largest stone fortress to be built in the entire Caribbean. When construction began in 1763, many or all of the remaining Keys Indians appear to have been relocated to nearby Guanabacoa.

The end of the Seven Years War also resulted in the final migration of the last of the northern Florida mission Indians to Cuba. As part of the 1763 Treaty of Paris, the entire territory of Florida was transferred to British rule, resulting in the evacuation of all Spanish forces to Cuba by early 1764 (Gold

1969). During the fall of 1763, a total of 89 mission Indians residing in the last two Florida missions of Nombre de Dios and Tolomato were transported to Havana, ultimately to be settled precisely in the nearby town of Guanabacoa to the south and east of Havana harbor. There they joined the remaining Keys Indians in the enclave that represented virtually the last refuge for the few surviving descendants of as many as perhaps 200,000 indigenous Southeastern Indians from Florida and southeastern Georgia. This fact alone makes it more than worthwhile to trace the possible descendancy of these Southeastern Indian immigrants to Cuba. And this is precisely what I have been attempting to do over the past two years using archival records in Cuba and Spain. Though the project is still ongoing, preliminary results indicate that while mortality rates were extremely high during the initial years after their immigration, at least a small number of Southeastern Indian refugees did survive long enough to marry in Cuba, normally with Cubans of mixed African or African-Indian ancestry. And though the children of such marriages often died in childhood, there were at least a few survivors who may have living descendants today. Some even seem to have prospered in their new home, as exemplified by Josepha Dominguez or Dominga, Yamasee widow of chief Juan Manuel Sánchez, who was born about 1730, immigrated to Guanabacoa in 1763, and was still drawing a widow's pension there as late as 1800, along with two other Florida Indian women (e.g. Pérez de Urria 1800). She may also have been the same woman identified as "Josefa Dominga, la cacique" who owned at least two African slaves in Guanabacoa during the 1790s (e.g. Rafael de Rivero 1794).

Following the evacuation of all remaining indigenous Florida Indians to Cuba in 1760 and 1763, direct contact between Cuba and other Southeastern Indians was temporarily interrupted, though not for long. Beginning no later than 1771, Spanish-allied Creek Indians based primarily in the Alabama town of Coweta began to establish relations with Cuban fishermen plying the waters of the southern Florida Gulf coast, and before long virtually every Cuban vessel that returned from South Florida waters carried at least a few Creek Indians back to Havana for audiences with the governor, and for gifts (e.g. Casas 1793). My most recent research indicates that visiting Creeks were normally

housed in private houses in the small harborside community of Regla, which served as the base of the South Florida fishing fleet, and also in Guanabacoa, perhaps having contact with other surviving Florida Indians living there (e.g. Luz 1776).

Despite early refusals, it was these Cuban fishing vessels that ultimately shipped the first Spanish firearms to Creek warriors when Spain joined the American Revolution against Britain in 1779 (Navarro 1779). This commercial and diplomatic interaction with the Creeks only intensified during subsequent decades, and Havana archives are filled with detailed lists of Creek visitors and official gifts distributed to them during this period (e.g. Hoz 1805). Subsequent evidence from Florida indicates that not only did the Cuban fishermen employ these Creeks and trade with them, they also intermarried with them, resulting in a curious new ethnic group known as the “Spanish Indians” (but see also Sturtevant 1953). Only after the 1821 transfer of Florida to United States rule did official approval and funding for these Creek voyages to Havana end, with the final royally-funded Creek delegation arriving in 1823 (León 1821, 1823). Nevertheless, many or most of these previously seasonal Cuban fishermen eventually chose to settle permanently in Florida. Despite this fact, combined with the fact that the intermarried Spanish Indians had stronger cultural ties to Havana than they did to the nearby Seminoles residing in the Florida interior, the United States government ultimately elected to include the wives and children of these Cuban fishermen in the Seminole Removal during the late 1830s, effectively ending the direct Cuban connection with the Spanish-allied Creeks of Southwest Florida (Covington 1959: 125-128; Almy 2001: 56-64).

In conclusion, the Cuba connection is a subject that has only begun to be explored as an important facet of the history of the Southeastern Indians during the European colonial era. Not only do Cuban archives evidently contain a wealth of ethnohistorical information about a diverse range of Southeastern Indians, but I am also confident that continued research may ultimately reveal genealogical connections with living descendants of several otherwise extinct indigenous groups from Florida and elsewhere. Apart from the cultural implications of this common heritage shared between

the United States and Cuba, it may eventually be possible to identify genetic traces of this Native American ancestry among living Cubans or Cuban-Americans, providing at least some surviving connection with an otherwise tragic story of cultural extinction during the colonial era.

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