



The Clerk's Black History Series

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"Saltwater Railroad" (1821)

"Coastal Underground Railroad that led to the Bahamian Islands"

The Saltwater Railroad was a southwardly coastal route that many enslaved people, along with Seminoles and free people fleeing capture, used to escape the Southern states in the early 1820s.

Long before Harriet Tubman and the Underground railroad became the escape passage North, enslaved people from modern-day Georgia and the Carolinas journeyed to Spanish controlled Florida in search of freedom.

In 1819, Spain transferred its Florida territory to the United States under the Adams-Onís Treaty. Prior to the transfer, Spanish Florida was a safe-haven for freedom seeking Africans with a large concentration of black Seminoles living in Negro Fort - a short-lived fortification inside of Fort Gadson, built by the British during the War of 1812. The Fort, located near the Apalachicola National Forrest, was destroyed and the occupants killed in 1818 by Confederate troops, under the command of Andrew Jackson. After the invasion, the free, largely black population could not travel north to the free states, so instead, they moved south. Their route to freedom is known as the Saltwater Railroad.



Unlike the Underground Railroad - an informal network of abolitionists and safehouses that helped enslaved Africans escape to the free Northern states and Canada - the Saltwater Railroad led its passengers to Key Biscayne, on the southeastern coast of Florida.

Nearly 1000 escapees traveled more than 500 miles, contending with challenges on their long journey. The land was undeveloped and full of swamps, insects, animals, and slave hunters from the North, as well as some indigenous tribes looking to capture and return escapees in exchange for weapons and compensation. It was Black Seminoles who helped the escapees with navigational assistance, food, and supplies along the way. Black Seminoles were runaway slaves from plantations in South Carolina and Georgia who sought refuge in Spanish-controlled Florida and lived among the Seminole Indians.

When groups arrived at the southeastern Florida coast, they negotiated with Bahamian wreckers and fishermen who sailed Florida's southern coast in search of marine salvage. If they were fortunate, they would haggle a fair price and board a boat bound for the Bahamian Andros Island - the closest land to the Florida coast. The Bahama Islands were under the control of the British, who had abolished slavery. Other escapees would risk the trip in dugout canoes with makeshift sails for the 154-mile crossing to the islands.

The dangerous ocean voyage offered no guarantees. While crossing the gulf stream, the escapees risked capture, storms, boats capsizing, and death. The fortunate ones found their destiny on Red Bays on Andros Island, an island that is still home to descendants of those that found refuge many years ago. Bahamian descendants, some who still call themselves Black Seminoles, live in the Red Bays settlement on Andros. Cuba, Haiti, and other islands in the Caribbean region were additional secondary destinations for the Saltwater Railroad.

With the final transfer of Florida to the U.S. was completed in 1821, Florida became a typical southern state that established a slavery-based economy. The U.S. military was brought in to capture escaping slaves and their native helpers.

The dark beaches of Cape Florida offered refuge for escapees until December 17, 1825, when the Federal Government built the Cape Florida Lighthouse, making it difficult for escape, essentially shutting down the Saltwater Railroad.

The Cape Florida lighthouse is the oldest structure in Miami Dade County and still stands in Bill Baggs State Park. In September 2004, Cape Florida was designated an official National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom site.

