

### Heaven's Soldiers: Free People of Color and the Spanish Legacy in Antebellum Florida

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## Review

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**Marotti, Frank** *Heaven's Soldiers: Free People of Color and the Spanish Legacy in Antebellum Florida*. University of Alabama Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8173-1784-3

### Understanding the Spanish Impact on Florida

*Heaven's Soldiers* is the second in Frank Marotti's studies about people of color, both enslaved and free, in north Florida. He follows the lives of an impressive number of individuals and families during the last years of the Spanish colonial period and the subsequent decades of American territorial government and early statehood. In this book, in particular, he traces out the challenges people of color faced, not only to survive the oppressions of the times, but to gain or retain their liberty. The topic is one that has fascinated him for decades, starting with the 1995 publication of his article "Edward M. Wanton and the Settling of Micanopy" in the *Florida Historical Quarterly*. His knowledge of the details of peoples' lives and life stories is based on years of research in Florida's colonial papers, country records, military and church records, and various court and investigative papers. In his last work, *The Cana Sanctuary* (University of Alabama, 2012), he described the impact of the War of 1812 on black families in Florida, covering much of the economic and labor history of the times, how people made a living, and the adjustments they had to make while Florida was under a military occupation. His thesis, well supported, was that the disruptions of war broke the regimented discipline that governed enslaved labor, something that enslaved men and women would remember even after the institution was re-imposed on them. Slaves, surviving on their own in a war zone in 1812 and 1813, were often victimized as war "booty" but also escaped into the territory of the Seminole and Creek, or to the British lines, or saw the war through near their own quarters, in danger, but no longer under the constant supervision and threat of overseers. Free families saw husbands and brothers fighting in the ranks of the Spanish authorities, or in cooperation with Indian war parties. These experiences, Marotti argued, shaped attitudes about

liberty, equality, and rights that were passed down through later generations, even as the post-war years saw the expansion of slave labor in Florida and the onset of laws designed to deprive free people of color of their property and political voice.

*Heaven's Soldiers* recaps the major points of Marotti's earlier work and then goes on to explore the life histories of families from the 1820s to the Civil War. It is a remarkable work, rich in case studies that tell the story of a kind of nascent civil rights struggle, not so different from the era of Reconstruction, in which free blacks had to deal with growing opposition to their free status, and slaves kept alive the knowledge that slavery could be challenged.

The final years of the Spanish colonial period, Marotti argues, were critical to creating this legacy. Free blacks of St. Augustine played a crucial role in repulsing American forces trying to seize St. Augustine in 1812 and 1813. With extensive experience in frontier fighting, the black militia won several major skirmishes against American regulars and Georgia militia, delaying an American take-over of Florida for almost a decade. Even when American rule came, black families of the colonial era protested any infringements of their former rights. The colonial years also spawned ideas that challenged bond servitude. Florida's tiny population of 4,000 people included about 2,000 slaves. Most had no opportunity to escape enslavement, but a significant minority ran away to British forces or to the Seminole during the War of 1812, and others to a maroon community, the Negro Fort, that arose along the Apalachicola River. Those who could continued armed resistance as participants in the First and Second Seminole Wars

In the 1840s, twenty years after the coming of American rule to Florida, memories of these events were still alive. As Floridians began to sue over damages from the War of 1812, locally known as the Patriot War, free blacks testified in court cases, noting their losses, and also recalling family members who served under arms. "Hearings," argues Marotti, "recorded in writing the history of black valor and freshened it in the minds of all St. Johns County residents. It thus combated a hardening racial divide, while inspiring a younger generation of blacks" (p. 115). At the same time, slaves and maroons among the Seminole were under arms again, this time opposing American forces trying to force the Seminole to move West. In the absence of general emancipation and an end to slavery, which came with the Civil War, this heritage of challenges to the existing social system of slavery kept portions of the black community conscious

of the fact that liberty, and citizenship, were always possibilities.

*Heaven's Soldiers* therefore joins the ranks of a growing and rich body of research that examines how individuals and small groups challenged slavery before the Civil War. This theme is treated in Larry E. Rivers' *Rebels and Runaways* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), which also on the 1700s and 1800s in Florida, and in Gene E. Smith's *The Slaves' Gamble* (Palgrave McMillan, 2013), a chronicle of the War of 1812 and people of color. *Heaven's Soldiers* is a fascinating bridge between these two works—going further in depth about the era of 1812 in Florida than was possible in Smith's more comprehensive work on the entire theatre of the War of 1812, and standing almost as a companion work to Rivers' *Rebels and Runaways*. With *The Cana Sanctuary*, all four works can be read together as foundational pieces for the study of slavery and opposition to slavery dating back to Jane Lander's classic *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, Rivers' *Slavery in Florida*, and a rising scholarly literature that also includes Lander's more recent work on Atlantic creoles, Daniel Schafer's work on Anna Kingsley and Patricia Griffin's on the life of the African Sitiki. All these works need to be on the shelves of anyone wishing to be knowledgeable, or even conversant, with current trends in historical thought about the black experience during the early Republic, and with essential source materials for its study.

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