

FIRST FREE BLACK SETTLEMENT IN NORTH AMERICA, IN THE SPANISH FLORIDA

Fort Mosé: Black people from United States proudly remembering their Spanish history

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The Cross of Burgundy is waving in the United States. An African-American man holds the Spanish imperial flag, in front of a column of black and white soldiers wearing Spanish uniforms.

This scene is repeated year after year in mid-June in San Agustín (in English St. Augustine). It's the oldest continental city in the USA. Each September every year, it is celebrated the foundation of the city by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés. San Agustín proudly recalls its Spanish legacy with the town full of red and yellow flags.



Actors characterised of Spaniard soldiers during the Battle of Fort Mosé, Florida
(Photo:ExploreStAugustine.info)

On June 25th, 1740, a battle between Spanish and English forces was fought in San Agustín: the Battle of Fort Mosé, a fight that took place in the context of the War of the Seat (1739-1748). This was a war between both empires that took place in the Spanish territories of the Caribbean, on the Spanish side there were officers as distinguished as Blas de Lezo (in Cartagena de Indias) and ended with an English defeat. The Battle of Fort Mosé is remembered in the US as "Bloody Mose" for its extreme hardness. But before going into detail about this fight, we have to go back a little further back in time.

Florida: a Spanish sanctuary for slaves fleeing the British

The fascinating history of Fort Mosé dates back to 1687, when Spain began to offer asylum to black slaves fleeing the British colonies of North America (the so-called "cimarrons"). These escapees, often, were slaves abducted by the British in Africa, where they had been free. In the Spanish Empire, as well as in the British, there was then slavery. Nevertheless, the Spanish slaves, by Hispanic laws and Catholic customs, were treated much better than the slaves of the British colonies, may have their own belongings and maintain the unity of their families. On the other hand, in Florida, then Spanish territory, there were many free black people. For the Cimarrons, Spanish Florida had become a gateway to freedom. In 1693 the Spanish Crown placed two conditions on the asylum-free slaves to be able to live free in Florida: to embrace the Catholicism - the official religion of the Empire - and to contribute to the defence of the territory. Black militias were formed with fleeing slaves, to defend Spanish Florida against English attacks. These men formed in San Agustín a settlement that also ended up hosting American Indians who had become homeless during the War of Queen Anne (1702-1713), between England and France.



An Afro-American reenactor in Spanish uniform at Fort Mosé, Florida (Photo:AmericanRoads.net)

Up to the "last drop of blood in defence of the Great Crown of Spain"

One of the cimarrons that ended up serving Spain was Francisco Menendez, a Creole whose life is worth of a movie. Its original name was Mandinga and it had lived free in the Portuguese Angola until it was kidnapped by traffickers of slaves and taken to the British Carolina. Mandinga managed to flee and lived with the Yamasee Indians, in the northeast of Florida, fighting with them against the English. In 1724 Mandinga arrived at San Agustín, where he was granted asylum, taking the Spanish name of Francisco Menéndez after being baptized in the Catholic faith.



Spanish and British reenactors of the Battle of Fort Mosé, Florida (Photo: LocalsGuideSA.com)

Francisco helped in the defence of San Agustín against the English in 1727. He forged his reputation as a leader when, being just a teenager, became the commander of the Fort of Real Grace of Santa Teresa de Mosé, better known as Fort Mosé. It was built in 1738 (Francisco was already 24 years old by then), when the settlement of escaped slaves of San Agustín sheltered already more than 100 cimarrons, men, women and children. Willing to avenge the hardships of their slavery and moved by an strong patriotism and gratitude towards Spain, Menendez militia swore to be "the cruellest enemies of the English" and shed their "last drop of blood in defence of the Great Crown of Spain and the Saint Faith".



Re-enactment of the Battle of Fort Mosé, Florida (Photo:FloridasHistoricCoast.com)

The English get to take Fort Mosé

In June of 1740 the English tested the patriotic fervour and loyalty of Menéndez's men. An attack on Fort Mosé, headed by Colonel John Palmer in front of 170 men belonging to the Georgian colonial militia, Scottish highlanders of the 24th Infantry regiment and Indians who were with the British, murdered some of the black inhabitants of the Spanish fort. The English managed to take Fort Mosé, with the ultimate goal of conquering and destroying San Agustín.



Re-enactment of the Battle of Fort Mosé, Florida (Photo:FloridasHistoricCoast.com)

The Spanish counterattack and the bravery of the black militiamen

The Spanish governor, Manuel de Montiano, ordered a counterattack in which 300 men would take part, among regular troops, black militias and Seminoles Indians loyal to Spain. The regular troops were commanded by Captain Antonio Salgado; the black militias and the Seminoles were under the command of Francisco Menéndez. The assault was made in the early morning of June 25th to 26th, before dawn - then it was not usual to fight at night -. The Spaniards caught the British by surprise, slaughtering them in a battle which ended up to fight to body. Fort Mosé was destroyed, but the Spanish victory stopped the British offensive, giving time for the arrival of reinforcements from Havana. The black militias of Menendez fought with a bravery that deserved the praise of the Spanish governor of Florida. As the fort had been ruined, the cimarrons were allowed to settle in San Agustín, with the same rights as the Spaniards who resided in that town.



Re-enactment of the Battle of Fort Mosé, Florida (Photo: Daron Dean / StAugustine.com)

Menéndez, again captive and slave of the English

Shortly after these events, Francisco Menéndez and some of his men joined a corsair ship. The corsair ship had the support of the town of San Agustín, with the misfortune of being captured in 1741 by a British ship that had the significant name of "Revenge". When the English discovered who he was, they threatened to

castrate him in revenge for the bloody Battle of Fort Mosé. Finally, he was subjected to a brutal punishment: 200 lashes, pouring salt on his wounds so that they would not heal. Then they resubmitted him to slave status in the Bahamas islands. Against all hope, Francisco managed to flee again and return to San Agustín, where Fort Mosé was rebuilt in 1752, being his commander, already 38 years old.

The end of Fort Mosé and the march of the Menéndez militiamen

In 1763 Spain ceded Florida to England, and Mosé's black soldiers refused to live under the British flag, so they left for the Spanish island of Cuba. Francisco Menéndez moved with his wife, Ana María Escovar, to the Cuban province of Matanzas, creating a community called San Agustín de la Nueva Florida, later moving to Havana. That is where the trail of Menéndez and his black militiamen was lost. It is speculated that some would join the Havana militia and that a part of them, or their descendants, could return to Florida with the expedition of Bernardo de Gálvez in 1781. When, two years later, Florida returned to being Spanish, Fort Mosé was in ruins and was not rebuilt.



The forest in which Fort Mosé was originally located (Photo: Ebyabe / Wikimedia)

Fort Mosé current remains

In 1812 American forces occupied what was left of Fort Mosé, being expelled by the Spaniards, who decided to destroy the old ruinous fort to prevent it from being taken again. Today there is hardly any trace of it, except for a small forest that remembers its location, a forest that in 1994 was declared a National Historic Monument of the USA.



Sign of the Historical State Park of Fort Mosé, in Florida (Photo:Ebyabe /

Wikimedia)

As already pointed out, nowadays, every year and by mid-June, a group of Americans remembers the Battle of Fort Mosé with a recreation in which black and white men wear Spanish uniforms and wave the flag of Cross of Burgundy. Those African-Americans remember with pride their Spanish past, since thanks to the asylum that Spain granted to those cimarrons, Fort Mosé was the first settlement in North America formed by free black people.



Reenactors of the Battle of Fort Mosé, Florida (Photo: Florida State Parks)