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***The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People* by
Kenneth W. Porter**

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Black Seminoles: History of a Freedom-Seeking People. By Kenneth W. Porter. Revised and edited by Alcione M. Amos and Thomas P. Senter. Gainesville, 1996. University Press of Florida. xi, 285 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Cloth-\$29.95.

Anyone familiar with the historiography of the Florida Seminoles knows that the first scholar to explore the African-American involvement with this tribe in any meaningful way was the late Kenneth W. Porter. When Professor Porter began his career in the 1930s, few scholars were interested in black history, much less the important role of African Americans as a part of the Seminole experience. The Seminole experience itself - except for the work of John Swanton and Mark Boyd - had also been largely ignored by scholars. This situation changed, however, when Professor Porter's path-breaking research appeared in the *Journal of Negro History*, the *Journal of Southern History* and the *Florida Historical Quarterly* during the 1940s and 1950s. Porter's pioneering work laid the groundwork for J. Leitch Wright, David Littlefield and a host of other scholars. A whole new view of the Seminole experience began to take shape. Those familiar with Professor Porter's style will find the same fast-paced prose in this, his last work, unfinished at the time of his death in 1981, but completed by two editors, Alcione M. Amos and Thomas P. Senter. Three years ago the editors discovered the unfinished 700 page manuscript in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black History in New York City.

The Black Seminoles is divided into five parts: "War and Peace, Florida, 1812-1842," "The Lean Years, Indian Territory, 1842-1850," "The Sanctuary, Mexico, 1850-1870," "The Seminole Negro Indian Scouts, Texas, 1870-1914," and finally, "Father of His People, Mexico, 1876-1882." The latter is a tribute to John Horse, whose multi-faceted life provides the main thread through which Porter weaves his history. Porter's work begins with the birth of John Horse on the Alachua Prairie as the Patriot War (1812-1813) begins - a conflict which saw Georgia frontiersmen make an aborted attempt to take over Spanish East Florida. The Creek Civil War, Andrew Jackson's defeat of the Red Sticks at Horseshoe Bend, the destruction of the "Negro Fort" at Prospect Bluff, and finally, Jackson's 1818 raid into Florida - all told from the black perspective - set the stage for the story of the Black Seminoles in Florida. Early that year one of those who escaped with his people across the Suwannee River into East Florida was a little boy named John Horse.

By the middle 1820s John Horse lived in the Tampa Bay area and was a frequent visitor to Fort Brooke. The teenage lad, now dubbed "Gopher John" by the fort's commander, lived in relative peace until the Second Seminole War in 1836. That year John Horse was approximately twenty-five years old. Cowya or John Cavallo, as John Horse was sometimes known, took an active part in the Second Seminole War. Blacks participated in this conflict as warriors, interpreters and scouts. Soon runaways from neighboring areas also joined the conflict. Thomas Jesup and other commanders understood the stakes of the war for the Black Seminoles. For the blacks, losing the war meant not only losing

their land, but their freedom. Thus, Jesup stated not long after his arrival in Florida, "The warriors have fought as long as they had life, and such seems to me to be the determination of those who influence their councils - I mean the leading negroes" (71). Jesup stated the obvious when he uttered, "This . . . is a negro war, not an Indian war" (66). Soon Jesup and other commanders began using the double inducements of cash and promises of freedom in exchange for the assistance of blacks, who had it within their power to bring the war to a close.

"Abraham," a Black Seminole.

Though John Horse took an active part in the war, his movements are difficult to document. Easier to trace are black leaders John Caesar and Abraham, who were far more identifiable at this stage of the conflict. By the second year of the war John Horse began to take more of a leadership role. Jesup and other officers found John Horse a disruptive force among Seminole leaders leaning toward capitulation. After convincing several Seminoles to violate their agreement to emigrate, John Horse became a marked man. In 1837 he, Osceola and Wild Cat were seized under a flag of truce and jailed in St. Augustine. Making a dramatic escape from the old Spanish fort, Wild Cat, John Horse and several others resumed the fighting on the lower Kissimmee River. Near the end of the year Zachary Taylor - who would later take overall command of American forces in Florida - marched southeast from Tampa Bay to the northern shore of Lake Okeechobee, where a battle was fought on Christmas Day 1837. The encounter forced John Horse, Alligator, Wild Cat and their followers to flee. Finally, by the summer of 1838, John Horse and many of his followers decided to surrender.

Though leaving Florida temporarily, John Horse subsequently returned to Florida to assist in convincing other hostiles to emigrate. As a well-paid scout and interpreter, John remained in Florida until leaving for good in 1842 for the Arkansas territory where life was very difficult. Some of the Seminoles harbored hard feelings against John and his black compatriots, whom they were convinced had betrayed them. Soon, despite promises to the contrary, it appeared as though the blacks were to be re-enslaved. Wild Cat's Seminoles were in little better circumstances, and both men led delegations to Mexico, where they eked out a living farming until they re-entered Texas as scouts in the service of the United States. Their task was to patrol the border against hostile Indians raiding from Mexico. Porter ends his narrative with John Horse's death in Mexico City, while still attempting to secure a permanent settlement for his people.

The editors do an adequate job of bringing the work up to date, although they ignore many important recent works on the subject - much of it published after 1981. Nevertheless, this work will be of interest to both scholars and general readers interested in the Seminole experience.

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