Partners in Search of History

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In 2004, Time Sifters Archaeological Society helped to launch Looking for Angola, the search for material remains of an early 19th century maroon community in southern Tampa Bay. Time Sifters volunteers have helped with public events, archaeological excavations, and the inventory and analysis of artifacts for the archaeological search for Angola, the name for a settlement that lasted from the late 18th century to 1821 on the Manatee River. The challenge of locating material evidence for people who sought freedom in southwest Florida was great, with many obstacles; some challenges radiate from the nature of the search and are others due to the specifics of archaeological research in Bradenton. But after years of public outreach, sustained research, and patient analysis, the results are surprisingly positive. In large measure, the success comes from Time Sifters’ partnership with Looking for Angola and then the New College Public Archaeology Lab, which was created in 2010. The partnership deserves acclaim, and Time Sifters members deserve an early look at the findings.

Collaborations and Partnerships

Archaeologists have a ready audience for the science and findings of the field. Typically, archaeologists engage the public at the end of the research process: first the archaeologist delves
into background research, then there are excavations, analysis, interpretations, and a write up of the findings, and finally the archaeologist tells the public what happened. That can take a decade or two. But recently, archaeologists have experimented with different avenues for public engagement especially with local and descendant communities, through collaborations and partnerships. The interdisciplinary Looking for Angola research team decided to bring the research process to public attention from the start. The traditional approach would be to wait for all the data tables to be organized, to have all the reports completed, and several rounds of scholarly publications vetted by other professionals; those steps are necessary and required before definitive interpretations are accepted and debated. But the initial interpretations deserve attention and this brief essay reviews the process and concludes with an announcement.

In 1990, Canter Brown Jr. published an article on Sarrazota, otherwise known as Angola, in *Tampa Bay History* (volume 12), revealing a history hidden in the archives. Angola presented a moment in time, probably several decades long, when people seeking freedom came to southwest Florida for freedom. The people are sometimes called escaped slaves, fugitives, Black Seminoles, African Seminoles, run-away slaves, free blacks, as well as maroons; the labels are many due to the complex relationships and histories for the individuals striving for liberty in the Spanish colony. In Florida, when the saga of freedom-seeking people gets recognized, rightfully,
the focus goes to Fort Mosé in northeast Florida. Yet there is a history of maroons on Florida’s
Gulf Coast, with an important chapter revealed by the archival research of Canter Brown.

Public Outreach and Engagement

The history of freedom-seeking people in Manatee/Sarasota is so unexpected that it
deserved attention. In late 2004, Vickie Oldham created an interdisciplinary research team that
included historian Canter Brown, me, University of Central Florida Professor Rosalyn Howard,
Professor Terrance Weik of the University of South Carolina, and Louis Robinson of the Manatee
County Schools and secured funding. The archival information hinted at the location and
archaeology was needed to provide material evidence of the maroon community and hopefully
offer insights into daily life. A series of Florida Humanities Council-funded lectures, starting
with an overflowing crowd at New College of Florida, inaugurated the program. The
presentations sought public input and insights; one clear message from those who came to the
events: schoolchildren needed to know this history. The team complied.
Vickie Oldham produced an inspiring video, shown on WEDU, which provided an even larger audience for the history. Regional educators immediately recognized the potential for this project and Elizabeth Smith, Curriculum Specialist with Manatee County Schools, and Bernadette Bennett, Social Studies Program Specialist with Sarasota County Schools, helped the team meet the call for materials for school children. The Newspaper in Education program of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* created educational materials that were sent to schools from Tampa Bay to Charlotte County; those four tabloids can be found, online, at [http://sarasotaheraldtribune.fl.newsmemory.com/ee/sarasotaheraldtribune/ssindex_nie_angola.php](http://sarasotaheraldtribune.fl.newsmemory.com/ee/sarasotaheraldtribune/ssindex_nie_angola.php). Gay Sherman wrote the text and Mary Charland not only produced the tabloids but also orchestrated the donation of a SmartBoard to the one elementary school in Red Bays, in the Bahamas. Rosalyn Howard led the trip to bring the SmartBoard; Professor Howard had years of ethnographic engagement with the descendant community, whose ancestors fled Florida in 1821.

Wanting to offer the information to as broad an audience as possible, the lookingforangola.org website provided archival resources and scholarly publications, interviews with the scholars on the research team, and resources for teachers. Throughout all the programs and excavations, the media was invited and newspaper, television, and radio stories told of the search and the history of maroons, providing more exposure to the research process and the history.
In January 2011, funds from the US Department of Education FIPSE grant that supported the creation of the Preserving Regional Heritage program for the New College Public Archaeology Lab helped bring the research team back to Sarasota to review the findings; the panel is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2jZl9W92W4. I saw many supportive Time Sifters members in the audience that day. In summer 2012 I joined Canter Brown, Rosalyn Howard, and Vickie Oldham and members of the Red Bays community as well as other Black Seminole descendants at the National Park Service conference Escaping to Destinations South: The Underground Railroad, Cultural Identity, and Freedom along the Southern Borderlands.
The History and Archaeology for the Search

Very little of the history for the maroons of Gulf Coast Florida has survived the transformations in Florida, with little popular consciousness of an incredible heritage involved in people seeking freedom in Second Spanish Period Florida (1783-1821). Time Sifters has been instrumental in bridging the academic research and public interest, educating the interested public in the methods and theories of archaeology, especially historical archaeology, through case studies presented in the monthly lecture series and the newsletter.

For Angola, the interplay of documents and archaeological evidence is crucial for recovering the community. The archival information is clearest for the end of the haven for freedom: in 1821, reports of the destruction across the Gulf Coast of free black communities are found in US military records and court cases over the captured people brought into slavery in Georgia. The connection to the Bahamas was found in the Nassau archives, an impressive contribution by Rosalyn Howard that correlated names of those escaped after being captured and
with individuals listed by the British in Red Bays. The Spanish Land Claim gives us the term Angola for the failed attempt by Cuban rancho family Caldez, known from their ranchos in Sarasota Bay and then Charlotte Harbor, to claim the land. But the source of the name remains a mystery.

Caldez was just one of the many rancho owners who fished the waters of Gulf Coast Florida for the Havana market. The Cuban fishermen had ties to the maroons and other free blacks as well as the Seminoles and Spanish Indians. Traces of the rancho are found in place names like Phillippi Creek (named after Felipe Bermudez) and Perico Island (for Perico Pompon). There were also several Europeans involved in maroon history, including Robert Ambrister and Alexander Arbuthnot as well as George Woodbine and Edward Nicolls, famous supporters of the cause of anti-slavery and Seminole rights and maybe even Don Ramón de Lopez y Ángulo. John Lee Williams, used information he received from William Bunce, to note ruined cabins still visible in the fields by the Manatee River in his 1837 *The Territory of Florida*. Bunce, an Anglo-American rancho owner, may have known the location from his association with the Black Seminole Luis Fatio Pacheco (both men gained fame, or infamy, during the Second Seminole War).

The individuals involved in documenting the Manatee River are few. The archival record and history are complicated; the archaeological search for Angola required overcoming even more significant challenges. The target area was very large and under the streets of Bradenton. The larger history of freedom-seeking peoples in 19th-century Gulf Coast Florida brought forward models for maroon settlements on the Apalachicola River and on the Suwannee River,
comparisons that offer guidance for what to expect, mostly very little but even those traces are meaningful for reconstructing the maroon lifeways.

To help understand Angola’s settlement pattern, the concept of `falling back,’ escaping as a form of resistance provides a model of disparate homes and fields south of the Manatee River. I presented the argument at the annual meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology (and am awaiting publication of the work as a chapter in an edited volume on resistance to slavery).

Another facet of the community comes from the archival record; when the initial Anglo-American pioneers came to the Manatee River, they noticed dried out corn stalks and pumpkins in what they called the Old Indian Fields. John Lee Williams, in *The Territory of Florida*, wrote of other plants having become “naturalized” in the Old Spanish Fields. The list of plants – corn, pumpkins, peas, potatoes, and lima beans – from accounts of the maroon community to the north and the descendant community in the Bahamas fit the escape agriculture category created by the anthropologist/political scientist James C. Scott. Escape agriculture are those plants that are easily hidden, require little care, and have staggered maturity rates. I published the findings in the journal *Historical Archaeology* (volume 46, number 1), available at New College’s Jane
Bancroft Cook Library. Additional insights came from honors theses I supervised at New College: Sherry Svekis documented the historical archaeology for the Tabby House Ruins at De Soto National Memorial, Elizabeth Usherwood traced the history for Louis Fatio Pachecho that included his years in this region, and Rachel Roach performed archival and ethnographic research at the Braden Castle neighborhood. Fitting together the pieces of the puzzle brought forward the area around the Manatee Mineral Spring for excavations.

Excavations supported by Time Sifters volunteers and New College students
(Photographs by Uzi Baram)

Knowing the significance of the river as a defensive structure, the exploration entered the waters of the Manatee River under the direction of J. Coz Cozzi. A mention of a half-sunken ship in the Manatee River in Lillie McDuffee’s 1933 *The Lures of Manatee* hinted at the history but the survey did not provide any new insights. The archaeology focused on the terrestrial.

After the initial false steps with standard test pits, I started leading the archaeological search that recognized the multiple histories, and the complexity of the archaeological record, on the south side of the Manatee River. Sherry Svekis, the President of Time Sifters, coordinated a donation by Witten Technologies for a radar tomography survey at the Manatee Mineral Spring, a source of freshwater with pre-Columbian mounds (8MA32) that stood until the 20th century.

Jeff and Trudy Williams, of Reflections of Manatee, Inc., were gracious hosts for test
excavations in 2008 and 2010; Sherry Svekis as field director and lab supervisor ensured professional data collection and organization. Nat Lawres, now at University of Florida, and Ryan Murphy, now Sarasota County Archaeologist, reanalyzed previously excavations materials from Reflections of Manatee, exposing important information missed by a previous excavator. Time Sifters volunteers and New College students inventoried and identified the artifacts from excavations I led near the Manatee Mineral Spring; notably Time Sifters Vice-President Felicia Silpa encouraged the students, modeling sustained serious examination of archaeological artifacts with enthusiasm.

The specific findings from excavations needed confirmation. Jeff Moates, director of the Florida Public Archaeology Network West-central Region brought an expert to endorse that we had early 19th-century artifacts. That is a simple dating of artifacts but essential for the project: there is only one community of people living around the Manatee Mineral Spring during that time period. Further excavations in January 2013, with superb field work by Ryan Murphy and Meg Stack (of the University of South Florida), confirmed the stratigraphy and the presence of diagnostic artifacts.
While announcing confirmation of diagnostic artifacts is not as exciting as revealing the structures for a long-lost community, it is a key finding from the archaeology, and worthy of celebrating. The excavations, although minor in terms in area explored, revealed the complexities of the archaeological layers by the spring and offered artifacts and stratigraphy that unlock the history for the peoples who lived by that part of the Manatee River. The work was reported to Reflections of Manatee, Inc., with excavation reports capped off with Deepening Understandings of the Manatee Mineral Spring Site (8MA32): January 2013 Excavations. More importantly, scholarly publications came from Canter Brown, notably Tales of Angola (2005), Rosalyn Howard, for instance, 2006 The “Wild Indians” of Andros Island: Black Seminole Legacy in The Bahamas, and my A Haven from Slavery on Florida’s Gulf Coast (2008), with more forthcoming.

**Revealing the Past**

The process of excavation has been slow, with public outreach and building the New College Public Archaeology Lab, the location for analyzing the archaeological materials. The nuances of the maroon presence in Florida, refining the research design to recognize post-colonial readings of the archives, and going through the excavated materials that were misidentified took several years took years. But the process allowed more outreach, including a New College Public Archaeology Lab-Time Sifters co-sponsored, and Florida Humanities Council-funded, lecture series that brought Jerald Milanich, Kathleen Deagan, and others to large audiences; the partnership led to thirteen lectures at New College (over four years, titled Traces of Our Past, Dialogues with Florida’s Past, Archaeology of Spanish La Florida, and Voices from Native Florida), with audience size ranging from 150 to 220. Time Sifters co-organized and
staffed Archaeology-Fest, annual celebrations of archaeology and regional heritage that brought hundreds of community members to the New College Public Archaeology Lab. For children, I organized A Day at the Lab that included the history for the maroons and others of the 19th-century Manatee River and Sarasota Bay region. The Arts and Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County funded a video game project focused on the Cuban fishermen and including their trade relations with the maroons of Angola.

Outreach Programs: Lectures, Festivals, and Video Games

Expanding on the history of the maroons has been an important contribution from Looking for Angola. Such recent history books as *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* by Nathaniel Millett (University Press of Florida, 2013) illuminate marronage in Florida, including Angola, particularly regarding the sophisticated discourse of freedom by the maroons.

Visiting the Site

The public outreach has meant more residents know of the people who came before them; the successful history fair projects on Angola have been a particular delight. But the original
impetus was a search for the material evidence for Angola. On October 19th, at the Manatee Mineral Spring a commemoration will be part of a new historical walkway. Early in the research process a reporter asked me how we would know when we found Angola; I responded that there would be no plaque, no dramatic evidence because of the nature of the community but the research team would have to construct an argument. Looking for Angola has the argument and I want to continue the partnership process by sharing the insights. Please come and join Reflections of Manatee for the presentations as announced in this issue of the Time Sifters newsletter. And, as members of Time Sifters, please come to accept my gratitude for your organization’s positive support for Looking for Angola.

Looking for Angola is finishing one phase and moving to a new stage in its research. The partnership that sustained the archaeological endeavor should continue – it is a great model for public archaeology and has produced superb results.

The above is just an overview of the Looking for Angola project. There are scholarly readings on Angola available, including articles online that will provide more of the background for this important chapter in the history of freedom-seeking people, Florida, and Sarasota/Manatee.

and books that include Angola by the research team:
Canter Brown Florida’s Peace River Frontier
Rosalyn Howard Black Seminoles of the Bahamas
Terrance Weik Archaeology of Anti-Slavery Resistance