

**National Park Service**  
**U.S. Department of the Interior**



## Gulf Islands National Seashore **African-Americans**

From colonial times to the present, African-Americans have contributed to the history of Pensacola and the nation, in spite of slavery, segregation, and discrimination.

The Spanish initially regarded Pensacola as a military outpost, sending only soldiers, priests, workmen and slaves to the colony. The absence of European women when combined with the presence of slave women led to many interracial relationships. These women and their children were often freed in their owners' wills, or when the men returned to Spain. Those freed usually inherited property as well, playing important roles in the economic and social life of the Gulf Coast. Of the 992 residents in the 1819 Census of Pensacola, 432 were listed as "white," 343 as "slaves," and 217 as "free persons of color." Among the few historic homes surviving in Pensacola, both the Suzannah and the Julee cottages near Seville Square belonged to "free women of color" from the Spanish colonial era.

The U.S. acquisition of Florida in 1821 brought a harsher form of slavery, and more of it. From 1825 to the eve of civil war in 1861, military construction projects on Pensacola Bay involved hundreds of enslaved African-Americans. Fort Pickens and Fort Barrancas are monuments to the skill and toil of enslaved African-American masons, carpenters and laborers. These men not only learned valuable skills, but retained some of their wages as well, possibly providing a means for purchasing their

freedom.

Then in 1844 the national debate over slavery focused on Pensacola. In July of that year, Jonathan Walker was captured while helping the escape of run-away slaves and returned to Pensacola. Walker was a sailor from Massachusetts who had moved to Pensacola in 1837 to make a living in the coastal trade. The slaves were men he knew who asked for his help. Convicted of slave stealing, he was first imprisoned, then placed in stocks for an hour and publicly humiliated, and finally had his hand branded, "SS" (for "Slave Stealer.") This inspired the poem "The Branded Hand," which became a rallying cry among abolitionists seeking to end slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War. Images of Walker's hand were widely circulated in abolitionist circles, where the brand was interpreted as meaning "Slave Savior."

Walker later went on a speaking tour with the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Like Douglass' autobiographies, the published account of Walker's months in jail in Pensacola, during which he witnessed numerous beatings of enslaved African-Americans, forced the nation to face the brutality slavery.

In spite of the growth in slavery in Pensacola, the economic and social position of some local African-Americans had won them exemptions from "slave codes" used to restrict slaves and "free persons of color" in Florida and other southern states. Following the Walker trial, the state legislature ended these exemptions. In a blow to Pensacola's economy and culture, the most prosperous African-Americans in Pensacola emigrated to Mexico as the date for the imposition of the new restrictions approached.

The *Pensacola Gazette* for April 4, 1857 included this notice: "The Exodus: On Tuesday last thirty-five free colored persons took their departure from this city for Tampico, and in a few days the balance of those remaining will also leave for the same place. It was a painful sight to see them parting from their friends and their native country to seek homes in a foreign land. They take with them the sympathy of all our citizens on account of the causes which have led them to leave us, and also their best wishes for their future happiness and prosperity in their new home."

The stark contrast between the Walker trial and the sentiments of "The

Exodus" reveal the divisions and contradictions caused by slavery in a nation based upon equality and freedom. The "exodus" also demonstrates the resourcefulness of those African-Americans who had gained freedom, and their determination to keep it.

With the coming of the Civil War in 1861 and the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the military once more became an avenue to freedom. Many blacks leapt at the chance to fight for their freedom in the army and navy. By 1864, the forts that had been built with slave labor at Pensacola were being guarded by the 25th Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops (USCT). Many other regiments of the USCT landed at Pensacola to take part in the Mobile Bay campaign. Where free blacks had not long before left Pensacola to preserve their freedom, now they came to fight for and secure that freedom.

Pensacola enjoyed racial harmony for a decade after the war, harking back to its cosmopolitan past. An influential black middle class included doctors, lawyers, teachers, newspaper editors, and the first president of what would become Florida A&M University. Booker T. Washington called it "one of the more progressive colored communities in the South."

Pensacola's black community continued to prosper in spite of segregation and "Jim Crow" laws imposed at the end of the Reconstruction Era that continued into the 20th century. Segregation was extended to the beaches, and Pensacola Beach was "whites only." Among the few beaches open to African-Americans was Rosamond Johnson Beach on Perdido Key, now a part of Gulf Islands National Seashore. Private Rosamond Johnson, Jr. was killed on July 26, 1950 during the Korean Conflict. Having carried two wounded men to safety under enemy fire, he was killed going back for a third, becoming the first African-American from this area to die in that conflict.

How many of the visitors enjoying Johnson Beach today notice the modest memorial to this man? How many know that Johnson joined a long roll of African-Americans who have fought for this country in every war since the Revolution? The contributions and experiences of African-Americans in Pensacola are a bigger part of our history than many suspect. Theirs is a remarkable tale of contributions in the face of constant struggles, and of successes in spite of overwhelming obstacles.



### **Did You Know?**

Gulf Islands National Seashore's barrier island habitats, offshore waters, and submerged resources offer a variety of recreational opportunities for people year-round.

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