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largest free Black settlement comes to Pensacola



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Leading up to the Highlights in Black exhibition in December, museum manager Mike Thomin and Pensacola City Councilwoman Teniadé Broughton were figuring out which significant archaeological sites featuring Black history they should focus on next.

The fort at Prospect Bluff was the first to come to mind.

Following the War of 1812, Prospect Bluff held the largest free Black settlement in the United States. The new exhibit details how the maroons, or free Black people who escaped slavery, worked hard to protect their beacon of freedom and how the fort's destruction showed the commitment the U.S. government had to maintaining the institution of slavery.

"One of the reasons why this settlement was so feared was because it was enslavers' in the American South's worst nightmare," said Thomin, museum manager of the Florida Public Archaeology Network. "It was a free community of formerly enslaved people who had emancipated themselves and were literally fighting back to maintain their freedom."

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The Florida Public Archaeology Network, with support from Broughton, will hold an opening reception of the new temporary exhibit, "The Maroon Marines: Archaeology at Prospect Bluff," from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Friday at the Destination Archaeology Resource Center at 207 E. Main St. in Pensacola.

Broughton said she is thankful to sponsor and highlight events that have shaped Pensacola's history.

"Exhibit openings welcome guests to ask questions and offer their opinions in a casual setting. More so, exhibits give a moment to reflect, to actually sit with the artifacts and

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our freedom."

The fort was constructed during the War of 1812 when the United States and British were at odds. The British decided in 1814 to open up a front in the Gulf South. They constructed Prospect Bluff, which was also called the British Post or Negro Fort by the Americans, along the Apalachicola River in what is now the Apalachicola National Forest.

It was mainly built by the Corps of Colonial Marines, which consisted of fugitive slaves and Creek tribesman who the British recruited. Because fugitive slaves did not want to go back into slavery and the Indigenous communities were resisting changes to their native lifestyles and encroachment onto their lands, some members of both groups were willing to side with the British against the Americans.

When the War of 1812 ended in 1815, the British left Florida and left the 300 African Americans and Indigenous people with all their weapons hoping they would defend themselves from the United States. The fort garnered a reputation as a beacon of freedom for escaped slaves as eventually 800 fugitive slaves from the Pensacola region, Tennessee, Georgia and Mississippi, came to settle in the surrounding areas.

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"They didn't just hand these guys guns and they had to figure it out, they were highly trained Marines and there were hundreds of them," Thomin said of the fort's occupants. "And that guaranteed safety if you could get there and so that became, in the U.S. government's eyes and in slavers' eyes, a huge problem."

When Gen. Andrew Jackson heard about the fort, he came with the Army and Navy to destroy it. After a few skirmishes, Jackson ordered Maj. Gen. Edmund P. Gaines to destroy the fort. On July 27, 1816, Gaines fired a heated cannon ball to ignite gunpowder stored inside the fort.

The explosion killed over 270 men, women and children, and most survivors were executed or sent back into slavery. Those who did survive and escape went to Seminole towns nearby or to another free Black settlement called Angola in the vicinity of present-day Sarasota.

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military items such as bayonets and ammunition and pottery fragments to showcase the daily life of people living in the fort.

Thomin and Broughton said they feel the exhibit demonstrates how Black and Indigenous history needs to also be told.

"The hope is that people, maybe if they're learning about it for the first time through the exhibit, that they'll then go and do more research and learn about it," Thomin said. "It's an amazing, incredible and tragic story, but it really shows the resilience and I think that's something that we can all really appreciate as human beings, is that resiliency."

For more information, visit the Destination Archaeology Resource Center's website at destinationarchaeology.org or its Facebook page.