

Fort Davis

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



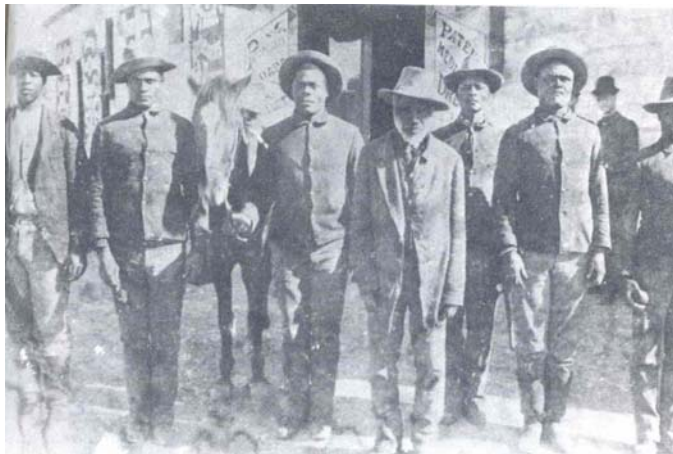
Seminole- Negro Indian Scouts

One of the toughest units in the U. S. Army was the Seminole- Negro Indian Scouts. This elite group was recruited in 1870 from black people living in Mexico. The army selected them for their superbly honed frontier tracking skills, superior marksmanship and first rate horsemanship. They served gallantly in Texas during the Indian Wars, but today few people have heard of them.

Who They Were

The Seminole- Negroes were descendants of escaped slaves. They settled among the Seminole Indians of Florida. In the late 1830s and early 1840s the Seminoles and Seminole- Negroes were moved to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. Slave hunters and Creek Indians persecuted them there. One band of Seminoles and a band of Seminole- Negroes consequently moved to Mexico.

Although the Seminole Indians returned to the United States in 1858, the Seminole blacks did not. They feared kidnapping and a return to slavery back in the United States. Mexico prohibited slavery. As a result the Seminole blacks were safe as long as they lived south of the Rio Grande. They drew on survival skills learned in the Florida wilderness and adapted those skills to the harsh and barren terrain of the Mexican borderlands.



Seminole Negro Indian Scouts both retired and new recruits.

They learned as youths to ride, hunt, track, trap and shoot. These blacks became legendary frontiersmen. Some served as soldiers in the Mexican Army. They gained a reputation for being tough and daring.

Recruitment

Following the Civil War, the U.S. Army returned to West Texas. The army was called on to defend settlers and travelers against retaliation by Apache and Comanche Indians who were being displaced from their homelands. Military commanders needed scouts who were as skilled as- their opponents at surviving and fighting in the desert borderlands.

In 1870 Major Zenas R. Bliss started recruiting Seminole- Negroes from Mexico as U.S. Army scouts. In return for their services, the men would receive pay and rations. Their families were allowed to live at the forts where the scouts were stationed. On the fourth of July 1870, the first recruits crossed the Rio Grande to enlist for six months. The scouts operated primarily out of Fort Clark and Fort Duncan.

Scouts for the Army

In 1873 Lt. John Bullis joined the 24th Infantry. He saw in the Seminole- Negro Scouts the type of highly mobile strike force that could take the war to the enemy.

For the next eight years, the scouts served under Bullis' command. They saw combat in extremely rugged conditions on both sides of the border. During 26 expeditions they engaged in 12 battles without losing a single scout in combat.

The Seminole- Negro Indian Scouts went into Mexico with the 4th Cavalry. There they saw action against Lipan Apaches and Kickapoos at Remolino.

They also accompanied Col. Ranald Mackenzie when he led an expedition against the Southern Plains tribes at Palo Duro Canyon in 1874. The expedition was a success. By 1875, the Indians were back on their reservation.

In the Big Bend

In 1885, a detachment of scouts garrisoned a camp at Nevill's Springs in what is now Big Bend National Park. They served there for six years with troops from Fort Davis. The scouts were also at Camp Pena Colorado near Marathon. They stopped there on regular trips between Fort Clark and Camp Nevill's Springs.

Medals of Honor

They never numbered more than 50 men at a time, yet the Seminole- Negro Indian Scouts distinguished themselves. Four Seminole- Negro Scouts received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Adam Paine received the Medal of Honor for "gallantry in action" on the Staked Plains. John Ward, Pompey Factor and Isaac Payne were awarded the Medal for rescuing their commander, Lt. Bullis. The trio rode in under enemy fire. Ward pulled Bullis up onto his horse, and they rode away to safety.

Their commanders thought highly of the Scouts. Major Bliss characterized them as "excellent hunters and trailers, brave scouts... [and] splendid fighters." Col. Edward Hatch called them "fine trailers and good marksmen. "They were said to be expert at hand- to- hand combat and were well known for their incredible tracking skill. In one remarkable feat of tracking, Lt. Bullis and 39 scouts trailed Mescalero Apache raiders for 34 days over 1,260 miles.

Promises Broken

The scouts amassed an impressive record of frontier combat. Meanwhile, their families faced racial violence, discrimination and governmental indifference. At first the army fed and housed the Seminole- Negroes. The army thought the government would resettle them on a reservation. That never happened. Some accounts say the

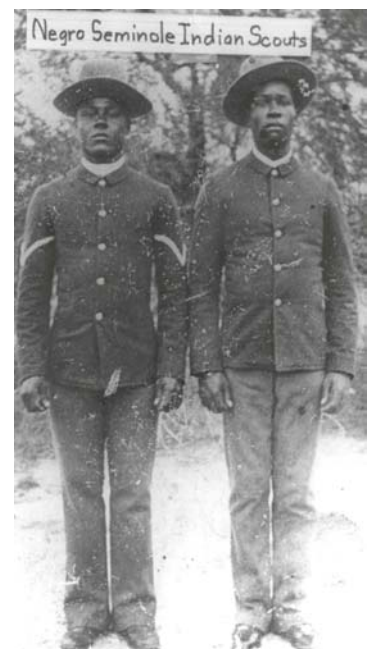
Seminole- Negroes were promised land in return for their service as scouts. No written record of that agreement survived. As the officers and officials involved in the case changed, the details were lost.

Several prominent officers endorsed the scouts claims to land, but the War Department had no land that it could legally give them. To make matters worse, registration for the rolls of the Seminole tribe closed in 1866. This left the Seminole- Negroes in Texas and Mexico ineligible for Indian Reservation lands. Some returned to Mexico. Others tried to stay on at Fort Clark and Fort Duncan. Without rations, some of them resorted to killing stray cattle for food. As a result, local citizens often distrusted and resented the Seminole- Negroes.

Epilogue

The Seminole- Negro Scouts received harsh treatment from local ruffians and Washington bureaucrats. In spite of this, they maintained a high level of effectiveness. They were loyal to the army and proud of themselves. The scouts continued to serve in the army until 1914. Books, movies and television shows have never fully told their story. You are now among the few who know of their history. But the mark the Seminole- Negro Indian Scouts left on the frontier west is as plain as the tracks they left across the desert over a hundred years ago.

Seminole- Negro Indian Scouts



Fay July William Shields