We are all familiar with the stereotype of the plantation slave dominated by a white master, stoically bearing abuse. But in fact not all captured Africans accepted their new role as slave. Practically from the moment they arrived in the New World some Africans rebelled and escaped into the surrounding wilderness to create their own fortified communities. Nor were blacks the only slaves who revolted. In 1502 the governor of the tiny Spanish colony on the island of Hispaniola – today known as Haiti and the Dominican Republic - complained to King Ferdinand that both local Taino Indian slaves and the Africans he had imported had run away, joining forces against the colonists. He called them Cimarron, the Spanish version of a Taino word for "feral livestock." The French shortened this to marron, and the English changed it to maroon to refer to those runaway slaves who not only avoided capture, but set up self-sufficient communities in the wild.

Over the next 300 years maroon communities grew throughout the Caribbean and the Americas as Europeans annually imported thousands of Africans for plantation work to replace Indian populations decimated by old world diseases. Distinct from rebel slaves or fugitives who often escaped without supplies or long-term plans, maroons were committed to living in the wilderness apart from European society. There they created their own distinct languages, customs, arts and laws that blended African traditions with Indian and European ideas.
No one knows how many maroon communities there actually were in the New World; some bands were small and lasted only a few months, while others, like the giant settlement of Palmares in Brazil, might be 2,000 strong and survive for generations. By the seventeenth century maroons had become a significant force in the New World, forming alliances with Indians and pirates, playing one colonial power against another, and in some cases actually controlling the flow of goods through strategic areas. Some maroon communities grew large enough to defeat European armies and take over islands like Jamaica and Haiti. Even today the descendents of maroons in remote regions of the Guianas and Jamaica still live apart from the rest of the world, much as their forbears did.

Scholars have spent years studying and preserving the history of maroons in the Caribbean Basin and South America, but few have thought to look for them in what became the United States. The American Colonies imported only about 5 percent, or roughly 600,000, of the over 11 million African slaves brought to the New World, so unlike in the Caribbean and South America, a black majority occurred only in a few Southern states, from the Carolinas to Louisiana. Most English colonies in North America were not clustered on the edge of vast, malarial wildernesses like those in the tropics, so there were fewer long-term hiding places for maroons. But a new group of scholars have been re-examining the accepted history, finding subtle clues in the records, and digging where no one thought to look before. What they are discovering could change the way we think about American history.

Cornell University's Margaret C. Washington has been investigating early reports of maroon communities in the South Carolina low country. She has found that teasing out evidence of escaped slave settlements from early colonial documents often requires reading between the lines. English colonists viewed runaway slaves as outlaws, in the same category as pirates, murderers, and thieves (which they sometimes were). The whole notion of successful armed maroon communities threatened not only the slave system but also the dominance of European society itself. So it should not be surprising that the first documented case of marronage in North America, identified by the Duke
University historian Peter Wood, appears as a sentence in the epitaph of a failed Spanish colony along the coast of Georgia in 1526. Six hundred men, women, and children had gone to what is today Sapelo Sound to stake a claim for Spain on the mainland of "La Florida." But mutiny, disease, and attacks from local Guale Indians left the colony in chaos. Seizing their chance, the settlers' African slaves rebelled and "escaped to the Indians."

There is also evidence that nearly three centuries later maroon colonies of Gullah peoples were sprinkled among the rice and indigo plantations of South Carolina's Sea Islands. In his 1789 journal, a planter named Major Pierce Butler made several references to bands of runaway slaves, some on Belle Isle in the Savannah River, whose homes, rice fields and canoes Butler and local planters tried to destroy. While most of the Gullah peoples of today are descended from communities of slaves freed after 1865, it is likely they harbored maroon groups as well. In 1766 an itinerant Anglican priest named Charles Woodmason described multiracial communities in the backcountry of South Carolina whose residents refused to accept the rules of English society. The colonists formed vigilante groups called "Regulators" and destroyed many of these "motley" settlements, which probably included large numbers of fugitive slaves. Apparently blacks, poor white frontiersmen, and Indians had intermarried to such a degree that the Regulators had difficulty distinguishing "who was a Negro."

Some scholars remain unconvinced that these were true maroons, insisting on the classic definition: isolated, enduring communities of escaped African slaves. But others, including Margaret Washington, believe that modern definitions don’t always fit these ancient peoples. "I don't think anyone can establish a claim for what Africans were doing then," she says. "I think they were doing a lot of things: some of them were making alliances, some of them were running away. They wanted to survive, and they found all kinds of ingenious ways to do that."

Sometimes that meant joining European society and sometimes not. During the Revolution, large groups of slaves are thought to have escaped amid the chaos of war
and hid in the swamps along the Georgia coast. There they may have formed fortified maroon communities that became so successful at raiding nearby plantations and foiling local militia that George Washington had to send the Continental Army to drive them out. Even more intriguing is one theory that the famous lost Roanoke Colony of 1588 did not perish but joined with the Tuscarora Indians, eventually forming a powerful multiracial colony of Europeans, Indians, and fugitive slaves. Run out of the backcountry of the Carolinas, this hypothesis suggests they may have taken refuge in Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp where thousands of maroons lived in the Dismal Swamp "for generations without ever seeing a white man."

While many scholars regard this idea as more romance than fact, it remains one of the very few attempts to seek proof of large maroon settlements in American swamps like the Great Dismal. If such a large colony actually had existed, it would have needed enormous amounts of food and supplies, and presumably would have attracted the attention of the authorities, and no evidence suggests that this ever occurred. On the other hand, there is proof that small groups of slaves actually became "outlyers" in the swamp in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, hiring themselves to black shingle-cutters who regularly worked in the Great Dismal's cypress stands. Small groups would escape from their plantations for weeks, sometimes months and then eventually return, often on condition that the master treated them better. This kind of truant behavior is called petite marronage, and it was so common on the Southern plantations that slave owners often had to tolerate it, as long as it only involved small groups and didn't endanger business.

In the bayous of eighteenth-century Louisiana, runaway slaves made petite marronage into a highly efficient system. Maroons in the Bas Du Fleuve region, south of New Orleans, developed a highly sophisticated trade and communication system with slaves that remained on plantations and with local free creoles. Using an intricate labyrinth of woodland pasaje (passages) between plantations, maroons like St. Malo and his band would exchange goods, perform work, and trade information with slaves and freedmen, forming a bond of loyalty and kinship that resembled a mafia. When the French, and later
the Spanish, sent black troops to track down St. Malo; they returned deliberately empty-handed, so powerful was his influence. Creole folksongs about St. Malo are still sung in the bayous and backwaters of Louisiana, and even the Creole expression for running away is *parti maron*.

Perhaps the largest and most spectacular example of marronage in North America was in Florida. Since the first doomed group of Spanish settlers set foot there in 1526, this tropical peninsula had been a source of friction and rivalry between Spain and England. Slaves had been fleeing into Florida’s Spanish and British territories from the Carolinas since the 1600s, either homesteading in maroon communities or seeking refuge at St. Augustine, where the Spanish army had been enlisting black recruits for decades. Diseases unwittingly introduced to the New World by Europeans and Africans nearly exterminated the native Timucuan and Calusa Indians. So the Spanish turned more and more to runaway slaves and maroon bands to help them raise crops and defend their territory against the English. Always ready to antagonize the British colonists, Charles II of Spain proclaimed in 1693 that any slave who escaped to Florida from the English would be free and granted asylum if he converted to Catholicism. Soon slaves began arriving in St. Augustine in a steady stream. The Spaniards knew that fugitive slaves would be more committed to protecting Spanish outposts than most Spanish soldiers, so they used black settlements as an armed buffer against the ever-present threat of English invasion. They also encouraged bands of Indians, mostly Creeks, who had been slowly wandering into the region, to establish the large cattle ranches that many Indian peoples were noted for.

In the early nineteenth century a civil war broke out between the Creeks of Northern Alabama, known as Red Sticks, who followed the Shawnee Indian leader Tecumseh's vision of pan-Indian resistance to European encroachment, and the Lower Creeks, who were more culturally and politically tied to the United States. When General Andrew Jackson's American troops helped the Lower Creeks defeat the Red Sticks in 1814, the rebels fled south, taking refuge in Florida, where they allied with scattered black and Indian bands, raising the non-white population to a sizeable 5,000. Since the mid-1700s
This inter-ethnic confederation of peoples had been known as Seminole, a Creek word derived from the Spanish *cimarron*, that had the same meaning. "We have to get this idea out of our heads that the Seminoles were an Indian tribe," says Joseph Opala, a maroon scholar at James Madison University in Virginia, whose theories have often been controversial among his peers. "What they were was a multi-cultural alliance. Another way of looking at it would be as an alliance of black and red maroons."

Originally Indians in Florida saw fugitive slaves as black Europeans and allied with them only occasionally. But with the coming of the Seminole Wars, a powerful bond emerged that made the Seminoles a unique fighting force that would humble the mighty American army. According to Opala, both the first Seminole War, in 1816, and the Second Seminole War, in 1835, were not only about the United States taking Florida first from the Spanish and then the Seminoles but, more profoundly, about slavery. American planters were enraged at the numbers of slaves they were losing across the Florida border each year, and word that armed maroon colonies were joining with hostile Indians made catching and re-enslaving these blacks a national priority. But the Americans didn't grasp the intelligence and the determination of the Seminoles or the hostility of the Florida wilderness.

It is this element that links the *gran marronage* of the Seminole wars with the major maroon upheavals of the Caribbean. The coastal regions of the American South at this time were semi-tropical regions, with plantations nestled against inhospitable wilderness rife with diseases like malaria, just like those in Jamaica or Guyana. Rice was the largest cash crop, and Opala says slaves from West Africa's coast, where rice had been cultivated for centuries, were specially selected to work the plantations. During the hot summer months malaria became such a danger that European planters and their families moved to coastal areas or even to New England until the fall. African slaves, who had considerable resistance to malaria after centuries of exposure in their homeland, were left to run the plantations, and invariably escapes occurred.
During the Seminole Wars the U.S. Army discovered, as other European armies had in Jamaica, Haiti, and South America, that hunting down armed guerillas in a malarial jungle wilderness was nearly impossible. "It was like Vietnam," Opala explains. "You couldn't see a damned thing, maroons were sniping at you off the trails; they knew you were coming days in advance, so when you got to their villages they were gone. And then your men start to get sick and die."

Scholars say what made black and red Seminoles a practically unbeatable fighting Force was their blending of cultures. Since most Florida maroons were African rice growers from the plantations, their agricultural skills allowed the Seminoles to grow enough surplus food to enter the Atlantic trading marketplace. Blacks were also often multilingual, thus becoming vital to negotiations between Indians and whites. Many scholars maintain that the Seminoles had held black slaves since the 1700s, but they were more like vassals, living in separate towns and providing tribute, usually food, to their Indian overlords. The Seminole Wars changed that relationship. During the conflicts blacks rose to power in Seminole society - becoming advisors and war chiefs - literally equals to their Indian allies. Black Seminole leaders married into Indian royal families, and one extraordinary man, named Abraham, became the equivalent of prime minister to Chief Micanopy, the supreme leader of the Seminole nation. During and after the wars, Abraham was the principal ambassador of the Seminoles negotiating treaties and meeting with American officials including President Martin Van Buren.

Since 1999, Terry Weik, an archeologist at the University of Florida, has been working to unearth the remains of Abraham's maroon town, Peliklikaha, in Central Florida, having located the site by superimposing nineteenth-century maps on modern ones. Weik says Abraham's town became a nerve center for the Seminoles during the wars and was one of the residences of Chief Micanopy himself before the U.S. Army burned it down in 1836. Farther south, Tampa Bay was home to one of the greatest maroon communities in Florida. According to its discoverer, the Florida historian Canter Brown, the Angola settlement was for a while the stronghold of more than 800 maroons, many of them refugees from the Negro Fort and Suwanee River black Seminole towns that American
forces destroyed in 1817. When General Jackson sent a force of Creek warriors to Tampa Bay in 1821, they burned Angola and its neighboring Seminole villages to the ground. Two hundred maroons were captured, but the rest escaped into the night. Some went east along the Peace River, and, protected by the Red Sticks, joined the venerable black settlement of Minatee. Another 250 Angola maroons fled south to Cape Florida in the Keys, where some bought passage aboard pirate vessels bound for the Bahamas. These black Seminoles were put ashore on the largest of the Bahama Islands, Andros, about 100 miles off the Florida coast, where there they established a maroon community they called Red Bays.

When the U.S. Army invaded Spanish Florida in 1835 and waged war on the scattered bands of Seminoles and maroons, the Americans probably thought that a rag-tag colony of "savages" could easily be bested. They couldn't have been more wrong. The conflict against Florida's Seminoles took more than 20 years, cost some $40 million (the equivalent of $700 million today) and claimed the lives of some 1,600 American soldiers. In the 1830s, when it became clear that the United States would not prevail in Florida, General Thomas S. Jesup started sending in Creek warriors, Delawares, and a variety of foreign mercenaries - as well as American troops - to rout out the Seminoles. Nothing worked. Eventually the United States was stalemated into negotiating a treaty that allowed the Seminoles to emigrate west to Indian territory, in what is now Oklahoma. Not only did they get to take their weapons, but they traveled with their black comrades as well. This was a major coup. American slave owners had been pushing the government to return all blacks to their owners, but both Seminole and black leaders had made it clear that there would be no agreement unless the black Seminoles could safely move west. Jesup had to negotiate directly with Abraham himself, because he knew that unless blacks' interests were addressed, they would never stop fighting and the war would continue indefinitely. The Americans, galled, officially continued to regard these blacks as renegade slaves, but they agreed to the Seminole’s terms. The sight of splendidly arrayed black Seminoles sailing up the Mississippi River in 1838 shoulder to shoulder with their Indian brethren was utterly shocking to white Americans. "The Governor of Arkansas wrote the President," Opala says, "wanting to know what the army
was doing escorting armed Negroes through his state. People had never seen anything like it. These were maroons!"

Today the descendents of North American maroons walk among us, though you won't find mention of their ancestors' struggles in most history books. Every year the Gullahs of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, celebrate their heritage, in Beaufort. In 1998 they even invited their distant cousins the Seminoles of Oklahoma and Texas to join them, discovering a shared culture after more than 200 years of separation. The Seminole Indians of Andros Island, who look as African as most other Bahamians, still live in Red Bays and its surrounding communities, weaving coiled sweetgrass baskets that have a striking resemblance to both Gullah and West African designs. William Warrior, a great-grand nephew of the maroon war chief John Horse, strolls down the dusty roads of Del Rios, Texas, where a small, but vigorous community of Black Seminoles keeps the memory of its ancestors alive. A few miles south, across the Mexican border, relatives of Warrior's live in Nacimiento de Los Negros, where John Horse and about 200 blacks, Seminoles, and other Indians settled in 1845 trying to recreate the kind of multi-ethnic society they once had in Florida.

In Oklahoma City, the struggles of maroon descendents continue to this day. Like two brothers battling over a will, the Freedmen, as black Seminoles there are called, are in a wrenching lawsuit against the Seminole Nation itself over millions of dollars in federal money. The Seminoles want to throw the Freedmen out of the tribe, but the Freedmen refuse to disavow more than 180 years of Seminole heritage. Sylvia Davis, a longstanding member of the Seminole Nation's Tribal Council who is also descended from maroons and Seminole royalty, still can't believe the sudden ugliness that has come over people she has known all her life. "They came out and told us to go back to Africa because we had no place in the Seminole nation," she says. "Well, I am a member of the Seminole nation. They may deny us, but they can't deny our blood. They can't take away our heritage. That's something we can hold on to."

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