



Florida's Forgotten Founder: The Life and Impact of Antonio Proctor

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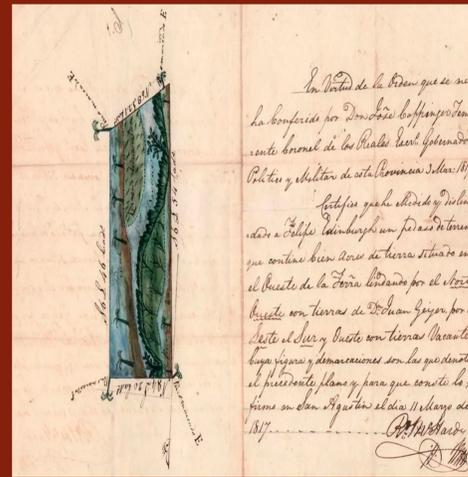
Theater with a Mission

Abstract:

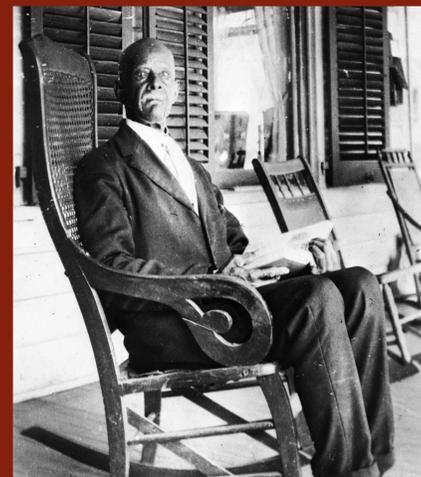
Throughout the course of my research, I discovered the richly diverse history of Tallahassee's early founders. From princes, to the descendants of George Washington, to American presidents, to Florida's Free Black citizens, Tallahassee was a hotspot for unique perspectives. In my research I initially discovered the surface level history of Florida's founding that many Floridians are quite familiar with. The dashing tale of William Simmons meeting John Lee Williams at a beautiful Cascade about halfway between St. Augustine and Pensacola and the romantic legacy of Achille Murat meeting his love Catherine Gray helped to illustratively set the story in my head and gave me inspiration for where to focus my efforts. As I focused my research into Tallahassee's most prominent Free Black, I discovered an impact from this precedent breaking figure that I would have never predicted. Antonio Proctor worked as a guide and translator on many important expeditions organized by William P. DuVal, in order to establish, legitimize, and protect the Territory of Florida. This included several critical treaty signings as well as more informal meetings such as the confrontation between DuVal and the great Seminole chief Neamathla. Every week I discover more about this historical legend, but one thing is clear: Proctor's little-studied presence in Territorial Tallahassee made a direct impact on our history.

Methodology:

- My research project aimed to shed light on Tallahassee's founding in celebration of its upcoming bicentennial. I began by examining secondary and primary sources to gain an overview of early territorial Florida from 1821 to 1841. My objective was to understand the events and people involved in Tallahassee's founding, as well as the broader historical context.
- To delve deeper into my specific interests, I created an annotated bibliography of sources related to the history of slavery, indigenous populations, and the economy during the early territorial period. I summarized each source's significance to my research and used it as a guide for my future analysis.
- I then focused on a primary source that intersected with several of my special interests. This source was a document relating to Antonio Proctor, one of Florida's little-known Free Black citizens, who had a precedent-breaking life that influenced the region for centuries to come. My goal was to understand how Proctor's life played a role in Tallahassee's founding. I presented my findings in a poster format to showcase my research and insights.
- In conclusion, my research project combined orientation, specialization, and intersection to provide a comprehensive understanding of Tallahassee's founding. Theater With a Mission aims to translate my hard work onto the stage and bring my insights to life.



St. John's Deed Book showing Antonio Proctor's property transaction and proof of ownership for his 185 acres of land. This documents property ownership by a Free Black in Spanish East Florida, 1817.



George Proctor, the son of Antonio Proctor, was another notable name in Tallahassee's early founding. George worked as a carpenter establishing many of the very first buildings in Tallahassee, several of which remain today.

Introduction:

Antonio Proctor's life remains largely unknown. Despite being a relatively well-documented black man for the time, historical records for minority populations in American history are sparse. Antonio Proctor is thought to have been born into slavery in Central America around 1743. Reports differ on whether this could have been in Jamaica, or the Dominican Republic. Antonio Proctor came to be the property of a British officer. During the time he served as the body servant to this officer, Antonio Proctor was said to be living in Boston. Antonio claimed, although there are no records to verify, that he was present at the Boston Tea Party and the Shot Heard Around the World. Antonio began to work for Panton, Leslie & Company, a company that specialized in trade with Floridian Native Americans. He became known for his fluency in English, Spanish, and many Indigenous languages. Proctor was said to have garnered Native support for Spain during the time that America attacked St. Augustine and when he was serving in St. Augustine's black militia. For this service, Proctor was granted his freedom and 185 acres of land from a royal order of the King of Spain in 1816. This indicates that Proctor not only served his local town and the nation that controlled Florida at the time but did it beyond the level of even his affluent, white peers, gaining international recognition from a King across the ocean. Antonio proved his value as a translator and his ability to adapt to different colonial powers when the United States took control of Florida. He joined William Simmons and Governor William DuVal on several trips to meet Indigenous leaders across the state and may have even accompanied Simmons on the expedition that determined the location of the state capital. Antonio lived to the age of 112, passing away on June 16th, 1855. The Proctor family line continued to be highly influential through the lives of Antonio's son George Proctor and grandson John Proctor.

Conclusions:

Throughout my research I realized that my historical research findings are not necessarily novel but can help to overcome cultural misconceptions. The most important findings that I came across put the great Seminole Chief Neamathla in contact with one of Tallahassee's most powerful founders Antonio Proctor. Little known but lastingly influential, Proctor provides a prism for reassessing Free Black presence in Territorial Florida. Once American rule was established, Antonio Proctor acted as a critical guide in Native American relations for Governor DuVal and Tallahassee's most influential residents. Yet many people remain entirely unaware of Antonio Proctor's existence and his presence at these critical times in the history Florida and the United States. His son's buildings stand tall around our community, while his legacy remains unrecognized. Antonio Proctor's service to the United States in the 1820s provides an opportunity to explore how people who remain underrepresented in our history books made precedent-breaking contributions to founding America. Working with Theater with a Mission, I hope that the impact Proctor made will be properly represented as Tallahassee commemorates its 200th anniversary

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