

These Atlantic Creoles were a diverse group, born in West Africa, in Haut du Cap, in Jamaica, in Havana, or in the Indian nations of Florida. Some were born enslaved; others were always free. Some were literate, urban, and propertied, while others rose out of more degraded circumstances. What united them was not only their time and place, but a determined quest for freedom. Refusing to be "bound in shallows and in miseries," they took the tide, and while few went on to gain fortunes, many achieved liberty. It has been a privilege to write about their little remarked, but fascinating, lives.

# I

## African Choices in the Revolutionary South

For twenty-six years and seven months I have served with the most constant zeal and love in Your Majesty's Urban Company of Color and on all occasions I have pursued the rebels who have risen in this province.

Juan Bautista Whitten, St. Augustine, July 31, 1819<sup>1</sup>

JUAN BAUTISTA WHITTEN, as he came to be known in Spanish records, was one of the millions of Africans who were swept into the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century. Born somewhere on the "coast of Guinea" in about 1738, according to his own best estimates, Whitten was virtually the Forrest Gump of his day—present at almost all the major turning points in the history of his time. Whitten spent the first fifteen years of his life in Upper Guinea, the next ten in South Carolina, another thirty-five in Spanish Florida, and the final years of his long life in Cuba. His successive and successful refashionings made Whitten a model Atlantic Creole.<sup>2</sup> His remarkable career, which spanned the course of the American, French, Haitian, and Latin American revolutions as well as the eventual abolition of the

Atlantic slave trade, helps us understand how Africans in the Americas actually experienced and interpreted the age of revolutions and the failed promises of that era.

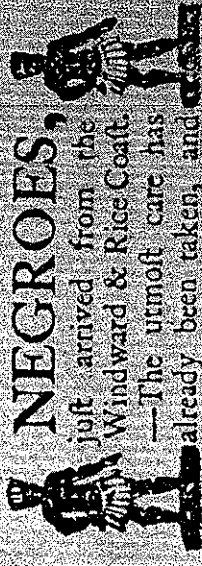
We do not know what his African name was, or how he came to be enslaved, but in the 1770s Whitten survived the horrors of the Middle Passage to disembark at Charleston, South Carolina. The physician charged with visiting the incoming ships and reporting on the health of the enslaved on board claimed that while crossing the Atlantic, some of the traders threw overboard as many as two-thirds of their captives. He described the "Filth, Putrid Air, Putrid Dysantries" on the ship and added, "it is a wonder any escape with Life." Whitten was one of the strong, or lucky, who did.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Olaudah Equiano or Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, or the Calabar princes Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John, Whitten left us no record of his terrible experience on the Middle Passage, nor, in fact, much information at all about his life as a slave.<sup>4</sup> His was an atypical experience, perhaps, because he spent less than a decade enslaved on a plantation. In any case, Whitten did not let slavery define him.

Even before the young African descended the gangplank to the required quarantine at the "pest house" at Sullivan's Island in the Charleston harbor, he would have realized that many of his countrymen had preceded him across the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> Many of their bodies littered the marshes opposite Charleston, and Whitten might have seen them as his ship approached the harbor. He might have heard "plaintive African songs, in cadence with the oars" as black canoe men rowed passengers and goods from ocean-going vessels to shore or seen the many "negro-

boats" from which black fishermen hauled in blackfish and trout for sale in the city.<sup>6</sup> No other city in British North America imported more enslaved Africans than Charleston, which led a Swiss visitor in 1737 to remark that South Carolina was "like a negro country."<sup>7</sup> By 1770 the colony was home to 80,000 persons of African descent who formed roughly 60 percent of the population; a majority of these were from the Upper Guinea region.<sup>8</sup>

Although Carolina planters worried about their minority numbers and the ever-present risk of insurrection by "Domestic enemies," they continued to clamor for slaves. As a correspondent to the *South Carolina Gazette* sardonically commented only a year before the slave revolt at Stono in 1739, "Negroes may be said to be the Bair proper for catching a Carolina planter, as certain as Beef to catch a Shark."<sup>9</sup> Carolina only briefly supported a non-importation resolution to protest British taxation on slaves, but once Charleston traders heard that Rhode Island, New York, and Pennsylvania had reneged on the agreement, they followed suit. Once again the floodgates of the slave trade opened. Pent-up planter demand coupled with fears of the coming war meant that slave imports and prices rose sharply in 1772 and 1773. Charleston's leading slave trader, Henry Laurens, predicted in March of that year that "the Province will be overstocked by the present Years importation." Laurens estimated that slave imports in 1773 would reach 8,000 to 10,000, and these figures are confirmed by reports from the *South Carolina Gazette*.<sup>10</sup> By 1774, however, the "Rage to buy Negroes" had passed, and on October 20, 1774, the Philadelphia delegates to the first Continental Congress declared, "We will neither im-

**TO BE SOLD, on board the**  
*Ship Bancé-Bland*, on Tuesday the 6th  
 of May next, at *Abley Ferry*; a choice  
 cargo of about 250 fine healthy

**NEGROES,**   
 just arrived from the  
*Windward & Rice Coast*.  
 —The utmost care has  
 already been taken, and  
 shall be continued, to keep them free from  
 the least danger of being infected with the  
**SMALL-POX**, no boat having been on  
 board, and all other communication with  
 people from *Charles-Town* prevented.

*Justin, Laurent, & Appley*

N. B. Full one Half of the above Negroes have had the  
**SMALL-POX** in their own Country.

Slave ad by Henry Laurens and partners in the *South Carolina Gazette*, April 26, 1760. Courtesy of "The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record" website, <http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery>, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

port nor purchase, any slave imported after the first day of December next; after which time, we will wholly discontinue the slave trade." Two ships that arrived in Charleston in March of 1775 with large numbers of Angolan slaves were sent on to the West Indies, allegedly with their whole cargoes.<sup>11</sup> Whitten may well have been among the last Africans to arrive in Carolina before the outbreak of the American Revolution.

At the house of one of the many slave trading firms in the city, Whitten would have stood among other African men, women, and children to be examined by prospective buyers. Peter Whitten, a Justice of the Peace for Charles Town District and Collector of the Poor-Tax for St. John's Parish, Berkeley County, purchased our protagonist to work on his inland plantation about forty miles from Charleston.<sup>12</sup> His new slave could not have been much more than fifteen years old at the time, a "Man boy" in the parlance of the trade, but Peter Whitten named him "Big Prince." Even at that young age, he must have been an imposing figure; ten years later he was described as "6' and brawny."<sup>13</sup>

There are no documents that describe Prince's ethnicity, but the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database shows that in the years 1751–1775, 58.2 percent of all slaves imported into South Carolina and Georgia (35,774) came from the Upper Guinea region.<sup>14</sup> Henry Laurens wrote of the Charleston planters' overwhelming preference for "large, strong People like the Gambians," adding that "tall, robust people best sute our business." Laurens and his contemporaries used the generic term "Gambians" to refer to diverse peoples who lived along the Gambia River and in southern Senegal, among whom the Mandinga, Wolof, and Fula were most numerous. Spanish records, uncharacteristically, fail to specify Prince's precise ethnicity, but he might have belonged to any of those groups.<sup>15</sup> A slave ship captain from Charleston complained that he was short of space because the "Gambians" were "as large as one & a half in any [other] part of Guinea." They were also reputed to be among the healthiest slaves on arrival in South Carolina because the voyage to

Charleston was shorter than from other African locales. The Africans living along the Gambia River were noted for their fierce shore-based attacks on the slave ships that plyed their rivers, as well as for suicidal rebellions at James Fort in the Gambia River and on shipboard. When slaves took control of his ship in the Gambia River, Captain Thomas Davis blew up the *New Britannia*. He took his own life as well as those of 236 slaves, 96 free blacks, and all his crew, except for one man who had gotten into a boat moments before to try to "take up some slaves who had thrown themselves overboard." Such dramatic events were surely reported up and down the river, just as they were among trader networks. In 1769 a large African force almost overran Fort James itself. Incidents such as these caused some captains to refuse to trade in the Gambia, and Charleston planters must have been willing to pay a high price to make the risk worthwhile.<sup>16</sup>

As Prince walked through the streets of Charleston with the man who had just bought him, the African character of the place would have been as obvious to him as to the city's European visitors. An anonymous "English Traveller" reported that in 1774 "Charles Town" was home to 30,000 "black Negro slaves" and only "9 or 10,000 white inhabitants."<sup>17</sup> The young African would have noticed black stevedores and sailors, coachmen, workmen, and artisans of every kind, as well as black women with foodstuffs and crafts arrayed around them for sale at Charleston's Lower Market. The chants of street hucksters selling oysters, shrimp, fruits, vegetables, baked goods, and other edibles from woven grass baskets balanced on their heads might also have reminded him of his home. As runaway adver-

tisements noted, many of these black artisans and entrepreneurs would have borne familiar scarification patterns. Some may have displayed filed teeth.<sup>18</sup>

Heading down Bay Street, Prince and his new owner would have boarded one of the river boats that carried passengers and supplies up the Cooper River toward Whitten's inland plantation. Slave crews dominated the river and coastal traffic of South Carolina, and many of the patroons or pilots of these vessels were also black. One Camden merchant who traveled from Charleston up the Cooper River found "only negroes on board." Slaves from the upriver plantations also traveled the Cooper in canoes and pettiaguars, stopping to trade or visit with friends and relatives on neighboring plantations where it was not uncommon for them to share food, drink, and sometimes musical entertainment. The mobility, independence, and geographical awareness of the area's black boatmen benefited other members of the enslaved community, and as Prince traveled inland, he was probably already acquiring information about his future destination and the politics of the new country.<sup>19</sup>

Prince's river journey up the Cooper River ended at Monck's Corner, an old trading post about twenty-six miles from Charleston that boasted several taverns and stores where area planters socialized and exchanged information.<sup>20</sup> From the way station at Monck's Corner, a road ran northward to the ferry on the Santee River and on to the nearest town of Camden. The Whitten plantation lay along this important corridor, as did the Cantey plantation, where Prince would find a wife.<sup>21</sup>

The region Prince was entering was still a frontier. Catawba Indians allied to the British and Cherokees whose land the Brit-

ish would eventually take still formed part of the turbulent multi-racial environment. The nearest town of Camden had only been established in 1768; five years later, jurors complained of the settlement's continuing isolation and of the danger from "Wolves and Tygers, Bears" and from "idle and disorderly vagrants constantly hunting in the woods and destroying Deer for their hides."<sup>2</sup>

But Charleston's elites saw profits to be made and sent large numbers of newly arrived Africans into the wilderness to make them. Africans soon outnumbered whites in St. John's Parish. In the wake of the Stono Rebellion of 1739, locals mounted nightly patrols of the parish that rounded up a number of suspected slave conspirators and transported them to Charleston for trial. There, fifty of the captured slaves were executed at the rate of ten a day in a grisly display of uncertain power.<sup>23</sup> Nine years later, planters discovered another nascent rebellion: 16 whites and 104 slaves from St. John's and surrounding parishes allegedly planned to set Charleston ablaze and escape to Spanish St. Augustine.<sup>24</sup> These rebels, like others before and later, headed to St. Augustine after hearing of Spain's offer to free escaped slaves who would convert to Catholicism. The nearby refuge proved so provocative that Britain launched an expensive military and naval effort to seize St. Augustine in 1740.<sup>25</sup> That expedition proved a failure, and runaway ads from South Carolina newspapers document continuing attempts by runaways to flee to St. Augustine. In 1754 a group of multilingual Havana-born slaves even tried to sail from Charleston to Cuba in search of freedom.<sup>26</sup> Despite constant worries about escape and rebellion, planters continued to import slaves, and by

the 1770s Africans formed at least 90 percent of the population of St. John's Parish.<sup>27</sup> Prince was thus entering a region that was largely African and famed for insurrection. Local slaves could tell tales of flight and resistance, of great imperial conflicts, and of alternate forms of government and freedom to the south.

The dense pine forests and swamps of St. John's Parish offered slaves another possible refuge, but early settlers had established critical timber and naval stores industries in the same forests. The British offered bounties on tar, pitch, rosin, and turpentine to encourage production, and by 1713 the planter William Canteley, Jr., and a crew of thirteen slaves were producing 200 barrels of pitch a year.<sup>28</sup> Area slaves also cut and sawed timber that planters shipped to Charleston and on to other parts of the British Caribbean. Harvesting the forests proved profitable to Canteley and others like him. By 1779, one-fourth of the region's estates had more than fifty slaves living on them.<sup>29</sup> Producing naval stores and cutting timber required crews of skilled men working communally, and under the tutelage of such experienced slaves, Prince learned the forest industry and became a carpenter on the Whitten plantation.<sup>30</sup> The valuable occupational skills he acquired in the Carolina forests would serve Prince well in later life.<sup>31</sup>

Even as Prince was adjusting to life on the Whitten plantation, Atlantic politics were shaping his destiny. In the summer of 1775, Charleston's leading figures expressed indignation over the closing of Boston's port, created a Council of Safety with slave trader Henry Laurens as president, and elected delegates to attend the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia to be held the following September. At the same time the Grand

Jury of Camden, on which several members of the numerous Canteley family sat, issued a proclamation protesting taxation without representation and remarking on their "Birthrights as Freemen." "And whereas we rather choose to die freemen than live Slaves, bound by Laws in the formation of which we have no participation," they "resolved to maintain our Constitutional Rights at the Hazard of our Lives and Fortunes."<sup>32</sup> The irony of the refusal to "live Slaves" seems to have escaped the authors of this proclamation, but such fiery rhetoric would have resonated with attentive slaves throughout the region. As one historian noted, the Southern slaveholder's dilemma was "to prevent their slaves from imbibing the heady notions of liberty and equality, which had become their own rallying cry against Britain."<sup>33</sup>

It was a losing proposition. Charleston merchant Josiah Smith, Jr., wrote that "our Province at present is in a ticklish Situation, on account of our numerous Domesticks, who have been deluded by some villainous Persons into the notion of being all set free" on the imminent arrival of the new royal governor, Lord William Campbell. Smith added that the rumor of British emancipation "is the common Talk throughout the Province, and has occasioned impertinent behaviour" in many slaves.<sup>34</sup> Contemporaries throughout the colonies were well aware that the slave telegraph communicated such important political news rapidly. After a report that "twenty thousand negroes" from South Carolina and Georgia would surely desert to the British to become free, John Adams wrote in his diary, "The negroes have a wonderful art of communicating intelligence among themselves; it will run several hundreds of miles

in a week or fortnight."<sup>35</sup> Worried whites in Charleston hastily raised three companies of militias to patrol the streets and "keep those mistaken creatures in awe."<sup>36</sup>

Adding to the paranoia about slave revolt were persistent rumors that the British also planned to arm and deploy Cherokee Indians against protesting colonists to curb their insubordination. So, in July of 1775, when King Prow and a delegation of friendly Catawba Indians visited Camden and Charleston to inquire about the confusing political developments of the day, the newly created Council of Safety promptly enlisted them to patrol outside of Charleston.<sup>37</sup>

But even the presence of armed mounted patrols did not calm the panic in Charleston. In August 1775, jurors charged the free black harbor pilot Thomas Jeremiah with conspiring with the British to incite slave insurrection. Governor Campbell objected to the lack of evidence against Jeremiah and described him as "a free Negro of considerable property, one of the most valuable, & useful men in his way, in the Province." Despite the governor's protests, however, jurors sentenced the black pilot to death, and he was hanged and "burned to ashes" in the public square. Jeremiah died protesting his innocence. An assembled crowd that included many people of color heard the doomed man warn that "God's judgment would one day overtake them for shedding his innocent blood."<sup>38</sup>

Violence against Carolina slaves had by this time become almost commonplace; the *South Carolina Gazette* reported frequent acts of public terror including castration, gibbeting, burning alive, cropping ears, and decapitation. Without shame, slave owners advertised for the heads of their runaways, and

occasionally the newspaper also reported the slaves' revenge for their mistreatment.<sup>39</sup>

By that fall a short-lived treaty of neutrality between Loyalists (Tories) and Patriots (Whigs) broke down, and violence erupted throughout the countryside. Patriot forces began arresting Loyalists in the interior, including "Captain Jones," a "Colored Powderman," and the mulatto William Hunt.<sup>40</sup> In these encounters, Patriots like the Canteys found themselves confronting Loyalist relatives like the McGirtts.<sup>41</sup> The December battles of 1775 known as the Snow Campaign ended in Patriot victory and the dispersal of many of the back country's most ardent Loyalists southward to Florida, where British Governor Patrick Tonyn commissioned them as officers in the East Florida Rangers. Emboldened Patriots demanded more than neutrality from their remaining Loyalist neighbors, and after harassment, intimidation, and sometimes acts of outright brutality, more Tories joined the southward exodus.<sup>42</sup>

Many departing Loyalists took their slaves with them to Florida, and little is known about how this outmigration disrupted slave families in the region. But slaves also moved on their own. Perhaps as many as 500 slaves flocked to Sullivan's Island in the Charleston harbor, waiting to be picked up by departing British ships. To staunch the flow of runaway slaves, fifty-four Patriot Rangers "dressed as Indians" staged an early morning attack on the runaways' camp, killing a disputed number of them. Henry Laurens wrote that he hoped the raid would "serve to humble our Negroes in general."<sup>43</sup> Apparently, it did not. Three months later Laurens authorized the murder of another group of "Rebellious Negroes" gathered on Tybee Island

off the coast of Georgia. This time seventy Patriots "painted and dressed as Indians" and thirty unidentified Native Americans carried out the slaughter. The disguised Patriots reportedly acted with the "most savage barbarity" and "exceeded the ferocity of the Indians." That the Patriots felt the need to disguise themselves suggests they may have felt at least some shame about their actions, but they were also trying to pit indigenous and African groups against each other.<sup>44</sup>

The planters' fears of South Carolina's slave majority eventually trumped their loyalty to Britain. In December 1775, South Carolina's reluctant revolutionaries became the first colonists to declare their independence. On July 4, 1776, the Second Continental Congress followed suit, and war began in the north.<sup>45</sup>

During this tumultuous period Prince met a woman named Judy, who was a slave on the nearby Cantey plantation, and by 1777 the couple had formed what would be a lifelong bond. Judy, later described in a runaway ad as "a smart, active wench," was country-born, and her language skills and knowledge of local customs must have assisted Prince's rapid cultural adaptation. In 1778 Judy and Prince had their first son, whom they named Glasgow, and the following year their daughter, Polly, was born.<sup>46</sup> When the children were still infants, the chaos of the American Revolution engulfed Carolina and this new family.

The British launched their southern campaign in Georgia in late 1778, and from Georgia they moved northward to South Carolina. Sir Henry Clinton, commander of Britain's southern campaign, repeated Lord Dunmore's earlier offer to free slaves who would serve the British military. The overwhelming

response led Loyalists to enact strict measures to control the "Banditris of Negroes who flock to the conquerors," but when Clinton's large fleet sailed into the Charleston harbor with 14,000 troops the following year, black observers must have thought liberation was at hand. Most would be disappointed. A hard siege ensued before Patriot defenders finally surrendered Charleston to British occupation on May 12, 1780.<sup>47</sup>

With that victory, the British began to establish garrisons throughout the interior. General Charles Cornwallis marched a large force of 2,500 troops through St. John's Parish, past the Whitten and Cantey plantations, to establish his headquarters at Camden. Cornwallis and Lt. Colonel Banastre "Bloody" Tarleton, infamous for killing surrendered Patriots, held Camden for almost a year. In response, local "men of substance" such as Francis Marion, from nearby Monck's Corner, became Patriot guerrillas. The locals' deep knowledge of the swampy and wooded terrain made them formidable opponents of even the best-trained British regulars, and Marion became known as the "Swamp Fox." Soon the Loyalist and Patriot forces were fighting "bloody war without quarter" all around the Whitten and Cantey plantations, in what one scholar called South Carolina's "Uncivil War."<sup>48</sup> In August 1780, Cornwallis and Tarleton routed General Gates and the Patriot forces at the Battle of Camden and then exacted gruesome retaliation on the locals for the "Error of Insurrection." Loyalist Rangers Daniel McGirtt, Thomas "Burnt-Foot" Brown, and William "Bloody Bill" Cunningham also returned from their exile in Florida to take vengeance on their former neighbors for their earlier mistreatment. For her refusal to divulge the location of Marion's forces, Mary

Cantey Richardson was flogged by "Bloody" Tarleton, who then dug up the body of her deceased husband and burned their plantation. In another act of terror, "Bloody Bill" Cunningham hanged or chopped to death fourteen surrendered prisoners.<sup>49</sup>

Carolinian Patriot Eliza Wilkinson recorded the terror when a group of Loyalist Rangers raided her plantation, noting that "what augmented it was, they had several armed negroes with them, who threatened and abused us greatly." McGirtt's mul-tiracial band behaved better when they, too, visited Wilkinson's plantation. Some were later captured, and Wilkinson pleaded for leniency for the "four whites and three blacks."<sup>50</sup> Francis Marion's forces also included some men of color. The force Marion first presented to the American army in 1780 included "twenty men and boys, some white, some black and all mounted." The famed image of Marion inviting a British officer to dine on yams at his Snow Island camp also depicts several black men in Marion's camp.<sup>51</sup>

Commanders on both sides seemed horrified by the level of barbarity that grew out of this internecine warfare. Patriot General Nathanael Greene wrote that "the Whigs and Tories pursue one another with the most relentless fury, killing and destroying each other wherever they meet. . . . The great bodies of militia that have been in service this year employed against the enemy, and in quelling the Tories have almost laid waste the country."<sup>52</sup> Greene's aide wrote, "I envy everything I see, except the poor unhappy blacks who, to the disgrace of human nature are subject to every species of oppression while we are contending for the rights and liberties of mankind." Some of the British officers were equally dismayed. British General

Charles O'Hara wrote that the region near Camden was "beyond description wretched, every Misery which the bloodiest cruel War ever produced we have constantly before us."<sup>54</sup> Before leaving the area, the Loyalist Rangers pursued a scorched-earth policy, burning the towns of Camden and Ninety-Six and leaving smoldering ruins where once stores, mills, and plantations had been.<sup>54</sup>

Prince Whitten and his family lived through the worst of these cruelties. During the Loyalist occupation of the Carolina interior, Colonel John Watson camped at Mount Hope, one of the Canteey plantations north of the Santee River. After many months of hard fighting, Patriot forces retook Monck's Corner in August 1781, and Francis Marion succeeded in expelling Colonel Watson from the Canteey plantation. It remained the Swamp Fox's headquarters until the war's end. Correspondence of the opposing commanders, written from the Canteey plantation, describes the violence in St. John's Parish; Watson and Marion each charged the other with "violating the law of nations." Both were probably correct.<sup>55</sup> The eighteen months of terrible fighting in St. John's Parish disrupted agriculture as armies on both sides commandeered slaves and precious food supplies. People went hungry, and slaves got the least to eat.<sup>56</sup>

Refugees from the violence flooded into Charleston, where they obtained a modicum of safety but had to endure miserable living conditions in squalid camps. As if the fighting and famine had not done enough damage, smallpox arrived in Carolina in the fall of 1779. British forces spread the virus on their marches through the interior in 1780, and it hit the Whitten

household. Little Polly Whitten was later described as "gently pitted with the pox," but at least she survived. Many slaves who had taken advantage of the chaos to desert their plantations and run for British camps were not so lucky. Great numbers of infected slaves died in makeshift British camps or were left to die in agony along the roadsides as they attempted to flee southward with the British.<sup>57</sup>

The British did, however, recruit, arm, and uniform approximately 700 ex-slaves during their occupation of Charleston from 1781 to 1782. General Alexander Leslie organized some of the black recruits into a cavalry of Black Dragoons that patrolled the area north of Charleston and down the Cooper River. Patriots were dismayed by the sight, but still-enslaved blacks could have seen the possibility of freedom in these armed and uniformed blacks. Some Loyalists such as Lord Dunmore and John Cruden pressed for an even larger force of 10,000 "hardy, intrepid and determined blacks," but other British officials demurred, fearing the long-term consequences.<sup>58</sup>

Two men of color who fought in the Carolina campaigns knew St. John's Parish well and may even have known Prince and Judy. Thomas Johnston was born in Charles Town "in the Family of John Izard Esqr. of Free Parents." Johnston served Izard as "his first Servant of Confidence in all Respects," and in appreciation, Izard gave Johnston ten acres of land to farm. But as war escalated, in October 1780, Johnston was "Pressed into his Majesty's Service" like other men of color. Thereafter, he served as a guide to the British legion commanded by "Bloody" Banastre Tarleton, and he was present during Tarleton's sur-

prise attack on Patriot forces at Monck's Corner. Johnston managed to escape to London at the war's end, where he petitioned the British government for some reward for his service.<sup>59</sup>

Another black man who served the Loyalists in the campaign in St. John's Parish did not survive to experience poverty in London. Harry, once the slave of Mr. Gaillard, was employed as a Loyalist spy, first by Lt. Colonel Francis Rawdon and then by Lt. Colonel Balfour. One day Harry set out from Monck's Corner to scout the Greenland Swamp, where he was captured and beheaded by the local Patriot forces commanded by the famed Swamp Fox. Obeying Governor John Rutledge's orders to execute any blacks giving intelligence or provisions to the British, the Patriots placed Harry's head on a stake at the edge of the swamp as a warning to other slaves who might be tempted to aid the Loyalists.<sup>60</sup>

The Whittens and many other area slaves thus had first-hand knowledge of the political positions and racial dispositions of both Patriots and Loyalists, and most scholars agree that blacks served the Loyalists in larger numbers.<sup>61</sup> Not all of them went willingly. The British commissioner John Cruden sequestered many slaves and put them back to work on plantations and in lumbering operations, attempting to maintain what was left of the region's economy. Both Patriots and Loyalists also resorted to plundering slaves as war booty; it is estimated that South Carolina lost between 20,000 and 30,000 slaves before the British and their Loyalist allies finally departed the ruined colony in 1783.<sup>62</sup> The many years of bloody fighting and raiding had reduced the slave population in St. John's Berkeley Parish by half.<sup>63</sup>

Loyalist cavalry forces led by Colonels William Young and "Bloody Bill" Cunningham captured several hundred blacks into from St. John's Parish, and both men incorporated blacks into their forces. Marion described fighting some of Young's "Coloured Dragoons."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps Prince was among them. If so, he would have acquired important military training in one of the bloodiest of wars, and this might explain his later military successes for the Spanish. One Patriot account stated that the Whittens were "plundered as the spoils of war" by Colonel William Young's cavalry troop.<sup>65</sup> But it is also possible that Prince and his family knew Young and had decided to follow him voluntarily. After all, Patriots had a habit of decapitating or burning Loyalist sympathizers at the stake, while Loyalists offered at least a chance at freedom.

Leaving South Carolina, Colonel Young and the Whittens traveled southward toward Florida, Britain's last Loyalist stronghold.<sup>66</sup> Florida had been under British control for less than twenty years, but in that brief period Loyalist planters from Carolina and Georgia had transformed the province, establishing prosperous new plantations on the lowcountry model where thick jungles had been. This back-breaking labor was accomplished by more than 9,000 slaves the Loyalists transported to what would be their last colony on the Atlantic seaboard, and by the thousands of "new" Africans they imported from slave factories on Bance Island in the Sierra Leone River, or along the Rio Pongo.<sup>67</sup>

The slaves sweated and died for nothing. In 1783, the Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolution and returned Florida to Spain. As dejected Loyalist planters packed their belong-

ings to evacuate to the Bahamas, Nova Scotia, and other still-English locales, hundreds of their slaves seized the moment and ran away rather than face unknown places and climates, or forced separation from loved ones. Some ran to the Seminole hinterlands, while others decided to remain in Spanish Florida.<sup>68</sup>

And what of the Whittens? Somehow, in the summer of 1785, Prince, Judy, Polly, and Glasgow had become the slaves of Jacob Weed, a Lt. Colonel in Georgia's Patriot forces. Whether Weed seized or purchased the family from Young is unknown, but as a skilled carpenter and lumberman, Prince would have proved very valuable to Weed's newly established lumbering and sawmill operations along the St. Marys River.<sup>69</sup>

But just across the St. Marys River, a body of water only several miles wide at some places, was another country and the chance for a different life for the Whittens and others like them. Prince may have learned about Florida's religious sanctuary policy from stories told in St. John's Parish or from one of the Spanish traders, sailors, or officials who frequented the taverns and stores of St. Marys. One cold Sunday morning, in December of 1786, a year and a half after being enslaved by Jacob Weed and after at least three failed attempts, the Whittens made their way across the dark water of the St. Marys into Spanish Florida. Attempting to recover them, Weed placed runaway ads which described Prince as "6 feet high, strong built and brawny, a carpenter by trade, 30 years of age . . . talkative"; his wife, Judy, as "a smart, active wench . . . also about 30 or upward and country-born 5' 7 or 8" high"; and their children, Glasgow, "about 8 years of age, a well looking boy of open countenance

and obliging disposition," and Polly, "6 years old, lively eyes and gently pitted with the pox." Weed's notice stated that he believed Prince had "carried them off with him to Florida to avoid a separation from his family to which he is much attached"—which is exactly what Whitten did.<sup>70</sup>

In crossing the newly established international border of the St. Marys River, the Whittens finally found freedom, but they did not escape danger. Because Spanish Florida had the misfortune to be the southern desire of the new United States of America, a nation "as ambitious as it is industrious," and because it had an important Atlantic port in St. Augustine—on the northern rim of the Caribbean and the southern fringe of the Anglo world—the Whitten family would continue to be swept up in the dramatic political and military events that swirled around them.<sup>71</sup>

The Whittens found a multicultural world in Florida—it was Spanish only officially. A Spanish report of 1790 estimated that natural Spaniards, including troops and dependents, accounted for only about one-sixth of the total population of 3500, making Florida among Spain's most heterogeneous possessions in the Americas.<sup>72</sup> The largest group of non-Spaniards in the colony consisted of approximately 460 Italians, Greeks, and Minorcans, remnants of Dr. Andrew Turnbull's ill-fated attempt to establish an indigo plantation at New Smyrna in 1768. They were, in the main, Roman Catholics, and although they spoke a variety of languages—Catalán, Italian, Greek, and assorted dialects—they were Mediterranean people and could easily assimilate into the Spanish culture. In St. Augustine they became fishermen and merchants or raised produce on rented lands to

sell at the public market; these were all occupations which free persons of African descent in Spanish communities commonly held.<sup>73</sup>

A number of "British" also remained in Florida—a designation the Spaniards used loosely to identify English-speaking people of many ethnic backgrounds, including English, Irish, Scotch, even Swiss.<sup>74</sup> In general, they were welcomed by the Spanish administrators, since they operated large plantations that helped supply the colony and were a source of credit to the often impoverished government. This group also included people with useful skills and connections to the American state and national governments, which led some of its members later to become involved in assorted plots to wrest control of the colony from their Spanish hosts.<sup>75</sup>

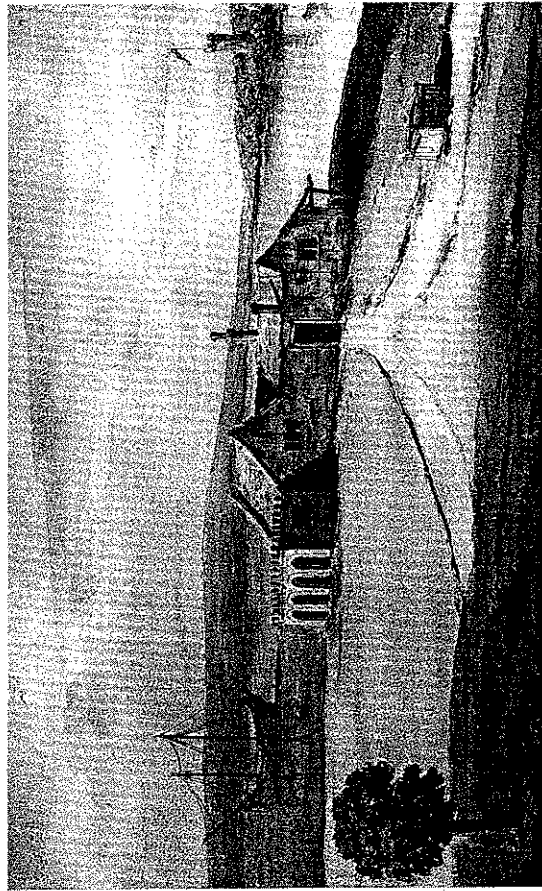
Many "new" Africans also inhabited Florida. Expecting to transform Florida into something resembling South Carolina, influential planters such as Richard Oswald, James Grant, and John Moultrie had imported large numbers of slaves during the British rule, chiefly from Bance Island in the Sierra Leone River and the Rio Pongo. When the Patriots drove Loyalist planters from South Carolina and Georgia southward to Florida, they brought almost 9,000 more slaves into the province.<sup>76</sup>

During the eighteen-month transition from British to Spanish rule, many of those slaves approached Spanish government officials to request the religious sanctuary that Francisco Menéndez and other runaways had earlier claimed. Although Florida's incoming governor, Manuel de Zéspedes, doubted their religious motivation—he charged that "not one of them has manifested once here the least inclination to be instructed in

and converted to our Holy Faith"—he was forced to honor his Crown's century-old offer to shelter any slaves of the Protestants who sought the "True Faith." It was the governor's belief that the fugitives were simply seeking liberty or escape from a cruel master, and although he may well have been correct, he was obligated to receive all who sought religious sanctuary.<sup>77</sup>

To protect potential converts, the governor required all non-Spaniards to present themselves and declare their intentions to remain or to depart the province. Anyone wishing to remove a slave from the province also had to obtain a license bearing the governor's signature. Any of the English settlers who planned to remain also had to register any blacks or mulattoes, either free or slave, "in their control." Finally, "every vagrant Negro without a known owner or else a document that attests to his freedom" had to report to the authorities within twenty days to clarify his or her status and obtain a work contract. Those failing to report would forfeit their freedom and be enslaved by the Spanish King.<sup>78</sup> British Florida's outgoing governor, Patrick Tonyn, protested that these requirements violated the provisions of the Treaty of Paris that allowed any who wished to leave the province, and he observed that many slaves were held without title and that many free blacks did not have legal documents to prove this status. Despite Tonyn's objections, Zéspedes enforced his decree, and more than 250 blacks hoping to legitimate their free status came forward to be registered.<sup>79</sup>

Among these 250 former slaves was Prince Whitten. In the fall of 1788 Prince presented himself at the governor's office on the town square and dictated a statement to the Spanish notary about how he had come to Florida, initiating what would be a



View from the governor's window of the counting house and the royal treasury, St. Augustine, Florida, November 1764. Original watercolor sketch, British Library, London. Courtesy of the St. Augustine Historical Society.

long paper trail in the Spanish records.<sup>80</sup> As previous governors of Florida and Cuba had done, Governor Zéspedes set an example by taking some of the black refugees into his own home. The rest he parceled out among townspeople and plantation owners who were able to shelter them, at least temporarily.<sup>81</sup> This was the beginning of many subsequent connections between the townspeople and the former slaves. Because the black freedmen and women lived and worked among the townspeople daily, it was almost inevitable in this Spanish community that other social relations would follow. African and Spanish views of family and society were highly compatible, and each group surely recognized the value the other placed on kinship.<sup>82</sup> A

central feature of Mandinga culture along the Gambia River was the adoption or assimilation of children or other strangers through relationships of trust, protection, patronage, and reciprocity.<sup>83</sup>

Aided by their early contacts and patrons, their rapid adoption of Catholicism, their “respectable” behavior, and their valuable military and occupational skills, refugees from Anglo slavery like the Whittens became important members of the free black community in Spanish Florida. They worked hard, defended their community when called upon, and made free lives for themselves, acquiring property and intermarrying with other successful runaways. The Whittens and their fellow freedmen proved to be a valuable source of skilled labor and military reserves for the Spanish community, and despite attempts by some of their former owners to recover their chattel through legal channels, the once skeptical Governor Zéspedes consistently supported these blacks’ right to liberty.<sup>84</sup>

Legally protected and free at last, Prince Whitten began to establish himself in Spanish Florida. Over the course of the next thirty-five years, Prince and Judy and Glasgow and Polly transformed themselves from fugitive slaves into loyal Spanish subjects. The instant Prince and his family had crossed the St. Marys River—that Spanish Jordan—and reached the other shore, they were “born again.” They were made human, acquiring personhood and autonomy. They took on new names, new legal personalities, and new corporate identities and began to enjoy precious liberties long denied them. One was simple geographic mobility: they could go where they wanted. Choice was another. They could choose what work they would do,

where they would live, and whom they would marry. They could control their persons, their property, and even others. They gained access and voice, learning quickly how to make claims on a legal system that recognized and protected them. They also learned how to work the social and religious systems that incorporated them.

Religious transformation was the key to the Whittens' new liberties, for it was upon their claim to want conversion that all other rights rested. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the Roman Catholic Church as a vehicle for African assimilation in terms of social acceptance and advancement in Spanish communities. In a sense it was the one true equalizer, for within the church all were "brothers in Christ." The Catholic Church had incorporated Africans centuries before Spain's expansion into the Americas, and although the Catholic evangelization effort among Africans in the Americas may have appeared minimal compared to that among the Native Americans, the Catholic Church did welcome and encourage black converts.<sup>85</sup>

It is not surprising that newly freed men and women conditioned to a chattel slave system that limited their access to Protestant church membership would seize the opportunity to have themselves and their children baptized in St. Augustine's Catholic Church. The corporate structure of the Catholic Church had important cultural implications for both free and enslaved Africans, offering them affiliation, brotherhood, protection, and status. Prince and Judy Whitten joined other refugees in seeking church membership for their children even before officially registering with government authorities. At about age



Christian baptism of an African in thirteenth-century Spain. Courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida.

nine, Glasgow became Francisco Domingo Mariano Witten, and seven-year-old Polly became María Rafaela Witten.<sup>86</sup> Done properly, it took more time and effort to convert adults, and Prince and Judy could not be baptized until they had successfully passed the priest's examination on the basic tenets of the Church.<sup>87</sup> Language impediments must surely have slowed the process, but four years after the baptisms of their children Prince and Judy also entered the Catholic Church, taking the baptismal names Juan Bautista Whitten and María Rafaela Quenty [*sic*].<sup>88</sup>

Baptism into the Catholic faith served several important functions for black converts. Most important in the view of the

priests was the religious function of removing the stigma of original sin and bringing the baptized into the brotherhood of the church. Perhaps equally important for black converts, however, was the social function of establishing an extended kin network between the baptized and his or her godparents, and between the parents and godparents, who thus became *compadres*. A prominent Spaniard, don Manuel Fernández Bendicho, who was also by then their next-door neighbor, served as Prince and Judy's godfather at their baptism.<sup>88</sup> With Fernández Bendicho standing beside the couple in the church in a public act of patronage, the family's social ascent had begun. The new Catholics Prince and Judy Whitten soon became among the most popular godparents in the black community of St. Augustine: Prince sponsored twenty-three individuals, while Judy served as godmother for thirty-one persons.<sup>89</sup> Acquiring so many "dependents" enhanced the Whittens' status in the Catholic community and reinforced their respectability.

The Catholic Church also offered another avenue for advancement for the Whittens and others like them. Remarkable on the special need to educate children in Catholic precepts in a colony populated by so many foreigners, Governor Zéspedes established a school for boys in St. Augustine in 1786. He ordered Father Thomas Hassett (who had earlier established a school for children of color in Philadelphia) to enumerate all the boys living in town and to visit their parents and explain the importance of educating their children in reading, writing, arithmetic, and Christian doctrine. Black youths were welcome at the new school, but in theory they were to sit in a separate section of the classroom. Despite this attempt at segregation,

the governor required that black pupils receive the same spiritual and temporal instruction as white students. The teachers were not to permit students to call each other names or "remind them of the faults of their fathers"; rather, all were to be treated alike as faithful Christians with "love and impartial charity."

It may not have been easy for the Whittens to take advantage of this educational opportunity. Although the government assumed the costs of the school, the regulations required the children to be clean and well-groomed, and to have shined shoes. Father Hassett described the colony in 1788 as "miserable" and "dying" for lack of money, trade, and population, and even poor white parents may not have been able to afford the luxury of withdrawing children from work to attend school.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, Prince and Judy understood the value of an education, having fled from a system which largely prohibited the education of blacks. They enrolled Glasgow in the school, and his subsequent literacy was an asset to the family in later years.<sup>92</sup>

Among the students of African descent who attended school with Glasgow were Antonio and Mateo Sánchez, the quadroon sons of the most important planter in the province, don Francisco Xavier Sánchez, and his mulatta consort from South Carolina, María Beatrice de Piedra. The boys joined their half-brothers, Román and Domingo Sánchez, sons of don Francisco and his white wife, doña María del Carmen Hill, also of South Carolina. Attending school with these half-brothers was their former slave, who had spent time in both households—Mariano Ambara (Edimboro), the son of Prince's Congo compadres, Felipe and Filis Edimboro. Whatever Glasgow remembered of the two-caste slave system he left in South Carolina was imme-

diately challenged when he walked into this classroom. School rules and Spanish medieval traditions fostered a corporate identity among the students, requiring group attendance at such functions as Sunday Mass, religious processions, and the funerals of classmates. Thus, as in many other corporate institutions in the Spanish world (such as the military, church brotherhoods, and guilds), racial difference was, at least within its confines, neutralized.<sup>93</sup>

Prince Whitten may have entered Florida with little in the way of material goods, but the valuable occupational skills he had acquired in Carolina allowed him to support his family. The Spanish work requirement for the freed newcomers could be considered a form of social control, and it clearly was designed to make useful subjects out of potentially disruptive foreign and unassimilated elements. Still, from the perspective of a former slave who had for so long been unable to control his own destiny or that of his family, the ability to select an employer and be paid for labor must have seemed a considerable improvement over his former condition.

Prince's first known employment was on the plantation of Ambrose Nelson, north of St. Augustine and on the southern bank of the St. Marys River over which the Whittens had crossed to freedom. Other planters in the region were threatened by the example that the newly freed slaves provided to their still enslaved chattel. William Pengree complained that "the negro Prince and his family, who in reality belong to Colonel Weed, have behaved with such shamelessness and presumption since they have moved to the River, that two of my negroes have fled with the idea of becoming free; I have been able to

catch one and have sent to Georgia in search for the other." Pengree asked that Prince be forbidden from further association with his slaves, which suggests that Prince was spreading the word about freedom.<sup>94</sup> Not long afterward, Prince learned that "the American Major Weed had vowed to recover them by force, if it costs him his life," and Nelson petitioned the governor to allow the Whittens to move into St. Augustine. The governor agreed. We can only wonder what might have provoked such a vehement declaration from Weed, but his honor and possible profit may have been at stake—Weed had accepted a commission to return Prince and Judy and the children to their former owners in Carolina.<sup>95</sup>

As soon as the danger of recapture had passed, Prince and his family returned to the countryside, this time taking up residence at the North River plantation of James McGirtt with whom Prince signed another year-long work contract. How and why Prince and Judy went to work for a planter linked by marriage to Judy's former owner in South Carolina is unknown, but the contract stipulated that Prince would labor as a carpenter and Judy would wash or cook for McGirtt in exchange for room and board and twenty-five pesos a year.<sup>96</sup> Nine months later Judy gave birth to the first of her children to be born free, but the family's joy turned to grief when, eight days later, the baby boy died. The church sacristan baptized Juan Fatio *in extremis* "in a private home," and the next day Father Miguel O'Reilly officiated as the family buried the child in the Catholic cemetery in St. Augustine.<sup>97</sup>

Sometime after the death of the Whittens' infant son, McGirtt began to demand that Judy do field work. Prince promptly

went to court to protest that he could not "permit" it. The use of that word alone speaks volumes. It was Prince who controlled his family, not McGirtt. "With the utmost respect," Whittens asked for the return of his work license and the amount he was owed for the labor performed in the nine and a half months he had worked for McGirtt.<sup>98</sup> It had not taken Whittens long to learn to exercise the rights available to him under Spanish law, and the man who had once been considered chattel property now challenged a white employer's violation of his contract.<sup>99</sup>

With her son's help, Judy later filed a suit against members of the influential Sánchez family for alleged insults and physical mistreatment. Judy asked the court to admonish her abusers and identified herself in the complaint as a *vecina* or property-holding member of the community, making no mention of her race. She had, in essence, placed herself on equal legal footing with the Spaniards she was suing. Spanish law permitted women, slaves, and even children a voice in the courts, but it did not consider all testimony equal, and class was the single most important determinant of veracity. Although the court gave her no satisfaction, Judy's legal and social challenge would have been inconceivable, and dangerous, in South Carolina.<sup>100</sup>

Their move into town helped integrate the Whittens into Spanish corporate culture. In 1789 St. Augustine celebrated the accession of Carlos IV to the Spanish throne. To mark the occasion, the government house where Prince had claimed his freedom was richly decorated. On the upper balcony, on an altar draped with wine-red and white cloths, were displayed portraits of the King and Queen. Uniformed soldiers of the Third

Battalion of Cuba stood guard. The governor, accompanied by all the government officials and men of note in the community, began the celebration by parading on horseback around the Plaza, acknowledging the troops posted at every corner. The vicar and other ecclesiastics received the procession at the Catholic Church, and then everyone proceeded to a stage set in the middle of the Plaza. There the governor and other functionaries gave a round of speeches interrupted by many "Vivas," the ringing of bells, and a triple salvo from the artillery at the Castillo de San Marcos and offshore war ships. At the conclusion of the speeches, Governor Zéspedes threw out to the assembled crowds silver coins minted at his own expense which bore the bust of King Carlos IV on one side and on the other three images: a jasmine flower—the symbol of Florida—a castle, and a lion, representing the Kingdoms of Castile and León. As might be expected, Zéspedes's name also appeared on the coins. The governor and his cortege then remounted their horses to parade through town to the military barracks and the great stone fortress, the Castillo de San Marcos, where the celebratory acts were repeated to much public acclaim.

That evening and for the next two nights, the streets and houses of St. Augustine were illuminated by lanterns and blazing bonfires, and people danced through the night as music played. The elites danced and ate refreshments at the governor's house, but the plebeians danced on the Plaza. On any of the three nights the Whittens might have been among the crowds applauding as the men of the Third Battalion performed Pedro Calderón de la Barca's comedy *Amigo, amante y leal* ("Loving and Loyal Friend"). On the third day the townspeople at-

tended a solemn mass where they heard singing, more salvos, and prayers for divine favor for the "just and beneficent" new monarchs. As a closing act the guild of carpenters, wearing red insignia on their hats and carrying burning torches, paraded through the streets in a "triumphal carriage pulled by six horses." At each corner the carpenters, too, shouted their "Vivas" for King Carlos IV and Queen María Luisa.<sup>101</sup> Theirs was the only guild to mount such a display. Because no list of the guild members survives, we cannot say with certainty that Prince was among them, but the corporate pride exhibited in their procession and their salute to the monarchs must have been noted by the black carpenter.<sup>102</sup>

The lavish public theater and the symbols and rituals of the accession ceremonies that Prince witnessed were specifically designed to impress the assembled crowds and to reinforce devotion to the Spanish monarchy. If any of the freed refugees from Carolina and Georgia had any lingering doubts about having chosen the Spanish monarchy over the British, and over the newly established government of the United States, after 1790 there was no turning back. In May of that year, Spain yielded to strong diplomatic pressure by U.S. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and abrogated the sanctuary policy that Spain had first established in 1693. The Spanish governor posted notices in Southern newspapers announcing that thereafter fugitive slaves could no longer expect to be received and freed in St. Augustine. Responding to a request for clarification from Florida's governor, the Captain General of Cuba declared that "there was absolutely no doubt" that runaways who had already been freed, like the Whittens, retained their freedom and their rights as Spanish subjects.<sup>103</sup>

Having gained freedom, the Whittens worked to expand their economic opportunities. In St. Augustine they had more access to information and patronage networks, as well as more diverse employment. Prince began to supplement his earnings from carpentry by securing stone-quarrying and timbering contracts from the Spanish government. In an informal apprenticeship, the Whittens also took in an *agregada* or dependent, a free black girl named Margarita about the same age as Glasgow and Polly, whom Judy began training to be a domestic. The 1793 census shows the Whitten family living in a rented house on San Carlos Street, where some of the community's most influential citizens lived. Several doors down from the Whittens, the planter don Francisco Xavier Sánchez had established a home for his eight free quadroon children and their five slaves.<sup>104</sup> By the following year the Whittens had acquired a slave of their own, Isabel Plouden, for whose child Glasgow and Polly (now Francisco and María) served as godparents.<sup>105</sup> Living on one side of the Whittens was don Manuel Fernández Bendicho, their patron and godfather.<sup>106</sup> On the other side lived the Scotsman don Juan Leslie, head of the Pantón Leslie & Co. Indian trading house. Leslie had fourteen slaves living in his household as well as an eighteen-year-old apprentice, Jorge J. F. Clarke. Like Sánchez, both Leslie and Clarke established mixed-race families (Clarke with Leslie's slave, Flora). Both of these influential men also became patrons of Prince Whitten and his family through Prince's enlistment in the free black militia of Florida.<sup>107</sup>

Spain had depended upon informal black military service in the Caribbean since the sixteenth century, and black interpreters and soldiers had helped establish Florida. The colony's first

black militia was established in 1683 and helped to defend Florida from pirates and Indians. In the eighteenth century Spain's new Bourbon rulers formalized "disciplined" militias of *pardos* (mulattoes) and *morenos* (blacks) and encouraged enlistment by exempting recruits from certain municipal taxes or levies. Two other changes were also socially significant. The Bourbon reforms allowed black militiamen to elect their own officers (a practice already observed in the provincial militias), and most important, the crown extended the *fuero militar* to *pardo* and *moreno* units. The *fuero* was a corporate charter with important implications. By its provisions, black militiamen were exempt from prosecution in civilian courts and gained equal juridical status with white militiamen. The *fuero* also granted other rights to blacks who served in the military—hospitalization, retirement and death benefits, as well as the right to wear uniforms and bear arms.<sup>108</sup> Officials in the Viceroyalty of New Spain resisted the social advancement of black militiamen and sought to abridge the benefits of their *fuero*, generally limiting its enjoyment to officers in active service.<sup>109</sup> But Spanish military officials in Florida and other areas around the Caribbean sorely needed all the help they could get and depended heavily on black recruits. Africans and their descendants clearly appreciated the juridical and social benefits of militia membership, and despite the dangers such service involved, they developed traditions of long-term family service.<sup>110</sup> Prince, and later Glasgow, would become part of that tradition.

Whitten and the other freedmen and women who had survived the dangers of the American Revolution, and had chosen Spanish monarchy over British, had hardly settled into their new identities when they were once again embroiled in revo-

lutionary turmoil—this time by the aftershocks of the French Revolution. In 1791 the slaves of Saint Domingue rose in bloody rebellion against the brutality of their oppression. Quoting the rhetoric of "natural rights," they killed their "masters" and destroyed the once-flourishing sugar plantations of the island. News of this world-changing event spread as rapidly as the fires that burned through Saint Domingue's cane fields, and planters everywhere feared their own slaves would also rise.<sup>111</sup> Alarmed by the rapid circulation of republican ideology throughout the greater Caribbean, Spanish governors attempted to quarantine their colonies from the "contagion" by forbidding the introduction of French ideas, books, citizens, and slaves originating from French territories.<sup>112</sup>

But revolutionary ideas were hard to contain. In 1793 Diego Morphy, Spain's vice-consul in Charleston, reported the alarming news that Citizen Edmond Genêt, French Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States, and Citizen Mangourit, French consul to South Carolina, were raising an army of backwoods-men from Mississippi, Georgia, and Tennessee to invade and "liberate" Florida.<sup>113</sup> The Revolutionary Legion of the Floridas intended to make East Florida "a Part of the French Republic" until the conclusion of their invasion, after which "said country is to become independent . . . with the Proviso of adopting a strictly democratical Republican Government. The Rights of Man to form the Basis of their Constitution."<sup>114</sup> The plotters made an alliance with the Creek Indians, prepared several armed vessels, two transports, food and arms, and declared: "We wait only for the fleet and Florida is ours and the tree of liberty will grow everywhere."<sup>115</sup>

Hearing this news, Florida's governor hastily wrote to Gov-

The relative independence and mobility of Whitten and the free black troops, who functioned as mounted guerrillas on the Florida frontier, seems remarkable in light of the widespread paranoia regarding slave revolts. The "planters' darkest hour in the Caribbean" was 1795, notable for the Second Maroon War in Jamaica, slave revolts in Demerara (Guyana) and Coro (Venezuela), and the Pointe Coupee slave conspiracy in Louisiana, to name only a few of the best-known examples of black revolt.<sup>120</sup>

On one of their scouting expeditions the free black militia-men found a call to revolution posted on a tree that read:

Attention, Slaves of the Spanish Tyrants. All persons of whatever denomination can now participate in the great blessings of liberty and escape from the yoke of Spanish tyranny by coming to the glorious Republican standard which flies triumphantly on the northern shore of the St. Marys where you will be welcomed with friendship and protected in your person and property so that you can once again enjoy the blessings of liberty and equality.<sup>121</sup>

Whitten and his compatriots were not enticed by this offer to cross back into the American territory they had struggled so hard to escape. Through such revolutionary broadsides and the alarms raised in St. Augustine, as well as the sight of the French republican flag briefly raised over Amelia Island, former slaves were fully familiar with the ideology of the French Republic. They knew they had political options, but they still supported the Spanish monarchy, even in the face of unofficial racial discrimination.

ernor George Matthews of Georgia to report that an invasion was being organized from his state. Fearing larger repercussions for the United States, Matthews issued orders to seize anyone found violating U.S. neutrality, but he also took the occasion to complain to the Spanish governor about his failure to return runaway slaves belonging to Georgia's citizens.<sup>116</sup>

Florida's governor promised more cooperation and began preparing for the expected invasion. Late in June an advance force from Georgia burned the frontier post of Fort Juana, and a hastily convened Council of War in St. Augustine voted to "arm all the free black and mulattoes in the province, for being fugitives from the State of Georgia, they will be loyal and will defend themselves to the death in order not to return to their former slavery."<sup>117</sup> Whitten's next-door neighbor, Juan Leslie, was named to command the newly formed free black militia, in which Prince enlisted and performed his first military service for Spain. Most of the free blacks who reported for duty were also freed slaves from the former British colonies, and they elected Whitten as their Sergeant.<sup>118</sup>

In July the Revolutionary Legion under the command of General Elijah Clarke launched a full invasion from Georgia and took the fort of San Nicolás (present-day Jacksonville) on the St. Johns River. The invaders also briefly occupied Amelia Island, and the Spaniards withdrew from two smaller forts. The following month, however, Whitten and forty-one members of the free black militia joined forty Cuban infantrymen, thirteen white militiamen, and some Seminole allies in a naval assault that dislodged the invaders. For the rest of the summer Sergeant Prince Whitten led a small party of free black cavalry in frontier patrols.<sup>119</sup>

Governor Juan Nepomuceno de Quesada, who had earlier denied land grants to free blacks in terms that suggested at least some personal racism, found that Whitten and his men had proved their loyalty in difficult times. In his report to the Captain General of Cuba, Quesada commended the service of his "excellent company of free blacks."<sup>12</sup> The free black militia of Florida had proved itself in its first armed conflict and acquired at least some honor in a culture which valued military valor so highly.

Whitten would have many opportunities to display his valor. Over the course of his twenty-six-year military career, he defended his family, their hard-won liberty, and his adopted monarchy against Jacobins, Mikosuki Indians, U.S. Marines, pirates, and assorted insurrectionists from South America. Through it all, and despite great hardships, much danger, and little reward, Whitten remained loyal to the Spanish Crown that had freed him and his family.

## 2

### The Counter-Revolution in Saint Domingue

I am the chief of the Counter-Revolution . . . I began the war, almost without arms, without munitions, without supplies, and almost without resources on August 23, 1791, a time that will always be remembered among the most magnificent of the Universe.

Jorge Biassou, General of the Conquered Territories of the North of Santo Domingo, July 15, 1793<sup>1</sup>

LIKE PRINCE WHITTEN, the Saint Domingue-born Georges Biassou "took the current" of revolution sweeping the Atlantic, hoping it would lead "on to fortune." Instead, and against all his expectations, he ended his days in relative obscurity on the Spanish Florida frontier. Biassou grew up a slave on the sugar plantations of Haut du Cap, on the hillsides that overlooked the harbor of Cap Français (Le Cap). From those plantations it was only a forty-minute walk to Le Cap, "the Paris of the Antilles," and it was common for slaves to make that pilgrimage on weekends to attend the market, visit the taverns, and see the sights. Saint Domingue's cosmopolitan commercial center boasted a printing press, a weekly newspaper (the *Avis Divers & Petites*