

ATLANTIC
CREOLES
IN THE AGE OF
REVOLUTIONS

Jane G. Landers

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England

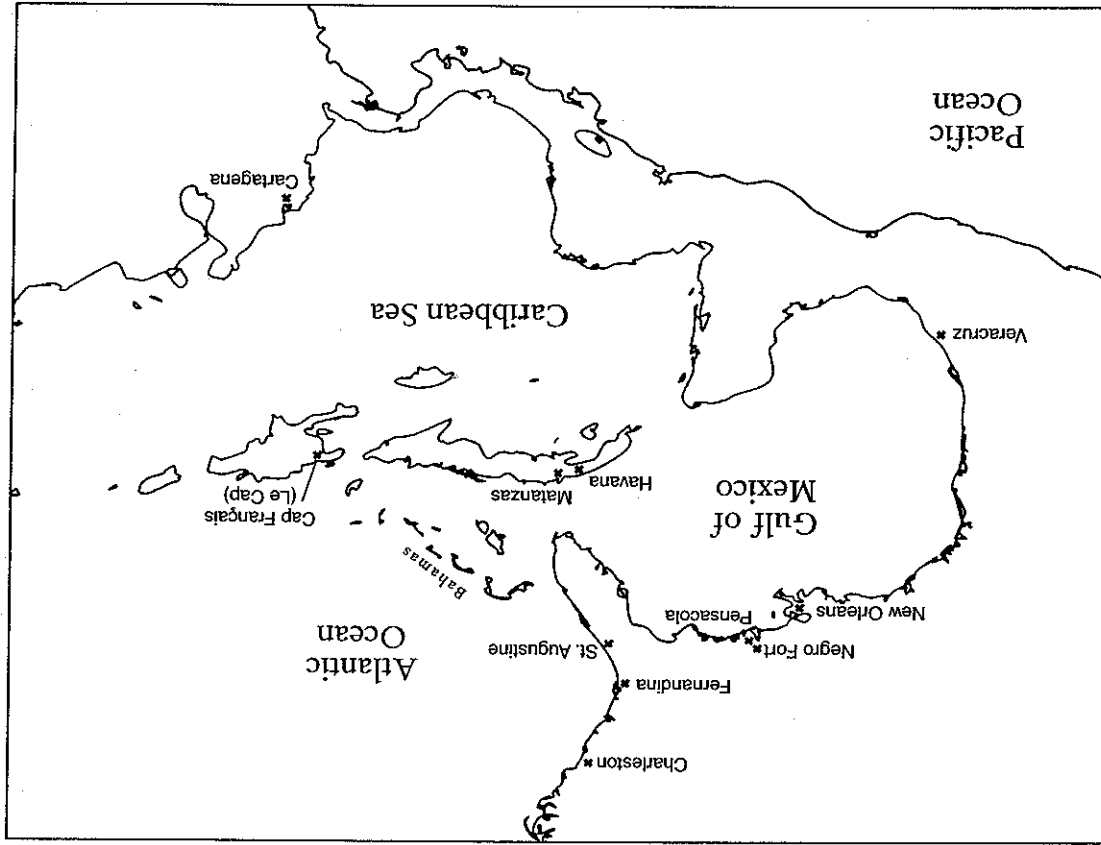
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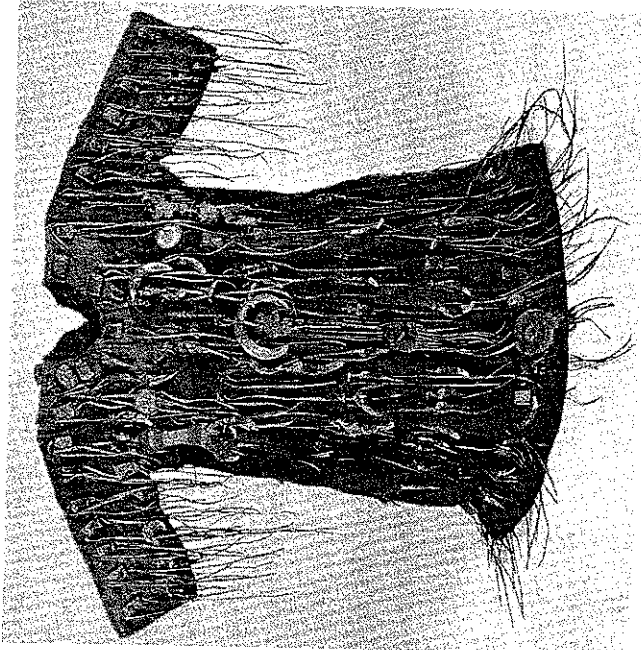
Introduction

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 3

SOMETIME NEAR THE END of the seventeenth century, British traders purchased a young Mandinga man in West Africa and transported him to Barbados. From there the youth was shipped on to South Carolina, where he joined other Africans and still more numerous indigenous captives to form the "character generation" of slaves on that colonial frontier.¹ The Mandinga were a people famed for their animal husbandry, and the young man may have become one of the enslaved "Cattle Hunters" who tracked rapidly growing herds through the dense Carolina forests.² When the local Yamasee Indians rose against their British oppressors in 1715, the Mandinga man and other enslaved Africans recognized the chance for their own liberation.





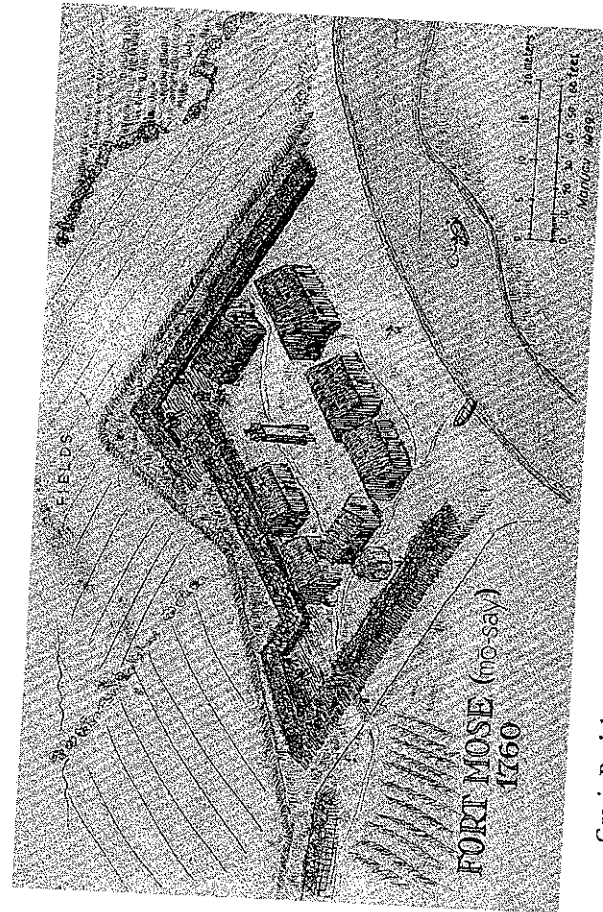
Mandinga war tunic, decorated with leather-covered Koranic scriptures and charms. William Arnett Collection; courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida.

Joining in common cause with the Yamasee against their mutual enemy, the slaves fought for three years with Chief George's forces, all the while gaining valuable military skills and cultural, political, and geographic knowledge. After the war went badly for the rebels, Carolina's Yamasee and African allies escaped together to Spanish Florida, where they claimed the religious sanctuary promised in 1693 by the Catholic monarch.³

Upon his conversion to Catholicism, the young Mandinga slave and former Muslim transformed himself from a "chattel" of the British into Francisco Menéndez, a free subject of the

Spanish King. The polyglot and literate Menéndez personified the cosmopolitan Atlantic Creole as described by Ira Berlin—someone with “linguistic dexterity, cultural plasticity, and social agility.”⁴ It is quite likely that he had already demonstrated these characteristics on the West African coast; in the Americas, he simply added to his repertoire. Menéndez’s military experience earned him a commission as captain of the black militia of St. Augustine, and in 1738 he became the leader of the free black town of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose. Menéndez may have been accustomed to leadership. The English traveler Richard Jobson, who visited Upper Guinea a century earlier, wrote that the Mandingas “are Lords, and Commanders of this country” whose tributaries included the Wolofs and Fulas.⁵ Africans of distinct cultural and political backgrounds made up the community of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, including those designated in Spanish records as Congos, Carabalíes, Minas, and Mandingas, and some men had indigenous wives. Spanish officials, however, referred to all of them as Menéndez’s subjects.⁶

Over the next quarter-century, Menéndez and his militia defended their adopted homeland against both British and Indian attacks. Menéndez wrote several eloquent letters to the King of Spain, detailing his military services and requesting a proprietary captainship. When the monarch failed to respond, Menéndez took to the seas as a Spanish corsair, seeking to make his way to “Old Spain” so he could discuss the matter with the king in person.⁷ In 1763, the British acquired Florida by treaty and Menéndez led his freed “subjects” into exile in Cuba, where they remade their lives on a new Spanish frontier.⁸ The arc of



Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, 1760. Illustration by Albert Manucy; courtesy of the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida.

Menéndez's fascinating life, during which he reshaped his identity and circumstances multiple times, demonstrates how enslaved persons learned about and acted on possibilities to regain their lost liberty. His is an amazing story, and yet it was only one of many.

In this book I employ the histories of a diverse but connected cohort of Atlantic Creoles like Menéndez as a prism through which to examine the active participation of Africans and their descendants in the age of Atlantic revolutions. Olaudah Equiano, whose lone voice once spoke for millions, has been joined by others like Baquaqua, Little Ephraim Robin John, and Anacona Robin Robin John.⁹ With the use of previously unstudied

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Spanish-language sources, new voices may now be added to this still limited narrative. The time span covered by this book is roughly 1760 to 1850, a period of radical economic, social, and political change across the Atlantic world.¹⁰ The geographic focus, however, shifts from the better studied areas of northern Europe and northern North America to the southern mainland of North America and the Caribbean. In this multicultural arena, many peoples and powers competed—Africans of various distinct ethnicities, a wide array of indigenous nations, European powers such as Great Britain, France, and Spain, and, eventually, the new government of the United States. Conflicts were frequent, and there were many opportunities for Atlantic Creoles to “take the tide” and alter a life’s course.

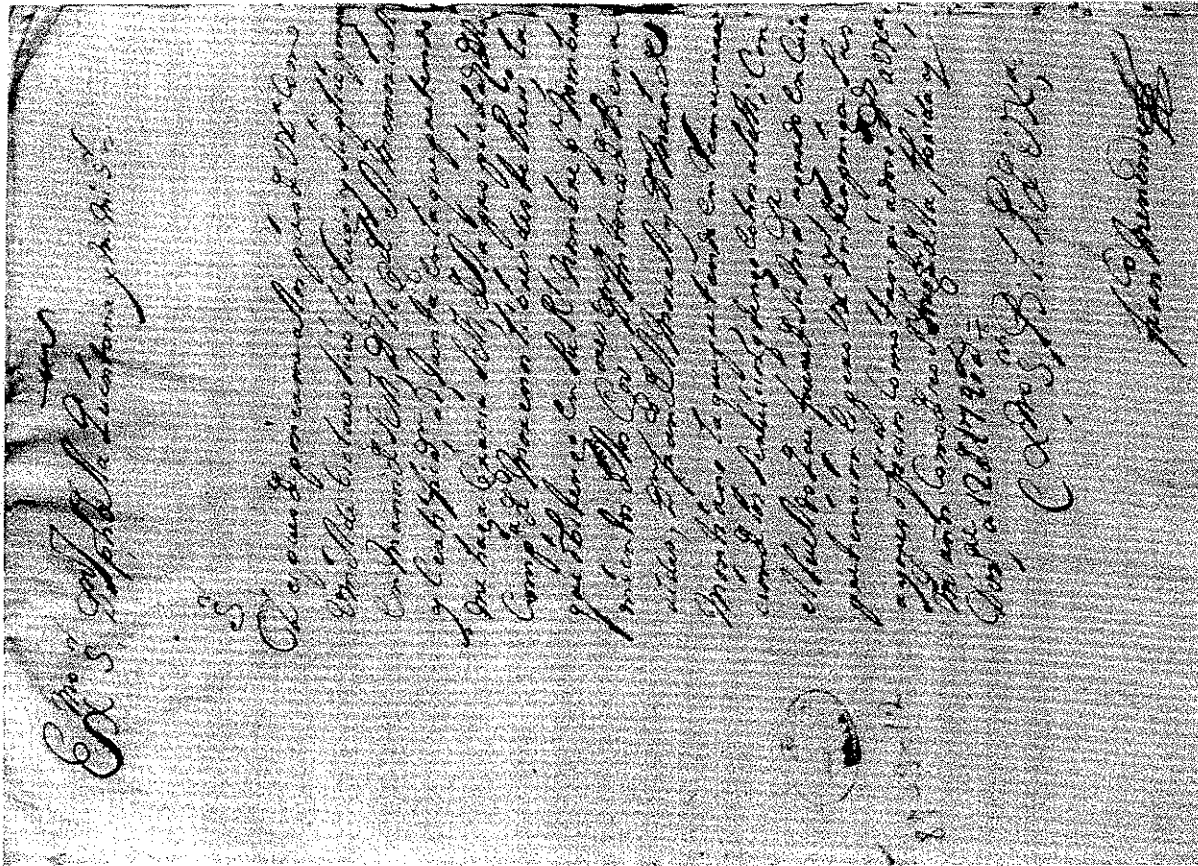
Because Atlantic Creoles were so often on the front lines of these contests—European and American revolutions, Indian wars, slave revolts, and the international efforts to abolish slavery—they were keenly attuned to shifting political currents. These African and African-descended actors had access to a wide range of political information, both printed and oral, and they made reasoned and informed choices in their attempt to win and maintain liberty. They were often critical to the balance of power and soon became adept at interpreting political events and manipulating them, when possible, to achieve freedom. Their initiative and agency—their acts of resistance, fight, and marronage (the formation of fugitive slave communities in the wild), and their shifting relationships to various European, American, and Native American powers—shaped the course of international events, as well as local responses to them.

The Black Loyalists who followed the British standard in the

American Revolution and the slave rebels who followed Toussaint in Saint Domingue have become the subject of important historical scholarship.¹¹ But some individuals, both free and enslaved, who were involved in those events chose alternate paths that are equally interesting and less well known. The Atlantic Creoles about whom I write fought variously for the King of Kongo, the King of England, the King of France, the King of Spain, Jacobins, Muskogee and Seminole chiefs, the King of Spain, and sometimes for themselves. Each shift of allegiance required a reevaluation of political platforms and programs, with the possibilities for freedom that each offered. As they changed allegiances and identities, Atlantic Creoles also helped to shape the course of history. Their stories make possible a more complex understanding of the traditional narratives and popular views of the Age of Revolutions, and demonstrate their active political and philosophical engagement in the most important events of their day.

Although the English and French sources for these events are rich, it was the Spanish juridical and archival traditions that recognized loyal Africans and Indians as imperial subjects with a legal personality, and therefore a voice, in Spanish records. Materials actually produced by persons of African and native descent are common: they include loyalty oaths; petitions to Spanish officials and to the King, such as that written by Menéndez; legal suits; interrogatories; civil, religious, and criminal records; and more. Through these varied sources it is possible to gain access to verbatim statements of the Atlantic Creoles, as well as insights into their thinking.

Africans and Spaniards shared many understandings of the



Petition of Francisco Menéndez to King Philip V of Spain, asking for a reward for his services during the invasion of General James Oglethorpe in 1740. Courtesy of the P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History and the Florida Museum of Natural History, University of Florida.

proper relationship between ruler and subject. Loyal subjects generated reciprocal obligations from those they served, and both groups organized their societies as sets of interlocking corporate and family structures. These cultural similarities allowed even those Africans newly admitted into the Spanish polity to quickly learn Spanish legal and cultural norms. Once considered movable property, these newly "human" and free individuals were quick to pursue the rights and privileges accorded them through membership in centuries-old Spanish legal, religious, and military corporations. As they exercised their freedom, Atlantic Creoles repeatedly stressed their loyalty, their service, and their devotion to the Spanish King and to the "True Faith" in written documents. They also enacted these values in public ceremonies. When they felt aggrieved—and some had reason to—they remonstrated, usually blaming any failure to honor promises and obligations on local officials. The distant Spanish King, dependent as he often was on their services to hold his far-flung and threatened frontiers, almost always supported the Atlantic Creoles.

The enslaved African whom the English called Big Prince Whitten lived through the misery of the Atlantic slave trade, the American, French, Haitian, and Latin American revolutions, Indian wars, and, in Cuba, slave revolts and the fight for abolition. Whitten and others like him learned what it was to be a slave in an English colony. They gradually became acculturated to the norms of Anglo slavery—learning plantation regimes, learning English, forming relationships with other Africans and with "country-born" slaves, and eventually starting families. The 1770s were the peak years of the Carolina slave

trade, and as more and more Africans poured into flourishing Carolina plantations, freedom must have seemed an ever more remote possibility for Whitten and his fellow slaves.

But then came the American Revolution. Its stirring rhetoric moved many who were actually enslaved to claim their own inalienable right to liberty and to fight for it. South Carolina experienced some of the bloodiest fighting in the American Revolution, and enslaved families embroiled in that violence made political choices that might save or ruin them. As battles raged around them, they gained first-hand knowledge of the politics and racial dispositions of both Patriots and Loyalists. Rejecting both, the Whittens and hundreds like them risked everything to escape across the international border and, as Menéndez and others had before them, to claim religious sanctuary in Spanish territory. There they acquired legal personalities and rights, shedding the dishonor of enslavement. Unable to tolerate such a threat to the chattel slave system, the new U.S. government pressured Spain to renounce the sanctuary policy in 1790; thereafter, freedom seekers would have to find alternate routes.

In the following year, slaves in Saint Domingue initiated the largest and most successful slave revolt in the western hemisphere. They, too, had to decide how to reshape their lives as free persons. They might have established an African-style kingdom, as other slave rebels had done in Spanish and Portuguese America. Courted by Republican France, Spain, and Great Britain, they had offers of freedom and alliance from each. Toussaint Louverture is the best-known figure of the revolt, but he did not launch it. Lesser-known individuals took that risk, and, ultimately, different political paths than Toussaint. Georges

(Jorge) Biassou styled himself the leader of the Counter-Revolution, allying himself first with the King of France and then with that of Spain. This decision cost him what might have been a more significant place in history, and in retrospect looks reactionary, but Biassou's correspondence shows that he made his decision to ally with Spain on an informed and pragmatic basis. At the war's conclusion Biassou and the rest of Spain's black auxiliaries, like those who had earlier fought for the British King, were ungratefully dispersed across the Atlantic.

Biassou and his followers found themselves transported to the Spanish borderlands of Florida. The British, French, and Americans all had designs on the region, and the weakened Spanish government, attacked by Napoleon at home and by revolutionaries across its empire, could do little but protest an escalating series of military interventions. In the chaos, escaped slaves joined indigenous allies in creating a series of maroon communities in the still unsettled hinterlands. They also participated in assorted Loyalist plots to reestablish British commercial and territorial hegemony in the Lower South. One was the ephemeral indigenous State of Muskogee, which in 1800 waged an ill-fated war against Spain. The War of 1812 also involved Atlantic Creoles throughout the Spanish borderlands in simmering imperial contests. That year the U.S. government's covert attempt to seize Spanish East Florida was thwarted by black veterans of the American and Saint Domingue revolutions as well as black troops from Cuba.

In Spanish West Florida, meanwhile, slaves escaped from both Spanish and American masters and linked their freedom to British interests instead. But the British eventually abandoned

their Negro Colonial Marines as they had many of Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian troops during the American Revolution. When U.S. forces destroyed their fort on the Apalachicola River, survivors like Abraham and Nero slipped away to the Seminole nation to fight another day. Their political awareness and engagement mirrored those of Spain's black auxiliaries: each group recognized that their common interest ultimately lay in defending Spain against the territorial ambitions of the new United States government. With the U.S. acquisition of Louisiana, West Florida, and finally East Florida, Atlantic Creoles were left with few possibilities for freedom on the North American mainland. They could leave, or they could fight. A large group evacuated to Cuba. Others retreated southward down the Florida peninsula to the swamps of the Withlacoochee.

When Atlantic Creoles from the North American mainland arrived in Havana, the city was already home to an important and sizeable free black population with a long tradition of rights and privileges in Cuban society. The wealthy and educated Gabriel Dorotea Barba and his fellow militiamen were involved either directly or ideologically in the most significant political revolutions of their day, including the American and French Revolutions, the slave revolt in Saint Domingue, the independence movements in Latin America, and ultimately the revolution represented by abolition. They avidly followed the news as Spanish liberals waged a fierce war of resistance against Napoleonic troops, and in 1812 they joined other Spanish subjects across the empire in celebrating Spain's new Liberal Constitution and the expanded rights it guaranteed. Like Menéndez,

Whitten, and Biassou, Barba and his fellow militiamen generated a generous paper trail for historians to follow. Their petitions speak to their sense of entitlement as Spanish subjects. But the involvement of one of their own in the Aponte slave conspiracy of 1812 cast suspicion on all of them.

As Atlantic Creoles struggled to maintain their traditional rights in Cuba, Black Seminoles like Abraham and Nero and Spain's African-born militiamen like Prince Whitten joined forces to try to prevent the U.S. advance into Florida. They helped undo the so-called Patriot Rebellion of 1812 but could not prevent Andrew Jackson from destroying the Seminole heartland six years later. By this time the Spanish empire was disintegrating, and U.S. expansionism could not be stopped. In 1821 Spain ceded East Florida to the United States, and Prince Whitten led his black troops into exile in Cuba, retracing the exodus of Francisco Menéndez and the people of Mose more than half a century earlier. The Black Seminoles fought on through another long war against the forces of the United States before Abraham also led his people into exile in Arkansas.

Cuba's Atlantic Creoles enjoyed a brief resurgence in the 1820s, but it was short-lived. The return of absolutism in Spain, the rising power of Cuba's sugar plantocracy, and the Africanization of the population spelled the doom of the island's once-flourishing free black class. Atlantic Creoles like Jorge Davison struggled to maintain traditional privileges, but their legal and social position deteriorated as the nineteenth century progressed. Free blacks formed one-fifth of the population of the city of Matanzas in the early nineteenth century; though not as wealthy and privileged as their counterparts in Havana, they

served in militias, joined religious confraternities, and formed theater and literary groups, in part to distinguish themselves from the new Africans who were pouring into Cuba. After major slave revolts rocked the province in the 1830s and 1840s and officials launched the gruesome repression known as La Escalera, many of Cuba's Atlantic Creoles scattered in yet another tragic diaspora, with some sailing off to an unknown African continent.

As all their histories show, Atlantic Creoles were extraordinarily mobile, both geographically and socially, and their horizons had few limits. These were not people who felt constrained by place or defined by slavery. Nor was race their primary identification; that imposition came later. In this revolutionary era, political exigencies demanded more fluid identities. The great instability of the age and of the spaces they traversed created tremendous danger for these Creoles, but also opportunity. The Atlantic Creoles who surface in this narrative are those who repeatedly risked danger, found an opening, seized the moment, and freed themselves. Some lived apart—under their own governance while they could, or with indigenous people with whom they found common cause. Others assessed the strengths and weaknesses of various European powers and supported the one that might best secure them liberty. These alliances were rarely stable, and Atlantic Creoles always had to be ready to adjust quickly to changing conditions. Their mutability and adaptability were survival tools that enabled them to build their lives anew when necessary. And it almost always was. The wars and political transitions they experienced led to repeated dislocations and exile, yet they found ways to begin again.

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, 1819¹

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 1758, 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.² His remarkable career, which spanned the course of the American, French, Haitian, and Latin American revolutions as well as the eventual abolition of the