
Whitten, Juan Bautista “Big Prince”

(c. 1756–1830s),

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sergeant in the free black militia who helped defend Spanish Florida from Indians, pirates, and the United States Marines, was born in Guinea on the west coast of Africa in about 1756, according to his own estimates. His name is sometimes spelled Witten. He spent perhaps the first twenty years of his life in Guinea, the next ten in South Carolina, another thirty-five in Spanish Florida, and he ended his days in Matanzas, Cuba.

Whitten's African name and the circumstances of his enslavement are unknown, but in the 1770s the man that English records later called Big Prince was carried across the Atlantic by slave traders to be unloaded at Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, the largest slave port of its time. The Charleston planter Peter Whitten purchased Whitten and named him Big Prince, perhaps in reference to his great size, for the African was described as “6' and brawny” (Landers, 77). Big Prince became a carpenter on Whitten's plantation, and by 1777 he had formed what would be a lifetime bond with an enslaved “county-born” woman named Judy on the neighboring plantation of William Canty. Within a year Judy and Prince had a son named Glasgow, and the following year their daughter, Polly, was born.

Before long the chaos of the American Revolution engulfed the Whitten family. The Canty plantation where Judy and the children lived changed hands several times during the confusion of 1781–1782. In this tumultuous period the Whitten family, like many others, was plundered as the spoils of war and came into the hands of Colonel William Young, the commander of a Loyalist cavalry troop. When the Loyalists finally evacuated Charleston, South Carolina, in 1782 Young took Big Prince Whitten and his family to Georgia with him, and two years later, when the American Patriots aided by free black militiamen from Saint Domingue (modern Haiti) liberated Savannah, Young moved the Whittens even further southward to the frontier post of Point Petre, Georgia, just across the St. Marys River from British Florida.

At the end of the American Revolution, Florida was returned to Spain, and this change of governments gave the Whittens a new hope. In June or July of 1785 the Whittens escaped from Colonel Young, but he commissioned the Georgia Patriot Lieutenant Colonel Jacob Weed to recapture them. After several failed attempts the Whittens also escaped from Weed and crossed the St. Marys River into what had become Spanish Florida.

Taking advantage of a religious sanctuary policy first established in Spanish Florida in 1693, the Whittens and almost 250 other escaped slaves stated that they fled to Florida to become Catholics. On this basis they were accepted into the colony as free subjects of the Spanish Crown. After learning the Catholic catechism all the Whittens were baptized. Prince Whitten became Juan Bautista, Judy took the name María, and the children became Domingo and María Francisca.

The Whittens quickly learned to take full advantage of their new free status and their rights as Spanish subjects. They registered Domingo in the free Catholic school in St. Augustine, and his subsequent literacy greatly helped the family. Prince Whitten's talents as a skilled carpenter were sought after, and he signed work contracts with various employers on his own terms. When one employer tried to make Judy do field work rather than the laundry and cooking that the couple had agreed to, Whitten went to court stating he "could not permit it" (Landers, 88). Before long Whitten secured government contracts to quarry coquina rock and cut timber, hiring other free blacks to work for him. Judy helped the family economy by raising pigs for sale and training young girls to be domestics. She also went to court when she felt her rights were violated, and she once filed suit against the richest planters in Spanish Florida. Francisco opened a shoemaking shop and trained young black apprentices, as his mother did. Within a decade the Whittens were living next door to two of St. Augustine's most prominent figures, and they had acquired a slave of their own.

After twenty-one years living as man and wife, in 1798 Prince and Judy further elevated their social status by marrying in the Catholic church in St. Augustine. Their elite neighbor and patron served as their marriage sponsor, and in turn the Whittens became favored godparents for many other free black families. In 1796 daughter María Francisca married Jorge Jacobo, one of the slave rebels from Saint Domingue who had taken up residence in St. Augustine only three months earlier. This wedding united some of the most important free black families in the colony.

As all able-bodied Spanish subjects were required to do, Whitten joined the militia and saw frequent service. Although it is difficult to determine if Whitten had already acquired military experience during the southern campaigns of the American Revolution, his military service for the Spaniards is well documented. In the summer of 1795 he helped defend the colony from the Revolutionary Legion of the Floridas, a mercenary force sponsored by the French Republic's first minister to the United States, Edmond Charles Genet, to "liberate" Florida from the Spanish monarchy. The grateful Spanish governor noted the significant service of his "excellent company of free blacks" (Landers, 208). Whitten also fought against Mikasuki Indians in the Indian Wars of 1800–1803, and on that occasion his son and his new son-in-law fought with him. Whitten received a land grant from the Spanish government as reward and soon built a prosperous homestead, but it was burned by Georgian invaders in the so-called Patriot rebellion of 1812. Whitten became a hero in that invasion, leading the black and Indian troops who defeated a unit of the United States Marines who were covertly aiding the Georgians. Claimants who later filed damage suits against the United States government usually refer to the black militia as "Prince's Black Company." In the next decade Whitten and his French-speaking in-laws and their black companies fought Latin American filibusterers of assorted new "republics" before the United States finally acquired Florida.

Spanish sovereignty in Florida ended on 10 July 1821, and free black families like the Whittens had to make some hard choices. Some free blacks trusted cession treaties and remained in Florida, but the white supremacist planters who immigrated into the new territory soon acquired most of their land and installed new laws to restrict them. Anticipating that certain shift in racial politics, Prince Whitten led most of Florida's polyglot free black community into exile in Cuba, where once again they remade their lives.

Further Reading

Cusick, James. *The Other War of 1812: The Patriot War and the American Invasion of Spanish East Florida* (2003)

Landers, Jane. *Black Society in Spanish Florida* (1999)