
Menéndez, Francisco

(c. 1709–177?),

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Spanish militia captain, corsair, and founder of the first free black town in what became the United States, was born in “Guinea” (a name used by Europeans and Americans for the slave-trading coast of West Africa) to unknown parents. Menéndez's birth date and birth name are also unknown, but when he was baptized a Catholic he took the name of his Spanish godfather, the royal accountant in St. Augustine, and Menéndez's former owner.

Enslaved as a young man, Menéndez was transported to South Carolina by British traders to work alongside large numbers of Africans already herding cattle, cutting timber, and producing naval stores, indigo, and, later, rice. Soon Carolina was said to be “more like a Negro country” (Wood, 132), and planters began to fear retaliation from the slaves who now outnumbered them. Slave revolts rocked Carolina periodically in the first decades of the eighteenth century.

Then in 1715 the Yamasee Indian war erupted in Carolina, and Menéndez and other enslaved Africans saw their chance to escape bondage. Fleeing their masters, they joined the Yamasee to fight English colonists who were exploiting both groups. Had reinforcements not arrived from other English colonies, they might have succeeded in driving the English from Carolina. The Yamasee chief Jorge (George) testified in 1738 that Menéndez and three other escaped slaves fought with his forces for several years before they were ultimately defeated and fled south across the international border to Spanish Florida.

Spanish officials had recorded the arrival of escaped slaves from Carolina as early as 1687 when eight men and two women from Carolina requested Catholic baptism in St. Augustine for themselves and a nursing child. Other runaways soon followed, and Florida's governor, Manuel de Montiano, asked for royal guidance. Spain's state religion, Roman Catholicism, encouraged the conversion of other races to the “True Faith,” and in 1693 King Philip II issued a decree “giving liberty to all ... the men as well as the women ... so that by their example and by my liberality others will do the same” (Landers, 25). The initiative and determination of those enslaved Africans changed Spanish policy and shaped the geopolitics of the Southeast and the Caribbean for years to come. Because of them Menéndez and his followers would become free. Although Spaniards also held slaves, Spanish law more so than English law recognized slaves as human beings with souls and legal personalities; under English law slaves were considered chattel or property, on par with a cow or a piece of furniture, with no legal personality or voice. Enslaved persons living in Spanish colonies could buy their freedom or win it by meritorious acts, such as military service and, in some cases, religious conversion. Moreover, Spain and England were locked in a cycle of territorial and religious warfare, and St. Augustine suffered frequent attacks from English colonists to the north. In an effort to fulfill his Christian obligation to grant religious sanctuary, while also fortifying his northern border, in 1738 Florida's governor freed Menéndez and

others who had escaped from the English and authorized them to establish the first free black town in what is today the United States, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose. The site where Mose stood has been designated a National Historic Landmark, and a museum now interprets this story for local schoolchildren and visitors.

Menéndez and the other new homesteaders of Mose wrote to express their gratitude to the king of Spain and vowed to be “the most cruel enemies of the English,” and to risk their lives and spill their “last drop of blood in defense of the Great crown of Spain and the Holy Faith” (Landers, 30). The black homesteaders included skilled craftsmen who soon built a fort, a church, and homes for a population of almost one hundred people. They planted crops on the periphery of their new town and fished and gathered oysters from the nearby creek. A Catholic priest assigned to Mose instructed the newcomers in the tenets of the faith, and once they were examined, he baptized them all. The new Spanish subjects then ratified their marriages in the Catholic faith. Menéndez and his wife, Ana María de Escovar, were married on 28 December 1739, and their entry in the parish registry states that they were both Mandingas who had once belonged to the royal accountant named Francisco Menéndez. A census taken of Mose in 1759 lists Menéndez's age as fifty-five and Ana María's as thirty-nine, although these are rough estimates only.

Less than two years after the town was built, however, England declared war on Spain, and in 1740 Governor James Oglethorpe of Georgia led a major invasion of Florida and occupied Mose. Its residents were forced to take refuge in St. Augustine. Seven ships of the royal navy sailed up from Jamaica to join the assault. Menéndez led many sallies against the invaders, and his troops eventually helped retake Mose. The Spanish governor recognized the black troops' bravery in reports to the king, noting especially that of Menéndez. Menéndez, who was literate in Spanish (and probably also in Arabic), wrote the king two letters recounting his military services and asking for appropriate compensation. Hoping to get to Spain to seek his reward in person, Menéndez became a corsair who harried British ships and settlements along the Atlantic coast. On one voyage Menéndez was captured by Englishmen who tortured him in retaliation for “Bloody Mose” (Landers, 37). His captors sold Menéndez into slavery in the Bahamas, but by 1759 the indomitable captain had regained his freedom and the leadership of Mose. In 1762 Spain finally ceded Florida to England in a peace treaty, and Menéndez, his wife, their four children, and the rest of the Mose residents joined other Floridians evacuating to Cuba. The Spanish Crown gave each refugee new lands, food, tools, and an African slave, and Menéndez and other black Floridians helped establish a new town called San Agustín de la Nueva Florida in Matanzas Province. Harsh conditions on the Cuban frontier eventually drove Menéndez and his family back to Havana, where they received a subsidy from the Spanish government and where Menéndez ended his days. The African-born Menéndez spent more than fifty years of his long life fighting for freedom and more than forty years serving the Crown of Spain that freed him.

Further Reading

Deagan, Kathleen, and Darcie MacMahon. *Fort Mose: Colonial America's Black Fortress of Freedom* (1995).

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

Wood, Peter H. *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (1996)

