

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Stories of Beaufort District
In the Revolutionary War

*Maroons
In Revolutionary Era
Beaufort District*

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BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

Maroons in Revolutionary Era Beaufort District

The term “maroon” first appeared in the English historical record as early as 1572, when it was recorded as “*Symarons*” in the ship’s log of Francis Drake during his expedition to Panama. Drake described these people as “a black people which, about eighty years past (1492) fled from the Spaniards, their masters, by reason of their cruelty, and since have grown into a nation, under two Kings of their own.”

The word “maroon” derives from the Spanish term *cimarrón*, meaning “wild” or “untamed.” Originally used to describe livestock that had escaped domestication, the term was later applied to enslaved people who fled captivity. Because enslaved individuals were treated as property under colonial systems, this linguistic shift reflected the dehumanizing framework of slavery in the Americas.

Many of the maroons encountered by Drake were likely descendants of Africans who escaped during early Spanish expeditions in the late 15th century. Over time, these communities developed into organized, self-sufficient societies. Some even allied themselves with English privateers, assisting in raids against Spanish shipping and colonial authorities.

It is important to distinguish maroons from ordinary runaway slaves. While many enslaved individuals attempted escape, relatively few succeeded in establishing permanent, independent communities. Maroons, by contrast, intentionally created settlements designed to exist entirely outside colonial control. These communities were often fortified, strategically located in remote terrain, and structured for long-term survival.

Maroons frequently formed alliances with nearby Native American groups, resulting in blended communities known to the Spanish as *palenques*. These settlements were typically hidden in difficult-to-access areas and protected through deliberate measures such as false trails and defensive traps. Over time, maroon societies emerged across the Americas, including in Suriname, Brazil, the French colonies, and the British Caribbean.

In North America, maroon communities were most often found in swampy, inhospitable regions. Elevated ground within these wetlands was cleared and cultivated, allowing villages - complete with gardens, fields, and livestock - to exist undetected. In the southeastern coastal plain, maroons sometimes settled near Spanish settlements and even fought alongside Spanish forces during conflicts with the British, including the 1740 invasion of Florida. Following Spain’s cession of East Florida to Britain in 1763, many maroons relocated to Cuba rather than risk re-enslavement.

South Carolina, with its strong ties to Barbadian plantation culture, became one of the most rigidly slave-dependent colonies in British North America. After the Stono Rebellion and the passage of the 1740 Slave Codes, conditions for enslaved people became even more restrictive. As a result, increasing numbers sought refuge with Native American groups allied with the

Spanish or attempted to reach Florida. After the American Revolution, many maroon communities in East Florida either migrated westward or were absorbed into the Seminole Nation.

A tragic and unusual maroon incident occurred during the retreat of British forces under Augustine Prevost in 1779. As his army withdrew from the vicinity of Charleston and maneuvered toward Savannah, logistical constraints forced the abandonment of nearly 800 captured enslaved individuals on Otter Island in St. Helena Sound. With minimal supplies and no means of escape, most perished. As late as 1795, reports from passing ships noted bleached white human bones still visible along the island's shores.

Despite such tragedies, maroon communities persisted in South Carolina. Smaller, mobile groups, often numbering around ten individuals, operated in remote areas, sometimes engaging in banditry. Larger, more established settlements, particularly in swamp regions along the Congaree, Santee, and Savannah Rivers, could reach populations of up to 100 and were often fortified with palisades.

Demographically, South Carolina maroon groups were initially composed largely of young male runaways. Over time, as settlements stabilized, they expanded to include women and children. Some communities also included formerly enslaved individuals who had fought for the British in hopes of securing freedom but were ultimately denied it. In 1786, for example, a chance militia engagement with a maroon settlement in the Savannah River region revealed that most of the inhabitants identified themselves as "the King of England's Soldiers."

Larger maroon settlements sometimes conducted raids on nearby plantations to secure food and tools. These raids occasionally provoked organized retaliation from colonial authorities, resulting in cycles of violence throughout the late colonial and Revolutionary periods.

One of the most significant postwar maroon settlements in the Beaufort District was located on Abercorn Island between Ebenezer and Purysburg during 1786–1787. This community was reportedly formed by more than one hundred former Black dragoons who had served with British forces and chose to remain free rather than return to slavery.

In response to increasing maroon activity, Thomas Pinckney authorized militia action in the Hartstone Swamp region along the Savannah River. Initial efforts to suppress these communities proved ineffective. Pinckney subsequently enlisted Catawba scouts and established bounties for captured or killed maroons.

On October 18, 1786, a joint South Carolina–Georgia militia force attacked a maroon encampment on Bell Isle Island near Purysburg. Although several maroons were killed, the militia withdrew due to lack of ammunition. A subsequent expedition in April 1787, led by Colonel Thomas Hutson, resulted in further engagement. While militia forces inflicted casualties, losses on their side and tactical limitations prevented complete destruction of the group. Ultimately, sustained pressure forced the dispersal of the community.

Over time, maroon communities in South Carolina gradually disappeared. Some migrated south or west, while others were absorbed into Native American populations. By the early 19th century, these organized settlements had largely vanished. However, small, independent Black farming communities that emerged in remote areas prior to the American Civil War may, in some cases, trace their origins to earlier maroon societies.

Sources:

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