

**Andrew K. Frank.** *Before the Pioneers: Indians, Settlers, Slaves, and the Founding of Miami.* Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2017. 160 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8130-5451-3.

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The purpose of Andrew Frank's *Before the Pioneers: Indians, Settlers, Slaves, and the Founding of Miami* is to tell Miami's lost history, or more precisely, to tell the history of the "North Bank" of the Miami River, the focal point of continuous human activity for over four thousand years. In six well-executed chapters, Frank, a professor of history at Florida State University and a specialist in Native American history, provides an overview of the North Bank from before the first human habitation to the Civil War, thus setting the stage for late nineteenth-century "Miami Pioneers."

Frank maintains that the several-hundred-acre spot, though almost entirely paved over today, once served as "the center of the human history of South Florida" (p. 2). With links to the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds as well as many important points in the interior, this location at the mouth of the Miami River was a sort of crossroads of civilization long before Miami gained that reputation in the twentieth century. Frank maintains that those who came after Miami's incorporation in 1896 either ignored or dismissed the previous history of the spot. Through an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, Frank aims to recover the lost history of Tequesta Indians, Spanish missionaries, African slaves, Seminole Indians, Bahamian boaters, wartime refugees, merchants, developers, and others who lived on the site be-

fore the well-known "pioneers" who arrived in the late nineteenth century.

After an initial chapter covering the prehistory of the area, Frank begins with an overview of the Native American presence on the North Bank. He speculates that the Tequesta founded a settlement at the mouth of the Miami River two thousand years ago because it was likely the only location in the entire region that was above sea level year-round. Though the Tequesta were a non-agricultural people, they harvested coontie, a poisonous root—that is, until the toxins were removed by processing. Coontie flour became a mainstay in the Native diet well into the twentieth century. The Tequesta fished, hunted, and set up camps in the interior. Using the latest anthropological and archaeological literature, Frank speculates on precontact Tequesta political, religious, and burial practices. They traveled widely by canoe throughout the region and interacted with the much stronger Calusa peoples on the other side of the peninsula. The Tequesta left huge middens on the North and South Bank that were wantonly destroyed by early twentieth-century developers. Perhaps the most remarkable archaeological find in the area was the discovery of the "Miami Circle" in 1998, uncovered during the excavation for a condominium. The thirty-eight-foot circle contained nearly thirty holes in the limestone

bedrock on the South Bank that archaeologists believe served as a circular ceremonial site, or perhaps as the residence of a spiritual leader. The discovery of ceremonial items from locations from as far away as the Appalachian Mountains indicate that the Tequesta traveled far and wide for trade and religious purposes.

The first documented European visitor to Biscayne Bay was Ponce de Leon in 1513, but no substantial efforts to explore the area occurred until Pedro Menéndez de Avilés sanctioned a mission there in 1567. Two priests and roughly thirty soldiers manned the Jesuit mission that served roughly 180 Tequesta, but the ill-fated establishment only lasted three turbulent years. The Spanish ultimately decided the location unworthy of its limited resources: the site was subject to flooding, the Tequesta were too few, and their non-agricultural society was not suited to Spanish needs. The North Bank's only real value to the Spanish was its close proximity to Havana, roughly 230 miles away. The Spanish hoped that the North Bank would provide a safe harbor for distressed Spanish ships and crews and that the Tequesta might prevent European rivals from establishing bases in the area. Yet within a few decades the English and the French began encroaching on Spanish shipping lanes and territories, and the bay became a "magnet" for shipwrecks. Tequesta became adept at salvaging ships. Eventually, "opportunistic sailors from across the Atlantic world" settled clandestinely in the area. They became "opportunistic salvagers" who "camouflaged their activities behind a facade of benign economic pursuits like fishing and turtling and frequently traded goods with the Tequestas in return for the access to the river and its fresh water" (pp. 44-45).

Once the mission was withdrawn the Tequesta began killing castaways. There had always been rumors and some evidence of cannibalism and human sacrifice, and Frank reminds his readers, "The link between barbarity and conquest extended throughout the New World, as the Spanish and

others used it to wage 'just wars' against the Native peoples. Indians who practiced cannibalism, human mutilation, and other 'savage' acts relinquished their rights to humane treatment. The rejection of the mission may have served as enough proof to justify the conquest of the Tequesta—as did their perceived 'worship of the devil'—but the policy toward Spanish castaways sealed the deal" (p. 46).

The dawn of the eighteenth century brought with it the onslaught of British slaving expeditions to Florida. The southern tip of the peninsula was not untouched, as many of Florida's Native peoples were either enslaved or dislocated by Carolinians and their Indian allies. The raids brought numerous Native American refugees from differing backgrounds to the North Bank. In 1743, one last effort to establish a mission (this time a Franciscan one) was attempted, but it failed. Spain was simply too weak and uninterested in defending the lower Florida Peninsula from English marauders and slave catchers. After a raid by the Yuchi Indians, many of those Native Americans who still remained on the North Bank evacuated to Havana.

Frank summarizes the dismal scene as the First Spanish Period came to a close: "The Tequesta people had lost their coherence as a culture and polity.... Most of the survivors of the North Bank had quietly relocated to Havana and disappeared into the amalgam of the Spanish Empire. Others remained in Florida, likely joining with other Indians the newly formed Seminole and Miccosukee villages in the interior. The Tequesta ceased to exist as a polity, and for the first time in over a millennium the North Bank briefly was up for grabs" (p. 49).

The location, with its evacuated lime groves and structures, remained relatively untouched for some time until an interloper named William Augustus Bowles arrived with several British loyalists, fugitive African American slaves, and demoralized Indians in 1783. Bowles proclaimed himself

“Director General of the Creek Nation” and planned to use the North Bank as a staging area to challenge Spain and the new United States. Bowles’s brief residence at the North Bank was emblematic of the many castaways, soldiers of fortune, and salvagers—most with ties to the Bahamas—who frequented the site before and after the Spanish relinquished the Floridas to the United States. In the years immediately following the First Seminole War (1818-19), when US military presence was temporarily absent, the North Bank became a kind of escape hatch for runaway Black Seminoles and enslaved African Americans who found freedom by boarding schooners passing back and forth from the Bahamas.[1]

Eventually the North Bank drew interest from enterprising Englishmen and Americans. In 1805 John Egan, an Englishman from St. Augustine, obtained a one-hundred-acre grant from Spain after first squatting at North Bank. The well-regarded ship captain acquired many more acres and eventually established a slave-based plantation that attempted, but failed, to successfully launch an agricultural establishment. In 1830 Egan sold out to Richard Fitzpatrick, a planter from South Carolina who had migrated to Key West not long after the change of flags. Fitzpatrick eventually acquired about four thousand acres and brought in nearly sixty slaves. But like his predecessor, Fitzpatrick soon discovered that the land was not suitable to the production of staple crops. Most of his slaves would be employed in picking fruit from the wild groves of limes, oranges, and coconuts. They also cultivated and milled coontie, herded cattle and other livestock, and fished. Fitzpatrick hoped to attract settlers to the area but these dreams were dashed with the outbreak of the Second Seminole War in 1835.

Once violence struck, Fitzpatrick and his neighbor-employee-agent, William Cooley, abandoned the area and entered the Florida militia. The United States founded Fort Dallas on the North Bank, and the post made use of the crops,

lumber, and domesticated animals left on the site. The fort served as a spot to interdict Indians and Cubans and Bahamians and as a staging area for raids and surveys into the interior. By 1838 the North Bank was transformed from a plantation to a military post and housed up to 126 men. In 1841 Fitzpatrick mortgaged his lands to his sister and eventually the land reverted to his nephew, William English, who tried to make a go of the plantation again until giving up in 1849 to pursue gold-digging in California. The military returned again in 1855 with the outbreak of the Third Seminole War, and for the next few years the post housed soldiers and served as a safe haven for Americans moving into the area. Once the Civil War broke out, Fort Dallas was once again reactivated. The site attracted refugees from all over Florida and the South, most of them attempting to escape the vicissitudes of the war. There were deserters from both sides, Bahamians, Cubans, wreckers, escaped slaves, blockade runners, but in large part authorities ignored the location because it was deemed inconsequential to the war.

After chronicling Confederate secretary of war John C. Breckenridge’s dramatic escape through Biscayne Bay, Frank turns to his recurring theme—that future generations of Miamians would attempt to erase the history of those who came before. Frank writes, “The North Bank and its natural environment remained forever changed by the earlier waves of inhabitants.” Though they left behind many physical reminders of the nearly two thousand years of continuous occupation of the site, “the next generation of settlers would choose to erase the memory of these ancient and not so ancient inhabitants. Instead, they would declare themselves to be pioneers, the first real occupants and creators of the community that would become known as Miami” (p. 96).

In a sense, Miami’s history is not unique in that historians have all but forgotten, discounted, or failed to take into account important Native American antecedents in other important modern

towns and communities. “Many, if not all,” Frank reminds us, “of the colonial towns that fill history books and tourist guides originally began as Indian towns. These memories, however, have long been forgotten. In the quest to establish ‘firsts’ and establish European origins, scholars and civic boosters have erased countless ancient and indigenous histories. As a result, the voices and perspectives of settlers and pioneers drown out those of the original inhabitants. This volume seeks to help continue the process of remembering these forgotten ancient histories for Miami, Florida, and elsewhere” (p. 112).

Andrew Frank has accomplished much in this early history of Miami’s North Bank. The book joins other fine works that tell the environmental and human story of Florida places, such as Branch Cabell and Alfred J. Hanna’s *The St. Johns* (1943), Marjorie Stoneman Douglas’s *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947), and Gloria Jahoda’s *The River of the Golden Ibis*, and more modern works like Canter Brown’s *Peace River Frontier* (1991), Janet Mathews’s *Edge of Wilderness* (1983), and Michael Grunwald’s *The Swamp*, (2006). The book’s greatest strength is Frank’s own research and his adept use of other modern scholarship to tell the previously untold history of the North Bank. Well written, readable, and free of jargon, *Before the Pioneers* will be popular with both scholars and the general public.

#### Note

[1]. For example, see Irvin D. S. Winsboro and Joe Knetsch, “Florida Slaves, the ‘Saltwater Railroad’ to the Bahamas, and Anglo-American Diplomacy,” *Journal of Southern History* 79 (February 2013): 51-78.

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