

CHAPTER TEN

The Atlantic Transformations of Francisco Menéndez

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For some twenty years now, I have been tracking the Atlantic trails of a Mandinga man known to me as Francisco Menéndez. I first encountered him through a 1738 petition to the Spanish governor of Florida in which he acted as spokesman for a group of African runaways from Carolina slavery. Menéndez called on the governor to honor Spain's religious sanctuary policy, first established in 1693, and to free all of the Africans who had come to Florida, only to find themselves unjustly reenslaved. Petitioning in support of Menéndez was Chief Jorge, a leader of the Yamasee War with whom Menéndez had fought for several bloody years before they were defeated and fled southward.¹ After two decades among the Spaniards, Menéndez would become the leader of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, the first free black town in what is today the United States, and his story would shape my career as an historian. Francisco Menéndez and Chief Jorge launched me on my first biographical quest into the Black Atlantic, and thanks to the rich archival documentation available for Africans and Indians throughout the Spanish world, I have been employing the biographical methodology ever since. My recent book showcases just some of the fascinating individuals I have met in the Spanish records who engaged in the turbulent geopolitics and revolutions of their day. And as Menéndez first proved to me, the actions of a few individuals can have perhaps unintended and, certainly unforeseen, imperial and trans-Atlantic consequences.²

My quest to identify Menéndez was triggered by reading Peter H. Wood's wonderful *Black Majority*, which concludes with a band of slave rebels from

Stono escaping down the King's Highway to St. Augustine.³ In my search for the survivors of that slave rebellion, I encountered Menéndez, a refugee from the earlier Yamasee War of 1715, and, eventually, I came to the earliest documented group of freedom-seekers from Carolina who reached Florida in 1687.⁴ We will never know how many others may have attempted that brutal journey and failed. This early foray into biographical history produced a dissertation chapter and a journal article, but more importantly, it led to an archaeological investigation, a major museum exhibit, and, eventually, Mose's designation as a National Historic Landmark. Today, a museum in St. Augustine honors Menéndez and his fellow freedom-seekers. Perhaps most importantly, the story of Menéndez and his "subjects" has made its way into K-12 and university textbooks, thus altering, at least in some measure, what has tended toward an Anglocentric narrative of early American history. School children in St. Augustine now play the roles of Mose villagers at somewhat anachronistic "Juneteenth" celebrations.⁵

My initial research focused on Menéndez's life in Spanish Florida, but I have since gained comparative perspective researching the experience of Africans in archives in Mexico, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Colombia, and Brazil. Having eschewed a national framework, I found a new scholarly home in Atlantic history, which introduced me to the rich scholarship of pre-colonial Africanists and also to the new Indian history. New online research tools such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Eighteenth Century Collections Online, and the amazing Portal to the Archives of Spain (PARES), among others, have also allowed scholars to range more widely across the Atlantic world. I am now revisiting Menéndez's story and attempting to fill in more of his African past, his years among the Yamasee, and his final years in Cuba. This essay represents my first attempt to incorporate new understandings and historical research into Menéndez's biography. The only clue I have to Menéndez's African origins is that he identified himself, and Spaniards also identified him, as Mandinga. I know, too, that English slavers brought him to Carolina early in the eighteenth century and that much of their early slave trade concentrated along the Gambia River. With that fragmentary evidence, we can begin to piece together some of his African past.

Portuguese merchants introduced Catholicism, Portuguese social patterns, and European material culture to the Gambia as early as the fifteenth century, while integrating themselves into local familial and economic networks that facilitated their trade. In a pattern that would be transplanted to the Americas, they married or cohabited with local women and their children

bore Portuguese names, wore crucifixes, and practiced a form of Catholicism. These Luso-Africans spoke *crioulo*, a blend of Portuguese and African languages, as well as a variety of local African languages. Their Portuguese-style houses reflected the wealth and status of *alcaldes*, or village leaders, who acted as culture brokers between locals and Europeans.⁶ Once a year, a priest from the Cabo Verde island of Santiago traveled to the mainland to perform marriages and baptisms for the polyglot Luso-Africans living there.⁷ Portuguese Jews also found a fuller measure of religious tolerance in the Atlantic Islands, and like their Catholic countrymen they became traders in Cabo Verde and along the Gambia where they established their own mixed-race families.⁸

By this time, Muslim merchants were already well-established in the Senegambia region, often living in their own villages strategically placed near existing indigenous villages. Muslim traders introduced Arabic, Islam, and Koranic education and literacy into Senegambia, along with trade. Muslim holy men known as *marabouts* gained status as local healers and sold amulets or *gris-gris* containing protective Koranic prayers. Some Muslim converts along the Gambia were noted for their strict observance of law, while others practiced a fairly relaxed form of Islam; many drank, for instance, and in this ecumenical locale, some non-Muslims also attended Koranic schools.⁹

The Mandinga, to whom Francisco Menéndez claimed connection, were the most powerful of the many African groups living along the Gambia River, and most were Muslims. They were ruled by noble lineages which acquired that status by having founded towns, as Menéndez would later do in Florida. Mandinga rulers established a series of small kingdoms along the Gambia River and collected tribute in the form of cattle, poultry, rice, and other agricultural produce from their weaker Fula and Sereer neighbors.¹⁰

In the seventeenth century English and French traders began appearing in the region, looking to purchase elephant “teeth,” beeswax, cattle hides, and slaves from Mandinga merchants. Mandinga *mansas* charged them land-use taxes as they had other weaker African groups, and in addition, they charged head taxes on each foreign resident and for each ship entering their ports. In 1661 the Royal Adventurers of England Trading in Africa occupied a small island in the middle of the Gambia River and in 1670 the Royal African Company won a government monopoly over the Gambian trade and built Fort James on that island. Then, in 1681, French competitors representing the Compagnie du Senegal established Albreda on the northern bank of the Gambia River, almost directly across from Fort James. Mandinga rulers grew wealthy on tribute and trade, and English and French observers reported that

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like the Luso-Africans, some of them also lived in European-style houses and wore elaborate mixes of African and European clothing. They also held slaves.¹¹

In Mandinga society, as in the Iberian world, a person might be enslaved for debt or crimes, or, in cases of dire necessity, they might sell themselves or their children and thereby be consigned to the *jongo* caste. It is unknown how the young man who would become Francisco Menéndez was enslaved or by whom. Although the Mandinga considered slaves property that could be sold, or even killed by their masters, they could not be sold or killed without a public trial and they might also be allowed to work some days for their own gain. Should they remain in a household for several generations, they would be given the surname of their owner and a second name denoting their slave origins.¹² Urban slaves in the Spanish world might also be regarded as part of the extended family and were permitted to work for their own profit at their owner's discretion and accumulate property (*peculium*).¹³

Thus, the Gambia region in which Francisco Menéndez was raised in some ways prepared him for the new worlds he would come to know. The Gambia had long been a multicultural and multilingual world where Mandinga, Fula, Wolof, and Serahuli speakers bartered with Portuguese, Arabic, English, and French speakers, each learning to accommodate the other to some degree . . . all in the interest of the deal.¹⁴ Given what English ship captains and factors described of life along the Gambia, it is entirely possible, then, that before being transported to Carolina, Menéndez would have already interacted with a variety of peoples and cultures and acquired the "linguistic dexterity, social plasticity, and cultural agility" that would serve him well in his next world.¹⁵

In 1670, as English traders from the Royal African Company were settling into Fort James, across the Atlantic Barbadian planters were launching the new English colony of Carolina, on land still claimed by Spain as La Florida. Charles Town was "only 10 days journey" from St. Augustine, and the undermanned Spanish garrison was compelled to make a feeble, and unsuccessful, attempt to eject the "usurpers." The abortive Spanish expedition was commanded by St. Augustine's royal treasurer, don Juan Menéndez Márquez, who would later become Francisco Menéndez's owner in St. Augustine.¹⁶ Thus began almost a century of conflict over the so-called "debatable lands." The ensuing Anglo-Spanish hostilities triggered waves of migration, raids, and counter-raids all along the Atlantic coast, engulfing indigenous groups and African slaves in imperial contests for control of the Southeast.¹⁷

Whether encouraged by the English, or of their own volition, Yamasee

Indians long allied to the Spanish soon began attacking the chain of Spanish missions along the Georgia coast.¹⁸ Unable to defend their Christian charges, the Spaniards tried to relocate them southward but some revolted and fled instead to the interior and an English alliance.¹⁹ In the early months of 1685, several thousand Yamasee accompanied by “3 nations of the Spanish Indians that are Christians, Sapella, Soho, and Sapicbay” relocated from St. Augustine to lands they formerly held along the coast, such as the Pocatoligo, on St. Helena.²⁰ Later that year, some fifty Yamasee from St. Helena raided the Christian Timucuan village of Santa Catalina de Afuica, on St. Catherine’s Island, killing eighteen people and taking twenty-five others as slaves back to Carolina. As an added insult, the former Christian converts also brought back church ornaments from the ruined Spanish missions.²¹

Despite this instability, Carolina’s commitment to and investment in African slavery continued apace. Early settlers brought small numbers of enslaved Africans with them to begin the hard work of clearing forests and building housing and periodically imported more from Barbados and Jamaica. They also enslaved local Indians, as their compatriots in Virginia and other colonies were doing, but the demand for ever more labor proved greater than local indigenous supply.²² In 1674, the Lords Proprietor of Carolina ordered Andrew Percival to “begin a Trade with the Spaniards for Negroes” but this plan must not have been realized and in 1699, Captain W. Rhett imported the first known shipment of slaves from the African coast in the ship *Providence*. Soon, Carolina planters were importing larger lots of enslaved people from Africa, primarily from the Gambia.²³ By 1709, Governor Edward Randolph reported to the Board of Trade that there were “four negroes to one white man” in Carolina.²⁴ The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database lists no voyages from Africa to the North American mainland for the years 1670–1720, but reports such as Randolph’s indicate a larger volume of Africans imported into Carolina than earlier supposed, with a significant increase in slave imports between 1709 and 1711.²⁵ It is probable, then, that the Mandinga youth who became Francisco Menéndez arrived at the Carolina frontier during this period of heavy African importation.²⁶

Many of the newly imported Africans were destined for the dense pine forests and swamps of Carolina where settlers early established critical timber and naval stores industries, encouraged by British bounties on tar, pitch, rosin, and turpentine.²⁷ Enslaved Africans also cut and sawed timber that planters shipped to Charleston and on to other parts of the British Caribbean. As Peter H. Wood has shown, early Carolina’s “black pioneers” also became

“cattle-hunters” in the Carolina forests. All these occupations allowed even recently imported Africans a certain amount of autonomy and mobility, as well as access to native peoples and their knowledge of the geopolitics of the region. Africans also came to know the lay of the Carolina landscape by serving as “path-finders” and linguists for Indian traders and planters.²⁸

Francisco Menéndez may have held any of these occupations, but he never referred to his enslaved past in his Spanish correspondence and we do not know how he came to be enslaved by other Africans or how long he waited on James Island before being herded into the hold of a slave ship. We do not know his African name or what name he was given by the Englishman who bought him in Charles Town. We know only that he entered Carolina’s multicultural frontier sometime in the early 1700s, joining other Africans and still more numerous indigenous captives to form the region’s “charter generation” of slaves.²⁹ Over the next ten years or so, he came to know English chattel slavery and also previously unknown Indian cultures. Soon, Menéndez, like other Africans and Indians alike, would be swept into the ongoing Anglo-Spanish contest for control of the Atlantic Southeast.

Given their numeric weakness, both the English and the Spaniards used Indian and African surrogates to do much of their fighting on this unstable Atlantic frontier. In 1683 the governor of Spanish Florida, Juan Márquez Cabrera, followed the lead of short-handed governors across the Spanish Atlantic and created a new *pardo* (mulatto) and *moreno* (black) militia in St. Augustine.³⁰ The men swore before God and the cross their willingness to serve the king, and while their pledge may have been formulaic, it was also an effort to define their status as members of the religious and civil community, and as vassals of a monarch from whom they might expect protection or patronage in exchange for armed service.³¹ These black militiamen were significant for their linguistic and cultural abilities, their knowledge of the frontier, and their military skills, and the Spaniards regularly included them in their raids against Carolina.³² The repeated cross-currents of raids and migrations across the Southeast acquainted many blacks and Indians alike with the routes to St. Augustine, as well as with the enmity existing between the English and Spanish colonies.³³ It did not take long for overworked slaves of the English to attempt to reach the enemy of their oppressors.

In 1687 eight black men, two women, and a nursing child arrived at St. Augustine in a stolen canoe and requested baptism into the “True Faith.”³⁴ Given the multicultural nature of the Gambia region, and early missionary reports of Portuguese-speaking slaves in Carolina, it is quite possible that

some of the runaways reaching Florida had already been exposed to Roman Catholicism.³⁵ Thus, they may have known of the protections and opportunities the Catholic Church offered, possibly even manipulating confessional politics to their own advantage in making a shared request for religious sanctuary.³⁶ As required of a good Christian ruler, the Spanish governor, Diego de Quiroga, saw to the African runaways' Catholic instruction, baptism, and marriage, and refused to return them to Captain William Dunlop, the Carolina Indian trader who arrived from Carolina to recover them the following year.³⁷

The slaves' "telegraph" quickly reported the outcome of the negotiations, and the Spaniards recorded new groups of runaways being received in St. Augustine in 1688, 1689, and 1690. Carolina's governor, James Colleton, complained that slaves ran "dayly to your towns." Unsure about how to handle the refugees, St. Augustine's officials repeatedly solicited Spain for guidance and finally, on November 7, 1693, Charles II issued a royal proclamation "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."³⁸ The initiative and determination of those eight enslaved men and women who risked their lives to become free thus led to a major policy revision at the Spanish court that would shape the geopolitics of the Southeast and the Caribbean for the next century, as it would the life of Francisco Menéndez.³⁹

Shortly after Menéndez reached Carolina, the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1713) embroiled the Atlantic Southeast in new waves of violence. Carolina's governor, well-known slave trader James Moore, led a combined force of about a thousand men, including Yamasee allies and armed slaves, in a series of devastating raids on the Spanish coastal mission sites. Thousands of Florida Indians were slaughtered and thousands more became slaves in Carolina or the Caribbean.⁴⁰ French allies joined Spain's tri-racial forces in a counterattack on Charles Town in 1706, but despite some initial success, this retaliatory expedition failed.⁴¹ During the war, Carolina officials created a militia of 950 "freemen," each of whom was to present for service "one able slave armed with gun or lance."⁴² It is tempting to wonder if Menéndez was one of those newly armed slaves who saw repeated service against St. Augustine's black and Indian militias.⁴³ In these engagements, Carolina's slaves would have witnessed armed black men in service to Spaniards and once again been reminded that Spanish Florida offered them a refuge. More would seek sanctuary in Florida as a result of the Yamasee War that erupted in 1715.

Most studies of the Yamasee War have blamed that conflict on Carolina's

Indian traders who exploited the local indigenous groups, enmeshing them in ruinous debt. The distraught Yamasee filed repeated complaints against these traders with the Carolina Commissioners of Indian Trade. They charged that John Wright, the Indian Agent posted at the paramount Yamasee village of Pocotaligo, on St. Helena Island, forced them to carry burdens, demanded that they build a house for him next to that of the council house, and debauched their young girls.⁴⁴ In another incident “Lewis King of yr Pocotaligo Town” complained against traders Cornelius MacKarty (sic) and Samuel Hilden for “stripping and beating Wiggasay and Haclantoosa, two of his people att one of their plays.”⁴⁵ Attempts by authorities to try to curb the worst of these abuses were largely ineffective, and the traders lived almost as rulers in their host towns.⁴⁶ During this same period, the Spanish governor was gifting delegations of Yamasee in St. Augustine.

In an effort to resolve long-simmering hostilities, on April 14, 1715 the commissioners sent a delegation of traders to Pocotaligo. They included William Bray, who had tracked some of his runaway slaves to St. Augustine earlier in the year, Thomas Nairne, Samuel Warner, John Cochran, and John Wright, against whom the Yamasee had filed numerous complaints. The Yamasee received the delegation of traders, but on Good Friday, they tortured and put them to death before rising in a well-coordinated attack against the English.⁴⁷ Recognizing the chance for their own liberation, Francisco Menéndez and other enslaved Africans joined in common cause with the Yamasee against their mutual enemy, although Carolinians reported their slaves had been “taken.”⁴⁸ The Yamasee and their African allies fought several major battles at Pocotaligo and another at Salkehatchie, but eventually were driven ever southward.⁴⁹

For three years, the man who became Francisco Menéndez and several other slaves who had risen against the English fought with the forces of the Yamasee chief Jorge, all the while gaining valuable military skills and cultural, political, and geographic knowledge. In those years, Menéndez transformed himself from English chattel into a valued Yamasee warrior. The Yamasee almost succeeded in eradicating white settlement in Carolina, but reinforcements from Virginia and North Carolina helped turn the tide, leading the Yamasees to seek refuge among the very Spaniards they had once harried. Chief Jorge and his African allies, among whom was Francisco Menéndez, escaped together to Spanish Florida where they hoped to claim the religious sanctuary promised in 1693 by Spain’s Catholic monarch.⁵⁰ Menéndez’s hopes of freedom would not be fulfilled for another twenty years.

During the Yamasee War, the indigenous geopolitics of the Southeast had shifted once again. One month after the outbreak of the war, and in response to the perceived weakness of the English, Coosa's paramount Chief Chalaquiliche ordered his subjects to switch their allegiance to the Spaniards. He sent four lesser chiefs to St. Augustine to relay this offer and their spokesman, one Yfallaquisca, also known as Perro Bravo, laid eight chamois cords full of knots before Spanish officials. Each knot denoted a town promising to switch allegiance to the Spaniards (a total of 161 towns) and Perro Bravo asked that the cords be sent to the king of Spain, noting that towns of fewer persons were not even represented.⁵¹

Spanish officials in St. Augustine settled many of their new Indian allies in villages on the periphery of St. Augustine, generally grouping them by language. Perro Bravo lived at the Yamsee village of Pocotalaca (after Pocotaligo) and somehow claimed ownership of Francisco Menéndez and three other African "slaves" who after fighting with the Yamasee considered they had liberated themselves. One of Perro Bravo's other slaves may have been Francisco Menéndez's Mandinga wife, who fled with him from Carolina. Perro Bravo told Indians and Spaniards alike that if he were not paid for the slaves he would kill them, and that he had many other lands in which he could live.⁵² The threat apparently paid off, and at a meeting at the Indian village of Nombre de Dios in the fall of 1718, the acting governor of Florida, Juan de Ayala y Escovar, purchased the endangered Africans for some corn and liquor.⁵³ Thus, in approximately two decades of his youth, Menéndez had experienced enslavement by Africans, Englishmen, Yamasees, and Spaniards, with only a brief period of freedom during the Yamasee War.

Spanish slavery was not what Menéndez sought, but it would be different than slavery he had experienced under any others. His was an anomalous enslavement. Although the manner of his purchase seems to have made him a Crown slave, owned by the government rather than by an individual, there is no evidence he was ever treated as such.⁵⁴ Rather, it seems that he may have lived some time with the governor himself, since his wife took the name Ana Maria de Escovar.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, ever growing African population and the fear that slaves might ally with Spaniards in Florida led Carolina planters to obsess about slave rebellion. Carolinians discovered alleged slave plots in 1711 and 1714 and in 1720 the townspeople of Charles Town uncovered a major slave conspiracy in which at least some of the participants "thought to gett to Augustine." Fourteen got as far as Savannah before being captured and executed.⁵⁶ In

1724, ten more runaways reached St. Augustine, assisted again by English-speaking Yamasee Indians, and they stated they knew that the Spanish king had offered freedom for those seeking conversion and baptism.⁵⁷

Following the precedent first set in 1687, Florida's governor, Antonio de Benavides, offered to purchase the runaways for two hundred pesos apiece and he sent don Francisco Menéndez Márquez to Charles Town to negotiate with their owners, who angrily rejected the offer as insufficient.⁵⁸ The governor also inquired of Spain if sanctuary was indeed to be offered, since the runaways had appeared during a time of truce between Spain and England. As often happened, the governor received no reply, and after the English threatened to reclaim their lost slaves by force, he sold the unlucky fugitives at public auction to the leading creditors of the St. Augustine treasury. In this way don Francisco Menéndez Márquez acquired the Mandinga man who would take his name at his Catholic baptism.⁵⁹

The African now had a powerful patron—a royal official and a wealthy landowner—who served as his godparent and made him part of his household. Don Francisco was sent on repeated diplomatic and military missions to Carolina, and it seems likely he would have taken with him the slave who had fought his way through that terrain and who also knew so well the Yamasee and English geopolitics. In 1725, don Francisco was sent to destroy a fortified English settlement at Stuart's Town and the following year Francisco Menéndez was named captain of St. Augustine's black militia.⁶⁰ Thereafter, Menéndez led important military engagements against the English from whom he had fled, each of which would have enhanced his status in the Spanish community.

In these years, Carolina slaves continued to flee to Florida. Some of the runaways were seasoned warriors who had fought with the Yamasee against the English, and some may have also been warriors in their homelands. They became effective additions to the black militia and joined in subsequent Spanish raids against their former masters. The same year Menéndez was made captain of the slave militia, planters near Stono "had fourteen Slaves Runaway to St. Augustine" and the governor of Carolina complained to London that the Spaniards not only harbored their runaways but "They have found a New way of sending our own slaves against us, to Rob and Plunder us."⁶¹ Carolina's Governor Arthur Middleton claimed that "Six of our Runaway slaves and the rest Indians" in two canoes attacked near Pon Pon in the fall of 1727 and carried away white captives. Another account of the same raid said that "Ten Negroes and fourteen Indians Commanded by those of their own Colour,

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without any Spaniards in company with them” had been responsible, and that they had also brought back to St. Augustine one black man and a mulatto boy. That same year, Spanish raiders and Carolina runaways struck again at a plantation on the Edisto River and carried away another seven blacks.⁶² In fact, Governor Antonio de Benavides had offered thirty pieces of eight for every English scalp and one hundred pieces “for every live Negro” the multracial raiders brought back to St. Augustine.⁶³ On each of these occasions, the black raiders would have been commanded by Francisco Menéndez. By this time, Governor Benavides was so convinced of the black militia’s ability that in 1733 he proposed sending the runaways north to foment rebellion in Carolina and, once again, planned to pay them for English scalps, but the Council of the Indies rejected this design.⁶⁴

The repeated raids from Florida triggered an English response in 1728, when Colonel John Palmer led a retaliatory attack against St. Augustine. On that occasion the black militia led by Francisco Menéndez proved one of the city’s most effective defense forces. In recognition of that service, the Spanish Crown commended the enslaved forces for their bravery and in 1733 also issued a new decree reiterating its offer of freedom to runaways from Carolina.⁶⁵

Francisco Menéndez, however, remained enslaved and so persisted in his efforts to achieve the freedom promised by the Spanish king. Over the years he had spent as a slave of important Spanish officials, he had learned a number of valuable skills for navigating Spanish culture. He had become a Christian and participated in Catholic communal rituals. He understood the idiom of extended family and the importance of hierarchy and patronage systems. Somehow he had even become literate in Spanish. He acquired a measure of honor for these social skills and most of all for his military valor. On behalf of his community, he presented several petitions to the governor and to the auxiliary bishop of Cuba, who toured Florida in 1735, but uncertain of the legalities, these officials wrote Spain seeking guidance and Menéndez and his community remained enslaved.⁶⁶

Their fortunes would change in 1737 with the arrival of a new Spanish governor and the advent of renewed hostilities with the English. Once more Captain Francisco Menéndez solicited freedom for himself and others in a petition that listed thirty-one individuals unjustly enslaved, including some who had been taken to Havana, and the names of the persons who claimed ownership over them. This time Menéndez’s petition was supported by another from his old ally, the Yamasee chief, Jorge. Jorge claimed to be the chief

who had led the Yamasee uprising against the British and stated that he and the other Yamasee chiefs “commonly” made “treaties” with the slaves. The use of the terms “allies” and “treaties” implies Yamasee recognition of the slaves’ autonomy and utility. Jorge stated that Menéndez and three other Africans had fought bravely for him for several years until they were ultimately defeated and headed to St. Augustine, hoping to receive the Christian sanctuary promised by Spain. Jorge also testified that in St. Augustine Perro Bravo had betrayed the Africans by selling them into slavery, but he did not blame Perro Bravo, for as a heathen, he knew no better.⁶⁷ Instead, Jorge blamed the Spaniards who bought the unlucky blacks, who in his estimation had been patient and “more than loyal.”⁶⁸

Florida’s newly arrived governor, Manuel de Montiano, was expecting war with England at any moment, and the combined petitions and stated alliance of Africans and Indians must have no doubt made an impression on a governor in need of their services. He wisely chose to investigate. After reviewing all relevant documentation on the issue, on March 15, 1738, Governor Montiano granted unconditional freedom to all fugitives from Carolina. The powerful men who had received the slaves in payment for loans to the cash-strapped government vehemently protested their emancipation, but Governor Montiano ruled that the men had ignored the royal determination expressed in repeated decrees and, therefore, all deals were null and void and all the enslaved were free.⁶⁹ When the Crown reviewed the governor’s actions, it approved and ordered that not only all the blacks who had come from Carolina to date “but all those who in the future come as fugitives from the English colonies” should be given prompt and full liberty in the name of the king. Further, so that there be no further pretext for selling them, the royal edict should be publicly posted so that no one could claim ignorance of the ruling.⁷⁰

In 1738, after two decades of Spanish slavery, Francisco Menéndez was once again transformed and became a free man at last. Governor Montiano assigned the newly emancipated Spanish subjects lands two miles north of St. Augustine and recognized Menéndez as leader of the new free black town of Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose the former slaves established there. Further, in his official correspondence the governor described the almost one hundred residents of the new town as Menéndez’s “subjects.”⁷¹ The new homesteaders, in turn, promised to be “the most cruel enemies of the English” and to spill their “last drop of blood in defense of the Great Crown of Spain and the Holy Faith.” Governor Montiano modeled the village of “new Christians”

after the nearby Christian Indian villages, assigning a Franciscan father to live at the site and be responsible for the Africans' Christian instruction. It must have been a challenge for the churchman, for Africans of distinct cultural and political backgrounds made up this community, including those designated in Spanish records as Congos, Carabalies, Minas, and Mandingas, and some men had indigenous wives. All the African men were formed into a black militia under the command of Captain Francisco Menéndez.⁷²

Although in its decrees, the Spanish Crown emphasized religious and humane considerations for freeing the slaves of the British, political and military motives were equally, if not more, important. In harboring the run-aways and eventually settling them in their own town, Florida's governors were following the Spanish policy of *re población*, populating and holding territory threatened by foreign encroachment.⁷³ But if the interests of Spain and Florida were served by this policy, so too were those of the ex-slaves like Menéndez. Spain offered them a refuge within which they could live free and maintain their families. They made creative use of Spanish institutions to support their corporate identity and concomitant privileges.⁷⁴ They adapted to Spanish values where it served them to do so and, thereby, gained autonomy. They reinforced ties within their original community through intermarriage and use of the Spanish institution of godparenthood or *compadrazgo*. And over time, they formed intricate new kin and friendship networks with slaves, free blacks, Indians of various nations, "new" Africans of various ethnicities, and Spaniards in St. Augustine that served to stabilize their population and strengthen connections to the Spanish community.⁷⁵

Over the next quarter century, Menéndez and his free Mose militia defended their adopted homeland against British, pirate, and Indian attacks. During the War of Jenkins' Ear, General James Oglethorpe led a combined force of Georgians, Carolinians, and their allied Indians in a determined effort to drive the Spaniards from Florida. The 1740 invasion was supported by a Royal Navy fleet sent from Jamaica that bombarded St. Augustine for a full month. Captain Menéndez and the Mose militia fought bravely in the defense of the Spanish city, but Mose was occupied by the English. Menéndez was with the Spanish forces that eventually retook Mose, but the village was so badly damaged in the fighting that its residents moved back into St. Augustine.⁷⁶

Thereafter, Menéndez wrote several eloquent letters to the king of Spain detailing his military services and requesting a proprietary captainship. He argued that he had worked with "loyalty, zeal and love" and had "been continually at arms, and assisted in the maintenance of the bastions, without

the least royal expense . . . to defend the Holy Evangel and sovereignty of the Crown.” And he signed with a flourish. In cover letters, Governor Montiano highly recommended Menéndez to the king and supported his requests. When the monarch failed to respond, Menéndez took to the seas as a Spanish corsair, seeking, he said later, to make his way to “Old Spain” and discuss the matter with the king in person.⁷⁷

As a corsair, Menéndez took part in the capture of several English ships loaded with valuable cargoes and also an attack on the English settlements at Okracoke, but in 1741 he had the misfortune to be captured by the English corsair *Revenge*. Some of the English sailors on board had recently witnessed “Spanish Negroes” being burned at the stake in New York for supposedly plotting to take the city.⁷⁸ When they discovered that Menéndez had captured Florida’s black militia at the Battle of Mose, they tied him to a gun, gave him two hundred lashes, “pickled” his wounds, and threatened him with castration in retaliation for atrocities committed against the English. Finally, the English captain who claimed Menéndez as a prize sold him back into slavery in the Bahamas. After only three years of freedom, Menéndez was a slave once more. It is still unknown how he regained his freedom—whether by escape or by Spanish ransom—but by 1759 he was again the leader of Mose.⁷⁹

Shortly thereafter, shifting geopolitics would once again alter Menéndez’s life. In the course of the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763) the British captured Havana. In the peace treaty that concluded that war the following year, Spain gladly ceded Florida to the English in order to recover the “pearl of the Antilles.” The beleaguered population of Florida—Spanish, Indian, and African—was evacuated to other still Spanish locales. In that exodus, Menéndez led his freed “subjects” into exile in Cuba.⁸⁰

Initially, Captain Francisco Menéndez and eight other free black families were settled at the small fishing village of Regla, across the bay from Havana.⁸¹ All the exiled Floridanos, Spanish, Indian and African alike, received government subsidies and Captain Menéndez and his wife received double that of the other Mose residents. Menéndez and his community stayed at Regla for approximately one year before being granted new homesteads and relocating to the Matanzas frontier. In the newly created town of San Agustín de la Nueva Florida, they began their lives anew.⁸²

As I have written about earlier, life on the Cuban frontier proved difficult, and after at least one murder and much disaster, many of the free blacks of Mose gave up their land grants and disappeared from our view. In subsequent research, I found that other Mose militia men, like Antonio Eligio de

la Puente and Tomás Chrisostomo, left their frontier homesteads and moved their families into the nearby city of Matanzas. While less developed than Havana in the eighteenth century, Matanzas did have a free black Catholic brotherhood of the Rosary and probably enough other urban institutions that some would have stayed on and made lives for themselves there. Spanish officials in Cuba generated records on the Floridanos as long as they supported them and I continue to track them. After repaying much of the cash advance Spain gave the new homesteaders (that covered the cost of an African slave for each, tools, and seed), Menéndez also gave up his land. It seems likely that being a literate and urban individual with military and sailing experience, he would have probably returned either to Regla or Havana, where his opportunities were greater. I am tracking what became of him in my current book project. The arc of 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 lost liberty. The polyglot and literate Menéndez personified Ira Berlin's cosmopolitan Atlantic creole—someone with “linguistic dexterity, cultural plasticity, and social agility.”⁸³ There is a good likelihood that he may have already demonstrated these characteristics on the African coast. In the Americas, he simply added to his repertoire.