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in
Florida Historical Quarterly
Volume 18 Number 4

April, 1940

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2018.9.1520

THE TEKESTA INDIANS OF SOUTHERN FLORIDA

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The Tekesta¹ Indians at the time of the discovery of America occupied a portion of southeastern Florida. This area seems to have comprised the greater part of Dade county and possibly to have extended north to Pompano in Broward county.² To the south toward Cape Sable it is difficult to tell where the boundary between the Calusa and the Tekesta was, although Barcia says there was a Tekesta village named Abayoa at the southern extremity of the Florida peninsula (probably Cape Sable). (Barcia, *Ensayo* 2, bibliography, *post*). However, archaeological evidence seems to indicate that sites about Cape Sable are more closely affiliated with the Calusa than the Tekesta. The Tekesta were second in power and prominence among the small tribes on the east coast, south of the Timucua territory. To the northward were the Ais, and to the west and southwest were the Calusa. In addition, many minor tribes existed whose names vary with different authors. Although the Calusa seem to have been overlords of the whole southern part of the state, the other small tribes sometimes refused to obey the chief of the Calusa, with resulting warfare. It is said that the chief of the Tekesta was related to the chief of the Calusa. (Lowery: 260)

1. There exist numerous forms of this name. Some are as follows: Tequesta, Tegesta, Tequeste, Takesta.
2. There seems to be some disagreement over the extent of the area. For example Lopez de Velasco (Swanton: 389) says that their territory extended from Cape Canaveral to the Florida Keys, but it is probable that he is in error.

The natural regions inhabited by the Tekesta were the Miami limestone region and the coastal prairie. The Miami limestone region is an eroded limestone ridge from five to twenty-five miles wide, extending the whole length of the Tekesta country. It never rises more than twenty-five feet above sea level. To the west lies the Everglades and to the east the coastal sloughs and lagoons. The vegetation is mainly pinewoods, with hammocks of West Indian hardwoods scattered throughout the general area and at the mouths of the streams. These streams cut through the ridge from the west, draining the overflow of the Everglades. The Everglades themselves seem to have been occupied only around the edges. The coastal prairie, constituting the extreme southeast and south portions of the state, was sparsely occupied in aboriginal times except for the Cape Sable area. Biologically and climatically this whole area is in the tropical life zone. The greatest centers of population seem to have been at the mouths of the creeks, rivers, and inlets, on keys, and on the coastal beaches that are separated from the mainland by a mangrove swamp.

The first record of European contact with the Tekesta was in 1513. In May of that year Ponce de Leon discovered the Florida coast near lat. 30°. Turning south one of the places at which he stopped was a bay called Chequescha, in the approximate location of Biscayne bay, where the main Tekesta villages were later to be found. (Davis: 21)

The second known meeting of the Tekesta with Europeans was in 1565, when one of Menendez' ships was caught in a storm and forced to find shelter in what is now Biscayne bay. There the Spanish anchored opposite the settlement of Outh-coqua who was chief of the Tekesta. The Spanish

were treated very well by the Indians, who assisted them until they were able to leave. (Lowery: 260, bibliography, *post*)

The next year Menendez himself visited Tekesta and erected a number of houses. With him were several missionaries, who took the nephew of the chief to Havana, where they educated him. The brother of the chief also accompanied Menendez to Spain, where he became a Christian. The relationship between the Spanish and the Indians was always friendly, except for one incident in which the soldiers provoked the natives. This friendship was due mainly to the personality and fairness of Menendez himself. On one occasion by making a treaty between the Calusa and the Tekesta, he stopped a war.

In 1568 Menendez again visited Tekesta. While there he erected a block house and a large cross. He left thirty soldiers to man the post and Brother Francisco Villareal to instruct the natives. Brother Francisco had learned the language from the nephew of the chief when the latter visited Havana two years before. The Brother was making good progress with both the children and the elders until the soldiers provoked acts of hostility. When the soldiers executed the uncle of the chief, the Indians in a rage tore down the cross and attacked the Spaniards from ambush. As a result Brother Francisco decided to abandon the mission for the time being, and on Passion Sunday he arrived at Charlotte Harbor with the remnant of the soldiers.

In November of the same year the brother of the chief returned from Spain. His appearance so revived the natives' friendship that Brother Francisco reopened his mission. In order to show their friendship, the Indians made a large cross and erected it in place of the one they had torn down.

In 1570 the mission was finally abandoned because of the seeming fruitlessness of missionary work, and Brother Francisco worked among the Indians of northern Florida with much success.

In 1673 Bishop Calderon refers to "13 tribes of savage heathen Carib [sic] Indians." Among these is one called the Vicayños which was located between the Jobeses [Hobel] and the Matcumbeses tribes, at approximately the former location of the Tekesta. (Wenhold: 11-12) It is probably from the tribal name "Viscaynos" that the present name of Biscayne bay was derived.

It was not until 1743 that another attempt was made to convert the Tekesta to Catholicism. Fathers Monaco and Alna came from Havana to start a mission at the mouth of the Rio Ratones, where they built a chapel and a fort. It might not be amiss to consider the exact location of this mission, since many authorities have taken it for granted that the Rio Ratones was the Miami river. But evidence seems to show that it might have been the Little river a few miles north of the Miami. The early geographers usually described only two streams emptying into Biscayne bay. However, Williams writing in 1837, names three: Arch creek, Rio Ratones, and Miami river. If this naming is correct, Rio Ratones and Miami river cannot be identical, and Rio Ratones would be what is now Little river. A half mile upstream from the mouth of Little river is a fine oak hammock on a high rock formation overlooking the river. Here there was once an Indian village. A fair sized mound now marks the spot. Between the mound and the river is a bluff that stands about eight or nine feet above the edge of the stream. Cut in the limestone just opposite the mound are steps leading down the most abrupt part of the bluff for approximately three

or four feet. These surely were not the work of Indians and their weathered condition indicates that they were there long before any of the post Spanish settlements in south Florida. It is reasonable to suppose that they might have been cut by missionaries if that was the site of the mission. However, there is also the possibility that this site was occupied by pirates or wreckers at one time. It is also fair to state that there once stood a large mound at the mouth of the Miami river. It is obvious that a careful study of early maps will do much to clarify the situation but the above theory is mentioned as being a possible answer.³ By writers after Williams, Rio Ratones is considered as entering Biscayne bay north of Arch creek, but I believe that the archaeological evidence points to Little river as being the original Rio Ratones.

The Tekesta, like so many other small tribes, were finally exterminated by the bands of raiding Creeks who later formed the present Seminole group. Father Monaco in 1743 was the last person to make any reference to the Tekesta, when he wrote they were suffering from the continued attacks of the Yuchi. A little later Adair writes of the warfare the Creeks carried on against the "Indians of Cape Florida" The Tekesta were undoubtedly those referred to. "The Muskhoge carried their cypress bark canoes from the head of the St. John's black river, only about half a mile when they launched them into a deep river which led down to a multitude of islands to the N. W. of Cape Florida." At last the cape Floridians were so reduced by warfare that only thirty men were left. These removed to Havana with the Spaniards. (Adair: 134) In

3. Romans, whose geography is quite good, unfortunately does not clarify this point. He merely says that west of Cape Florida is the River Rattones. p. 288.

the 1770's Romans traveled along the east coast and mentions numerous deserted villages in the Tekesta country. He, too, attributes the extinction of these south Florida Indians to the Creeks and says "that in 1763 the last remnant of the people consisting of about eighty families. . . . went to Havannah." (Romans: 29) These people he calls Calusa but they may well have included many Tekesta because of the better feelings between this tribe and the Spanish. Then, too, all of the Calusa did not leave as some of them are often referred to during the Seminole War as "Spanish Indians." Moreover, Romans refuses to recognize the fact that there was such a tribe as the Tekesta and accuses De Brahm of having made up the name of "Tegesta." (Romans: 296)

By 1820 there were several white settlements on Biscayne bay and there are no accounts of Tekesta (as such) around there. If any were left in Florida they must have been merged with the Seminoles and lost their identity.

Our knowledge of the customs of the Tekesta is very scant. A little, however, is known concerning the burial and religious rites. The first notice is by Velasco who says: "The Indians of Tegesta, which is another province extending from the Martires to Canaveral, have a custom, when the Cacique dies of disjointing his body and taking out the largest bones. These are placed in a large box and carried to the house of the Cacique where every Indian from the town goes to see and adore them, believing them to be gods." (Swanton: 389) This custom of disjointing the bodies of the dead is substantiated by Kenny (226) He says: "The corpse is stripped and dismembered at all the joints; and the bones are carefully cleaned and distributed among the kinsmen and friends, the largest bones

going to the nearest and dearest. Then a bonfire is made and the flesh is thrown into the flames, while around the fire a mournful chant and dance goes on, which ends in carousings that last until morning." Investigations in the burial mounds of the Tekesta reveal that many of the burials are secondary. In most cases they consist of the larger bones and the skull only. Velasco after describing the chase and kill of the sea cow says: "they cut open its head and take out two large bones, which they place in the coffin with the bodies of their dead and worship them." (Swanton: 389)

Father Monaco states that in 1743 "a fish painted on a board was worshipped in a hut by these Indians, the chief Medicine man calling himself bishop." (Shea 2: 472-3) At that time the Spanish influence must have been strong to cause the medicine man to appropriate the title "bishop." From another source we find that "the sun was worshipped under the semblance of a stuffed deer." (Lowery: 64)

The Tekesta, like the other South Florida tribes, were very savage. There seems to have been little love on the part of the parents for their children. Many were killed or maimed by their fathers when they were drunk. (Kenny: 339) The sacrifice of children is said to have been common whenever a special occasion arose. When Father Monaco arrived to start a mission at Tekesta in 1743 he found that no one was at the village. All the inhabitants were seeking to seal a friendship with their former enemies, the Santa Luces. To celebrate the occasion they were sacrificing a child. (Kenny: 337) It seems rather difficult to believe the foregoing since from no other tribe in the southeast do we have definite information that children were sacrificed. However, this may well have been the exception.

The Tekesta inspired great fear in the sailors of that area, particularly the English, for they were reputed to treat shipwrecked mariners cruelly and often tortured them, according to both Adair and Romans. In fact, Adair says that the "Cape Floridians were only Spanish mercenaries shedding blood for their maintenance." (Adair: 151) Despite this, Adair defends them against charges made by navigators that they were cannibals, saying that according to the Creeks "they could never be informed by their captives of the least inclination they ever had of eating human flesh, only the heart of the enemy,—which they all do, sympathetically (blood for blood) in order to inspire them with courage; yet the constant losses they suffered might have highly provoked them to exceed their natural barbarity." (Adair: 134)

No description has ever been written of the dwellings of the Tekesta. However, it is evident that they had some kind of huts, as Velasco mentions the "house of the cacique" (Swanton: 389), and Father Monaco refers to a "hut" (Shea 2:472). It is likely that they lived in the open the greater part of the year, as Calderon says of the tribes in south Florida: "they had no fixed abodes" (Wenhold: 11). What huts they did have were probably covered with palmetto thatch. Their villages were marked, as a rule, by a kitchen midden. This was the result of the accumulation of refuse and consisted of shell, bones, ashes, broken pottery, etc. These are usually located in some hammock on a river, near its mouth, or on a key. In all cases the site is accessible by water.

The Indians wore very little clothing. A breech clout was all that was worn by the men. The women wore skirts of "Spanish moss." Dickenson says that the Ais (who lived immediately north of the

Tekesta) wore breech-clouts of plaited straw (palmetto ?) and Fonteneda says the same of the Calusa to the west.

The Tekesta, in common with the other tribes of the section, did not cultivate the soil, but derived all their food from wild plants and animals. Their main reliance was, of course, the ocean and its many and varied forms of life. They were famed as fishermen and went to sea in their small dugouts, often traveling long distances from land in search of large fish. "In winter all the Indians go to sea in their canoes to hunt for sea cows. One of their number carries three stakes fastened to his girdle and a rope on his arm. When he discovers a sea cow he throws a rope around its neck, and as the animal sinks under the water the Indian drives a stake through one of its nostrils and no matter how much it may dive, the Indian never loses it because he goes on its back." (Velasco in Swanton: 389)

Besides sea cows they caught other large marine animals such as sharks, sailfish, porpoises, and sting rays. The bones of all these have been excavated from the kitchen middens along with those of many kinds of smaller fish.

Large quantities of oysters and conchs that were easily procured in the shallow waters of Biscayne bay were eaten. However, shell fish do not seem to have played such a prominent part in the diet of the Tekesta as it did among the Calusa and the people to the north. Why a greater quantity of this form of seafood was not used is unknown. It is probable that roots and wild fruits, always plentiful, were preferred to shellfish.

The more important food plants were the coontie root (*Zamia* sp.), and the palmetto berry (*Serenoa repens*). The coontie root was ground and the starch, which was washed out, made a very palat-

able and nutritious flour. The palmetto berries were eaten fresh and dried, but mostly in the latter state. The dried fruit was used extensively when the Indians were traveling and unable to procure fresh food. Extreme hunger was necessary to force the average European to eat these dried berries, for according to contemporary accounts they were quite offensive to the taste. The fresh fruit was far more palatable.

In season other fruits were eaten such as the cocoplum (*Chrysobalanus* sp.), the sea grape (*Coccolobis uvifera*), the piegon plum (*Coccolobis laurifolius*), prickly pears (*Opuntia* sp.), and possibly the wild figs (*Ficus* sp.). Wild grapes and huckleberries were also no doubt eaten when they could be procured.

Deer must have been fairly plentiful as the large number of bones in the middens show that they were frequently eaten. We have nothing definite about the other land mammals that were used as food, but it is quite probable that most of the species found in the area were eaten.

Those Indians who lived inland made great use of the terrapin and other turtles in their diet. Some of the middens on the edge of the Everglades show a predominance of turtle carapaces over all other bones. On the sea coast the large ocean turtles were seized when they came to lay eggs on the beach.

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