

Story of John Horse, a Black Seminole warrior

Although November was established as the month we celebrate National Black Catholic History, it is also the month we celebrated National Native American Heritage.

Here is the story of a Native American who was also a black Catholic.

The year was 1844 and without regard for his safety John Horse traveled from Indian territory to Washington, D.C., to lobby for land grants and meetings with President James K. Polk. Perhaps, this may not seem worthy of historical significance but John Horse was a Black Seminole Indian. Crossing the country before the Civil War was extremely dangerous. But the story of John Horse was written in danger. He was a man who answered God's call without reservation. He trusted in God, who had heard the cries and plight of his people. Against unimaginable perils, U.S. Army troops, Indian Wars, slave hunters, and attempts on his life, John persevered.

He was born into slavery to Seminole and black parents about the time of the War of 1812. The First Seminole War, prompted by the Indian Removal Act, pushed the Indians further into the Everglades after the destruction of their villages by General Andrew Jackson's troops. Working as an interpreter for the Seminole chiefs, he was an advisor to Osceola and Wildcat. During the Second Seminole War he fought against the U.S. troops. General Thomas Jesup had agreed to grant freedom to fugitive slaves who accepted relocation. But white planters and slavers arrived at Fort Brooks, Fla., prepared to return the black Indians to slavery. Under a starless night John Horse and his warriors led 700 Seminoles and Black Seminole Indians from the relocation camps.

Again, John Horse and the chiefs tried peace talks. This time under a white flag of truce, the men were seized and imprisoned at Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine. Fasting until he was able to slide through the bars, he escaped taking 16 others with him. He returned to the Seminoles and fought in the Battle of Okeechobee the last conflict of the Second Seminole War. In 1838, John surrendered to U.S. troops. With the Seminoles and black Seminole Indians, he was shipped from Tampa Bay to New Orleans then to Indian Territory. But his story is not over.

The arrival in Indian Territory (Oklahoma) was more dangerous than living in Florida. This was Creek Indian Territory. Creeks had settled on the land the Army had promised to the Seminoles but the Creeks were notorious for capturing, selling and enslaving blacks. During John's next trip to Washington, D.C., he lobbied for but was unable to secure a treaty to receive separate land, however he was granted property at Fort Gibson. While he was in Washington, then Attorney General, John Mason ruled "that the Black Seminoles were "functionally fair game for slave raiders." John returned to find his sister's children had been captured by the Creeks and sold. The children were lost forever.

Upon his return John and Chief Wildcat led all the Seminoles to Wewoka Oklahoma with the possibility of an alliance with other tribes. This was Cherokee region. In 1849 John and Chief Wildcat led their people across Texas and the Rio Grande River and into Coahuila, Mexico. On July 12, 1850, they presented themselves at Piedra Negras and were given land in Mexico for settlement. He fought in the Mexico Army riding his horse "American," and was given the rank of colonel.

When the Civil War ended, John returned to the United States along with many of the black Indians and settled near Fort Duncan, Texas, where he remained until the summer of 1876. His final days were spent negotiating for promised land for black Indians. But the fourth assassination attempt on his life left him severely wounded. John Horse returned to Mexico to secure land grants near Nacimieto. God called him

home before he reached Mexico City whispering “a job well done.”

Juliette Porter-Mitchell is a Black Cherokee Catholic and a parishioner of St. John the Evangelist Parish in Columbia.