

# Black History Month

## A Florida Focus

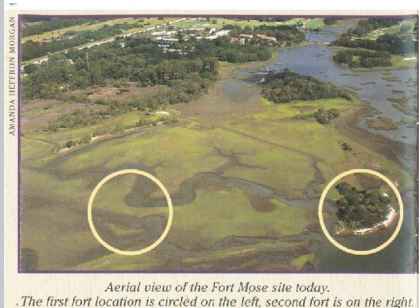
### A CIVICS IN REAL LIFE SERIES: CIVICS CONNECTION SPOTLIGHT

#### Spotlight #15: Fort Mose

Most people associate the famous [Underground Railroad](#) with [Harriet Tubman](#) and the journey taken by nearly a hundred thousand runaway slaves. However, over one hundred years prior, a lesser-known underground railroad brought thousands of escaped slaves seeking [asylum](#) to Spanish Florida. Journeying through treacherous swamplands, often aided by Native Americans, these [fugitive](#) slaves played an integral role in the fight for colonization of the Americas. Florida was first explored and claimed for the Europeans by [Juan Ponce de Leon](#) in 1513. It would not be long, however, before [competition](#) to colonize the lands of North America began between the empires of Spain, Britain, and France. Due to the growth of rival colonial settlements in British North America, the Spanish government relied heavily on Florida to act as a buffer and protect other Spanish colonies. One of their greatest assets in this geopolitical conflict was escaped slaves. Beginning in 1689, Spanish authorities began offering asylum to slaves who escaped from the British colony of Virginia and came to Florida. By 1693, King Charles II of Spain granted slave runaways freedom in Florida if they agreed to convert to Catholicism, be baptized with new Christian names, and serve for four years in the colonial militia. Over the next 40 years, escaped slaves, primarily from the British colonies of Georgia and the Carolinas, made their way to Spanish Florida. Reaching a population of around 100 by 1738, Spanish Royal Governor Montiano ordered the construction of a military fort two miles north of [St. Augustine](#) (the capital at the time) as a place for these fugitive slaves to go. [Fort Mose](#), as it came to be called, was the first legally free black settlement in the United States. The fort became a thriving village with multiple dwellings, a church, and crop gardens. Formerly enslaved, [Francisco Menendez](#) became the leader of Fort Mose. During their time at the fort, these freed blacks helped defend Spanish Florida from [attack](#) multiple times. When Spain ceded Florida to the British in [1763](#), most of the inhabitants of Fort Mose (about 3,000 people) fled to Cuba. Fort Mose was later destroyed in the [War of 1812](#) while under British control. In the 1980s, an [archeological excavation](#) was commissioned, and numerous artifacts were recovered. It was designated a [U.S. National Historic Landmark](#) in 1994. Fort Mose serves as an important story in Black colonial history and influenced a new cultural community, pulling from Native American, Spanish, and English customs.

### CONNECTION QUESTIONS

- What role can government play in either restricting or expanding the rights of individuals?
- What are some of the ways in which national, state, and local governments may work to ensure historical topics such as the story of Fort Mose are honored and remembered?



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