





Seminole Tribal members relax on the boat ride over to Egmont Key on April 5. (Kyle Doney)

EGMONT KEY — On April 5, Egmont Key was more than a tourist attraction with scenic views and various beach attractions. Staff members from the Tribe's Tribal Historic Preservation Office organized a two-hour tour for 33 Tribal citizens visiting the site, the largest Seminole visit on the island since the 1850s. On that day, the island that has been referred to as the "dark place" among Seminoles, became a relic that surfaced forgotten history and helped bridge the past for its kindred visitors.

"I just wanted to know more about [Egmont Key] when I talk to my grandchildren [about Seminole history]," Dorothy Tommie said. "When I was growing up, my world was small. Today, the world is big because of technology. It's important for me to be connected [to my history]."

Egmont Key is located off the coasts of St. Petersburg and Bradenton at the mouth of Tampa Bay. White sand borders the island that is saturated with palmetto palm trees. The only way to travel to the island is by boat. As a result of its prison and military history, there are prison cells and remnants from war on the island. Egmont Key is on the National Register of Historic Places and is home to Egmont Key State Park, the Egmont Key Lighthouse, Fort Dade and the Egmont Key National Wildlife Refuge.

In 2017, the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation listed Egmont Key as one of Florida's 11 most endangered historic properties.

"There is not a lot of [Egmont Key] coverage," said THPO Tribal Archeologist Maureen Mahoney as she addressed Tribal citizens in front of the Egmont Key Lighthouse. "The island is slowly disappearing. We want make sure we capture that history."

Changes in climate, rises in sea levels and dredging in Tampa Bay have created huge issues for Egmont Key. Last summer, the island lost 60 yards and currently is just one-third the size it was during the 1800s.

After Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, Native Americans were not allowed to live east of the Mississippi River. Egmont Key was one of the places Seminoles were brought to

before they were forced to head to Oklahoma. After detainment at Egmont Key, Seminoles were taken to St. Marks in Florida's panhandle, then to New Orleans and up the Mississippi River to what became known as the Trail of Tears. During each stop, the vessel would refuel before heading out to its next destination.

In 1858, Billy Bowlegs and 163 other Seminoles were held at Egmont Key, one of them being Polly Parker.

"I just wanted to see what [Egmont Key] was all about," said Nancy Willie, a great-great-granddaughter of Polly Parker, adding that she was interested in learning how Parker survived and what she went through. "I wish I paid more attention to what [elders] were saying. Now I regret it."

In the 1830s, the U.S. Army captured Parker and her husband Chai and forced them to become scouts to locate other Seminoles to imprison. Parker never betrayed her people, however, and in 1858 she was one of a large group of Seminoles who were detained with Billy Bowlegs on Egmont Key.

After she left Egmont Key on the vessel named The Grey Cloud, Parker was given permission to get materials for medicine while docked in St. Marks. While off the vessel, she and a small group of Seminoles began to escape from their captors. Although more than half of the Seminoles were caught, Parker managed to travel on foot and returned to Okeechobee. Many of her progeny have had a direct impact on the Seminole Tribe of Florida's success and some of her descendants were on the spring trip to Egmont Key. The group consisted of a mixture of Tribal citizens of various ages.

"You guys being here today, the world sees this," said Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum Director Paul Backhouse during the trip. "[Parker] escaped tyranny so that you guys can have peace. It is an honor to have you here."

Although it is difficult to find Seminole remains on the island, according to Tribal Historic Preservation Office Field Technician David Scheidecker, a re-creation of a gravesite preserves memories of at least seven Seminoles who died on the island.

The Tribal Historic Preservation Office visits Egmont Key every year. Although there are no set dates for the coming months, there will be more trips for Tribal citizens.

"I think it went well. It just shows the strength of the women in our Tribe," said THPO Community Engagement Coordinator Quenton Cypress. "It helps us preserve our past and lets us know where we came from [as Seminoles]. It reminds us that we are not here just because of casinos and gaming. We are trying to get that information out there and get more Tribal members out there to know their past."

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