ANDROS ISLAND, Bahamas — They came to Andros the first time in 1821, secretly seeking sanctuary and independence on this fabled island, a strategically located asylum for pirates, bootleggers and assorted outlaws. Andros Island, largest in the Bahamas chain, is still a rugged archipelago covered with limestone hardscrabble, skinny pines, palmetto bushes, blue-hole caves and giant land crabs, a three-day dugout canoe ride from South Florida across the Gulf Stream and the third largest barrier reef in the world.

History calls them Black Seminoles, mostly runaway Africans fleeing the various slavery scenarios, politics, broken promises and wars of the Spanish, British, United States and southeastern American Indians. Though they were considered slaves by the Seminole Indians, history records they were treated with a higher respect and independence far beyond the traditional concept of slavery. While some went to Texas, Mexico or Oklahoma – willingly or forced – others chose to brave the sea in canoes either south to Cuba or to Andros, where they established an isolated community named Red Bays on the island’s northwest shore. The Cuban Seminoles eventually joined them.

Almost immediately, local Bahamian folklorists, fascinated by the lengthy isolation, unusual cultural practices and general atmosphere of mystery presented by the Black Seminoles, exaggerated them as “wild Indians.” Though several professional anthropologists and adventurers came into contact with the Black Seminoles of Red Bays – and established their connection to the U.S. Seminoles – they remained relatively unknown to the world until the mid-1930s when ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax wrote about the “Seminole Negroes” and recorded a song sung by a Mr. Bowlegs, a resident of Andros Island.

Today, nearly 200 years after the first Seminoles landed on these shores, anthropologists agree that the majority of residents in the present-day settlement of Red Bays on Andros Island are descended from those original exiles from Florida. Descendants of Seminole Indians living in other parts of the country and world have always been of interest to Chairman James E. Billie. Most Seminoles who fled Florida during the wars of the 1800s crossed the Atlantic, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico in dugout canoes to establish communities that still exist in Texas, Mexico and the Commonwealth of the Bahamas.

It is about the same distance from Homestead to Andros as it is from Key West to Cuba.

The Chairman was invited to attend the annual All Andros Crab Fest by Peter Douglas, a former Chief Councilor and Mayor of the Central Andros District and the current sustainable tourism manager.

“We are known throughout the Bahamas as ‘Andros Crab Catchers’ because the island is known for the vast numbers of large land crabs that are harvested every summer (May through August) for eating and exporting to the other islands of the Bahamas,” said Douglas, who keeps an unusual
display for a tourist office: a giant crab in a glass case with a sign that says BEWARE OF ATTACK CRAB.

“The local Androsians have developed a culture surrounding the cooking and harvesting of this unique food resource. The festival is centered around the island’s many crab culinary dishes, crabbing competitions, cultural music and dance and every night the event is wrapped up with a large Bahamian/Caribbean music concert. The attendance to the festival peaks at 12,000-15,000 persons from all over the Bahamas, the Americas and the world.”

Along for the trip were the Chairman’s family (wife, Maria, and children Aubee and Eecho), Chairman’s administrator Danny Tommie and Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum director Paul Backhouse.

Eecho Billie even braved an “ecological artificial crab habitat” in the center of the festival grounds, to capture and hold up several blue land crabs, drawing a crowd around the fenced-in enclosure. A large sound system with heart-thumping bass woofers generated for hundreds of yards beyond the festive scene.

After Chairman Billie was interviewed by Bahamas TV and shook hands with well-wishers, some of whom remembered him from his last visit in 2001, the group made the hour-long trip north along severely pot-holed Queen’s Highway to Red Bays on the island’s northwestern shore.

The countryside was filled with tall straight pines and rough limestone rock ground. The lack of fertile ground was obvious; most made their living as sponge divers, fishermen and crafting baskets, wood and fabrics. Small wooden sea cottages and houses of varying design stood, each one in varying stages of completion, some with families of six living in two rooms.

“Over here, we start working on our houses when we get money and then we stop when we run out of money and start back up again when the money comes,” said the taxi driver. “It might take 10, 20 years to finish your house.”

The few businesses are locally owned, including a Seminole bar.

For the second time, the Chairman visited the house of Rev. Bertram A. Newton, the only teacher for 40 years at the Red Bays all-age school and the historian who, more than anyone else, helped keep the Seminole connection alive. In the living room, sprawled on an easy chair, 84-year-old Rose Newton slowly made palmetto baskets. Outside, on a clothesline, individual palmetto leaves hung. Clothes drying in the hot air, hung everywhere; one tree was covered with only panties next to what appeared to be a chickee roof; the Androsians call such structures a “camp.”

“I feel very comfortable here,” said the Chairman, sitting outside the Newton’s complex, where the rich tropical vegetation, including palms and mango trees, rose from the flat rocky land. “This reminds me of my old camp in Big Cypress.”

The Chairman also visited a few basket makers, including the family of the late Omelia Marshall, a legendary Red Bays medicine woman, midwife and basket maker, whose daughter has continued making the beautiful, sturdy baskets - some adorned with patchwork - known to collectors around the world. They were hanging and stacked all over the house, which like most homes in the area, had no air conditioning or fan; just an open front door, catching the occasional sea breeze. “Hot is just the way it is over here,” said the driver, with a big wide toothy smile. “We know it. We live it. We go on.”

Another highlight was a visit to the famous woodcarver Henry Wallace, who specializes in wildlife and marine life. Mahogany wood carvings in various states of completion were everywhere, with
finished pieces for sale on a table manned by his beautiful wife, Endetta. The man of international fame – his work is displayed at museums around the world, including the Smithsonian – humbly carved his name into the bottom of a fish for his guests.

A breathtaking sunset over azure waters waved goodbye to the Chairman and his group as they headed back to Florida.

“We’ll be back,” the Chairman had promised everyone. “I want to stay longer next time to really learn more about this culture . . . and go fishin’.”

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