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Unmaking an American Republic:
Slavery, Constitutions, and the 1812 Invasion of East Florida

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In August 1813, Cloe and Bob, an enslaved couple of African descent, testified in a Spanish East Florida court to try to free themselves from a man on trial for murder. A year and a half earlier, sixty Georgians calling themselves Patriots had invaded Spanish Fernandina and founded the short-lived Republic of East Florida. With U.S. military support, Patriots threatened to overthrow the Spanish government and enslave, remove, or kill Florida's Indigenous and African peoples. A coalition of Spanish soldiers, the Cuban Black Militia, Seminoles, and Anglo-Spanish settlers fought back, and the Patriots' makeshift government collapsed. During the conflict—known as the Patriot War—Cloe and Bob attacked the insurgent republic in court, accusing a Patriot sympathizer of murdering an anti-Patriot slaveholder. At trial, the couple's testimonies led to two convictions and the intelligence needed to track the invaders' local, small-scale maneuvers. In return, they demanded their freedom. Throughout the war, East Florida became a constitutional battleground as Spain's *Constitución de Cádiz* competed for authority with the Patriots' constitution. Witnesses to murder and treason, Cloe and Bob animated Spain's new constitutional order in ways that disrupted U.S. expansion into the Florida borderlands. Along the way, they constructed new meanings of slavery, freedom, and citizenship, leveraging legal complexity to seek justice for themselves.