

## Introduction

British occupation of the North American region that came to be known as the Southeast began with the founding of Charles Town in 1670. South Carolina leaders quickly identified the distant Creek Indians as the most numerous and dangerous native people that they faced. Bad potential became worse reality during the so-called Yamasee War of 1715–17, when Creeks and their Yamasee allies briefly threatened the very survival of South Carolina. Advised on Indian affairs by leading Carolinians, James Oglethorpe and the founders of Georgia in 1733 never doubted that their dealings with the natives had to focus on the Creeks. During the next thirty years British diplomacy with these Indians—particularly the “Lower” Creeks—was routed almost exclusively through Georgia. Moreover, for long periods the Georgia Trustees and/or imperial officials in London gave little attention to this vital relationship, thereby leaving essential decision making to the provincial government in Savannah.<sup>1</sup>

This book continues the story of British relations with the Creeks after 1763, but in a broader context. The year 1763 was one of radical change in North America, nowhere more so than in the Southeast. That year marked the definitive end of the great imperial war for control of North America. The British victory was complete: in the Southeast French Louisiana and Spanish Florida ceased to exist. The triumphant British replaced these vanished entities with two new provinces of their own, prosaically dubbed West Florida and East Florida. Colonial Georgia continued to be the main theater for British-Creek relations, but its government would never again have a free hand to shape policy. Insofar as provincial officials still had a role in Indian diplomacy, those in Georgia now had to share responsibility with counterparts in East and West Florida. As directed from London, henceforth both of the new provinces would have significant diplomatic dealings with the Creeks.

But the main reason for the Georgia government's reduced role in Indian relations was that the imperial government had awakened to the need to take charge. Nothing comparable had been seen since the aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion nearly a century earlier. As in that earlier episode, the immediate cause was a violent challenge to British rule in America, this time by imperial rivals. British officials concluded that their forces had had an unnecessarily difficult time defeating the vastly outnumbered French because most native participants had sided with them (hence the popular label "the French and Indian War").

In order for the British government to restore and then maintain amicable relations with Indians, it would have to persuade them that they too stood to benefit from this bridge-building project. This did not appear to be a monumental task, for most native grievances against the British focused on the governments of particular colonies, not the imperial government. As Indians could see for themselves, the provincial administrations they dealt with had failed to protect them from land encroachments and trade abuses by the colonists. The British government had the means not only to discipline those responsible for these shortcomings but also to provide positive benefits to Indians far beyond the ability (or inclination) of any colonial government. Serious planning aimed at effecting such change was under way in London long before the final peace treaty was signed with France and Spain. For the next few years the course of British-Indian relations in the Southeast was largely determined by decisions made in London.



When James Oglethorpe and the first Georgia colonists founded Savannah atop Yamacraw Bluff, they looked out over a mostly empty landscape. Over the previous century the Yamasee War, following commercialized slave raiding and still earlier nativist attacks on Spanish missions, had left the territory we think of as Georgia almost completely depopulated. Though very few Creeks now lived within two hundred miles of the colonists, British-Indian diplomacy necessarily came to focus upon them.<sup>2</sup>

Referring to these Indians as "the Creeks" may seem to imply that they were ethnically homogeneous, uniform in culture, and united under a single leadership. That was hardly the case. This general term can be misleading, but often there is no good substitute. This was a society, or rather a group of societies, in flux. Much the same was true for the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and other natives of the region. Rapid social change had begun centuries earlier, largely in response to contact with the first European in-

truders. Traditional Mississippian societies led by autocratic chiefs disintegrated into fragments, which often relocated and recombined with dissimilar remnants from other parent societies into unstable assemblages, which themselves soon disintegrated . . . and so on into the eighteenth century.

Anthropologist Robbie Ethridge has described these churning landscapes as “shatter zones.” By the turn of the eighteenth century, integration was often outpacing disintegration, and the coalitions involved grew larger. Anthropologist Charles Hudson coined the term “coalescent societies” to describe these still mutable entities. Each of these new terms has proven helpful for depicting an important aspect of postcontact social change among aboriginal Southeastern societies and accordingly has gained widespread usage. Together the two terms can be seen as a complementary pair that portrays a characteristic pattern of disintegration followed by integration with different partners.<sup>3</sup>

Some Creek societies had coalesced further than others. Integration had advanced furthest among those South Carolinians and Georgians called the Lower Creeks. This was the concentration of Creek settlements nearest to the colonists and the one they had most dealings with. In 1763 there were about a dozen Lower Creek towns scattered along the Chattahoochee River, mainly on the western bank in what would become Alabama. Although ethnic and cultural differences among them remained strong (three different languages—Muskogee, Hitchiti, and Yuchi—were spoken), these towns had joined into a loose political confederation. By the late seventeenth century, leaders from these towns regularly met together and made joint decisions.

For most of the eighteenth century this confederation had been led by the towns of Coweta and Cussita, both located near the falls of the river (modern Columbus). Coweta had been especially influential, so much so that Lower Creeks in general were sometimes called “the Cowetas.” Early in the century the principal leader of the confederacy was a Coweta man named Brim. Spanish and South Carolina leaders sometimes called him the “emperor” of the Lower Creeks. Coweta and Cussita differed from most other towns of the confederacy in that they were Muskogee speakers, “war towns” in the Creek moiety system, and relative newcomers to the area. Sometime in the mid-seventeenth century they had relocated eastward from what became central Alabama to the banks of the Chattahoochee. Given their long maintained martial reputation and occupation of prime sites at the falls, the suspicion grows that they had imposed themselves on the earlier settlers of the area. Most of the other towns of the confederacy were populated by these prior residents, Hitchiti speakers, and were located further down the river. By 1763

Chehaw and Ouseechee had supplanted Apalachicola to become the leading towns of this group. More important, they had begun to supplant Coweta and Cussita as centers of Lower Creek decision making.

The related peoples the colonists called the Upper Creeks were still more remote, all located in what is now Alabama. They consisted of about thirty towns divided into three groupings that had yet to gel into a unified political organization. The most numerous of these Upper Creek “divisions” were the Abeikas on the upper Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers. Slightly less populous were the Tallapoosas along the lower course of the river that had given them their name. The much less numerous Alabamas, who lived around the junction of the Coosa and Tallapoosa, were only reckoned among the Upper Creeks after 1763. These peoples, along with the Lower Creeks, had numerous ties of ethnicity and intermarriage. All were growing in population, and new political ties among them were taking shape. In 1766 Indian Superintendent John Stuart observed that “the Confederate Nations of Abekas Tollipusses Alibamons and Cowetas known to the English by the name of Creeks have of late greatly increased in number.”<sup>4</sup>

Muskogee was the predominant language among the Upper Creeks, but there were pockets that spoke Alabama, Koasati, Chickasaw, Hitchiti, Yuchi, and even Algonkian. The leading Abeika towns were Okfuskee and Oakchoy, while the most influential Tallapoosa towns were Tuckabatchee and Tallassee. Meetings of leaders from all or most of these Upper Creek towns, rare before 1760, became common afterward. From 1763 onward the favorite site for these meetings was the small community of Little Tallassee, located between the Abeika and Tallapoosa towns. Loosely affiliated with the latter, it was not itself a town.<sup>5</sup>

The other native nations of North America that most disquieted the British were the Iroquois of the New York area. There were striking similarities between the two peoples and their relations with Europeans. Creeks and Iroquois both lived far inland, developed tightrope diplomacy between the British and the French, grew by incorporating native remnants, were feared by all of their neighbors, and after 1756 were the chief concern of one of the two British superintendents of Indian affairs. Accordingly, Georgia-centered relations with the Creeks often paralleled New York-based relations with the Iroquois, though there were important differences.<sup>6</sup>



Concerned off and on about the Creeks, until 1763 most British leaders worried more about their European rivals for empire in the Southeast, the

Spanish and French. The Spanish had a long-standing imperial presence in Florida, while the French had a more imposing establishment along the Gulf coast and lower Mississippi River in what they called Louisiana. Both had considerable influence among the native peoples, including the Creeks, and could choose to supply or deny them goods, including arms and ammunition. Though Europeans were no longer much concerned about Indians who lacked firearms, when so equipped the natives became formidable military forces. Since the Creeks were the best armed and most feared Indians of the region, they were potentially the most valuable local allies of all three imperial rivals. Carolinians and Georgians were well aware that they themselves had been most responsible for arming these Indians, hoping that this would lure them into becoming soldiers for the British Empire. It didn't work. The Creeks famously had played the three imperial powers off against each other, thereby maintaining and in some ways even expanding their autonomy and influence. All three suitors were left frustrated and angry that these "barbarians" had been able to outmaneuver them. This situation, so agreeable to the Creeks, could not last.

The final clash between the British and their rivals for North American empire came in the great war of 1754–63, one of the most decisive wars in all of history. For Europeans the results were spelled out in the Treaty of Paris of February 1763. For France the war was a catastrophe, for Spain a disaster, for Britain a triumph difficult to exaggerate. Though France lost all of its North American territories, many Frenchmen remained. In the Southeast most congregated around New Orleans. The Spanish evacuated Florida with stubborn thoroughness: without exception all Spaniards left, taking with them every single Yamasee Indian and almost everything that could be moved.<sup>7</sup>

Neither the British military triumph nor the settlement treaty among the three European competitors could determine all major results of the war. Although the departure of the French and Spanish from the region elated the British victors, it had the opposite effect upon the Creeks and many other Indians. To their chagrin, the British discovered that their great victory had made these natives much more dangerous.



After 1760 the bad news for the Creeks never seemed to stop. Early reports that the British had conquered French Canada were decisively corroborated for Creek leaders when the Wolf King, a leading Tallapoosa chief, met some of Colonel James Grant's Mohawk auxiliaries in Charles Town in February 1761. The Mohawks confirmed the French rout and the British takeover. With