Unburied Hatchet: The Creek Struggle for Neutrality During the American Revolution

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British General Archibald Campbell could not have been happy. Besieged on all sides in the South by Patriot and Spanish forces, he mustered little support from his native allies, the Creek Indians. When he engaged his enemy, few Creeks were present for battle. With the American Revolution rapidly drawing to a close, Campbell experienced the ambivalence of the Creek nation in late 1781. This was especially frustrating and disappointing for British goals of keeping at least the southernmost colonies. That England was not able to ever fully recruit what James Adair referred to as "the most powerful Indian nation we are acquainted with on this continent" may have lost them South Carolina, Georgia, and East and West Florida. As John Alden later wrote, "It was a happy circumstance for the Southern states, suffering as they did from Cherokee onslaughts that the belligerent Creeks never threw their full weight into the war on the Southern frontier."[1]

Certainly the presence of thousands of powerful, experienced warriors like the Creeks would have been a boon to either side during the confrontation. However, nothing of the sort ever materialized. Instead, roving bands of war parties attacking Whig and Tory alike typified the Creek experience during the American Revolution. Due to factors both internal

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[1] Samuel Cole Williams, ed., *Adair's History of the American Indians* (Johnson City: The Watauga Press, 1930), 275; John Richard Alden, *The South in the Revolution, 1763-1789* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 274.

and external, the Creek nation experienced a struggle for neutrality during the years of 1776-1783 that would lay the frame work for their own civil war just thirty years after the end of the colonial revolt. This paper seeks to analyze those very causes that must have mystified both Patriot and British leaders alike.

No concept is more readily misunderstood by readers than the idea of a Creek "nation." Historians have long used the word to describe the Creek, or more properly, Muskogee people. It was an attempt to explain the cultural bond that held the group together. However, nationhood, as commonly understood today, implies a certain unification along political boundaries and ideals that simply did not exist within Creek society. Therefore, when considering the Creek political structure, the term "confederacy" is probably best applied. The term "nation" is still applicable when speaking towards the group's cultural bonds.

The Creek derived their common name from the many streams, rivers and swamps they inhabited in much of present day Georgia, Alabama, and Florida. In 1775, Adair calculated that Creek lands consisted of approximately 50 towns, and consisted of "about 3500 men fit to bear arms." Recent historical demographic studies have placed the entire Creek population at a number approximating 14,000.[2] According to

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[2] Joshua Piker, "Colonists and Creeks: Rethinking the Pre-Revolutionary Southern Backcountry," *The Journal of Southern History* 70, No. 3 (August 2004): 511; Williams, *Adair's History*, 274; Peter H. Wood, "The Changing Population of the Colonial South: An Overview of Race and Region, 1685-1790," in *Powhatan's Mantle*, ed. Gregory A. Waselkov, Peter H. Wood and Tom Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

their own history, the Creeks had arrived from a location far to the west, conquered the local tribes, and adopted them into their society. Naturalist Bernard Romans noted the mixture of races, stating the Creeks:

> were a mixture of the remains of the Cawittas, Talepoosas, Coosas, Apalachias, Conshacs or Coosades, Oakmulgis, Oconis, Okchoys, Alibamons, Natchez, Weetumkus, Pakanas, Taensas, Chacsihoomas, Abekas and some other tribes whose names I do not recollect...call themselves Muscokees and are at present known to us by the general name of Creeks, and divided into upper and lower Creeks; also those they call allies and are a colony from the others living far south in East Florida.[3]

It was difficult to achieve political unity within the confederacy due to the competing and sometimes conflicting loyalties Creeks had with townships and family clans. The confederation was split almost equally in two, with its people being known as either "Upper" or "Lower" Creeks. The Upper Creeks inhabited the valleys of the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Alabama rivers in central Alabama, situated along a trade route from Charles Town. To the south and east resided the Lower Creeks, living amongst the Chattahoochee, Flint, and Ocmulgee rivers in Georgia.[4]

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[3] Louis De Vorsey, Jr., *The Indian Boundary in the Southern Colonies, 1763-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 21.

[4] Wood, *Powhatan's Mantle*, 83.

The Creek confederation was united by the notion of clans. Interwoven between Upper and Lower towns, members of the society linked themselves to others through these extended families. A Creek warrior, for instance, did not identify himself as "Creek." Rather, he identified himself as part of the Bear clan or Wind clan. When war parties went on raids, they did not do so because of Creek allegiance; they did so as members of a particular clan. Alexander McGillivray, later a very strong pro-British leader, was able to establish himself because of his mother's membership in the Wind clan, one of the most powerful within the confederacy.[5]

Clans and townships shared a common delineation: their stance on war and peace. Known as either "red" or "white," red towns and clans were more aggressive towards foes, while white towns and clans were known to be more peaceful, though they too participated in war. This division created hostility within the Creek world. According to Claudio Saunt, "The tension between red and white towns and between and even within individuals made alliances conditional and negotiable and made persuasion the root of power."[6]

Further complicating matters for anyone seeking Creek allegiance was the lack of centralized leadership. Alexander McGillivray may have proclaimed himself to be head of the Creek nation before his death in 1793, but in 1775 the people

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[5] John Walton Caughey, *McGillivray of the Creeks,* 2nd ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 5, 62; Charles M. Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 194-195.

[6] Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22.

of the swamps had no supreme ruler. Instead, towns were led by chiefs, called "micos." These rulers did not have the power to compel any of their followers to do anything. A mico only had the power to persuade his fellow people along a certain path, never holding absolute authority. Towns had complete authority to act independently of one another. This extreme democratization infuriated those dealing with them, notably James Oglethorpe, head of the colony of Georgia in the 1730s, who exclaimed:

> ...there is no coercive power in any of their nations; their kings can do no more than persuade.... All the power they had is no more than to call their old men and captains together and to propound to them the measures they think proper; and after they have done speaking, all the others have liberty to give their opinions also; and they reason together with great temper and modesty till they have brought each other into some unanimous resolution."[7]

Politically, the Creeks were unmatched in the South. During the Seven Years' War, the Creeks played the French, Spanish and English off each other to maintain a strong system of trade and support. Never really choosing any side over another, individual Creeks would favor certain parties and work actively for the benefit of their friends. Creek-on-Creek fighting did not occur, except for the gladiatorial sparring of words in town talks.

The beginning of the American Revolution found the Creek confederacy in an uneasy position. Their grounds were under heavy assault by both white hunters and land speculators. Colonists did little to endear themselves to the native population, especially in the case of one Thomas Fee, a

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[7] Ibid., 26.; Williams, *Adair's History*, 459-460.

white settler who murdered the popular Mad Turkey and escaped prosecution.[8]

Overhunting by the settlers on traditional grounds (especially those of the Lower Creeks) devastated the populations of whitetail deer. As the herd numbers diminished, native hunters were forced to target smaller deer. Not only important for means of subsistence, the deer skin trade was vital to Creek livelihood. Creek hunters traded the deerskins for rifles, ammunition, blankets and rum. As elsewhere, American Indians by the late eighteenth century were reliant upon foreign goods to sustain their lifestyle. They did not have the ability to manufacture or repair firearms, leaving them at mercy of colonial traders. Without white munitions, Creek men were unable to provide for their families during the winter months. Therefore, many Creek men operated at a deficit, indebting themselves to traders prior to the winter hunting season before repaying them in the spring. The deerskin to goods exchange rate was eroding, and forced Creek members into huge debts that would eventually be repaid in the form of land cessions. The continual land grabbing by speculators and faltering Creek economy led some, like The Mortar (Yahatastanage), to become openly hostile towards the Colonial newcomers.[9]

The Creeks were also engaged in yet another war with the Choctaws, their longtime rivals to the west. While Adair claimed the Muskogee were "an over-match for the numerous and fickle Choktah," the war took its toll on the Creek nation,

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[8] *New-York Journal*, May 12, 1774; *Dunlap's Pennsylvania Packet*, May 30, 1774.

[9] Kathryn E. Holland Braund, *Deerskins & Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 153, 161.

depriving it of many capable warriors and leaders, especially The Mortar, who was killed seeking help from the Spanish in 1774.[10]

Heeding James Adair's warning that there was "no sure way to fight them, but in carrying the war into the bowels of their own country, by a superior body of the provincial troops, mixed with regulars," both British and Colonial diplomats initially asked the Creeks to stay out of the war. The Continental Congress on July 13, 1775, delivered a talk to the Six Nations Iroquois meant for all native peoples, comparing the war to a fight between father and son. They asked that Indian nations not attack the British and "keep the hatchet buried deep." At the same time, the Americans sought to explain their position and gain sympathy with Indians by stating that King George's counselors were "proud and wicked men," who had persuaded the king to break his bond with the colonies and were stealing from the colonists. Preying on Indian fears of land loss, the Americans questioned, "If the king's troops take away our property, and destroy us who are of the same blood with themselves, what can you, who are Indians, expect from them afterwards?"[11]

The requests for neutrality did not last long. In a letter dated September 12, 1775, British General Thomas Gates called upon Superintendent of Southern Indian Affairs John Stuart to

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[10] Williams, *Adair's History*, 286; *The New-York Gazette*, January 23, 1775.

[11] Ibid., 301.; "Continental Congress to the Indian Nations about the Conflict with the British", July 13, 1775, *Early American Documents: Treaties and Laws, 1607-1789: Volume XIV North and South Carolina Treaties, 1756-1775.*

employ Indians to the crown's advantage. This was a task Stuart was loathe to undertake.[12]

By all accounts, Scottish Stuart was a "remarkable man and a worthy and loyal servant of the crown." He owed years of experience with southern Indians to fighting in the Anglo-Cherokee war and had been a prisoner marked for death before being pardoned by Cherokee Chief Attakullakulla (Little Carpenter). He returned from his imprisonment with much prestige, owing to both his wartime heroics and his time spent with the Cherokee. What set him apart from his contemporaries was his understanding of American Indian ways of life and he spent much of his time preventing red/white hostilities in the frontier. He also understood that complete peace in Indian country was unattainable, since Indian boys were not considered men until they had taken a scalp. To wit, he steered hostilities away from white settlers and stunted pan-Indian sentiment by fomenting grievances between the Six Nation Iroquois, Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw and Chickasaw peoples, specifically the ongoing Choctaw-Creek war. He grew disillusioned of land cessions by Indians to private organizations and actively opposed the Cherokee-Creek Land Cession of 1773. He feared that a precedent of private acquisitions with the Indians would make frontier government powerless, stating that traders would have the power "to counteract the Measures of Government whenever they may

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[12] "General Thomas Gage to Superintendent Stuart with Authorization to Use Indians Against American Rebels", September 12, 1775, *Early American Documents: Treaties and Laws, 1607-1789: Volume XIV North and South Carolina Treaties, 1756-1775.*

happen to clash with their particular Views & Interest, to the total Subversion of all Order and Regularity."[13]

Stuart, along with his deputy David Taitt, was able to build a lasting friendship with a particularly influential Creek headman named Emistiseguo, from the Upper town of Little Tallassee. Emistiseguo was able to rally the Upper towns to the side of the British, but was continually rebuffed by the Lower Creeks due to the work of Patriot merchant George Galphin. Like Stuart, Galphin had spent much time in Indian country, particularly the Lower Creek town of Coweta, a red town known for its cunning warriors. Likely the earliest merchant in Creek territory, Galphin was an intelligent man who had made a considerable fortune in the backcountry. He made many friends among the Creeks, most importantly Handsome Fellow of Okfuskee, an Upper town that was decisive in keeping the northern bands inactive for the majority of the war. He differed from Stuart in that he promoted neutrality. Galphin similarly hated the frontier violence but thought that frontier traders could do a better job limiting it. He believed the traders knew the Indians best and that generous gifts would go a long way in ending hostilities. Writing to his friend the Young Lieutenant in 1774, he stated: "I am doing all that is in my Power to keep Peace here with your People and the White People and I hope you will do the same there.... You never shall be poor as long as I live."[14]

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[13] John Richard Alden, *A History of the South III: The South in the Revolution 1763-1789* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 124; J. Russell Snapp, *John Stuart and the Struggle for Empire on the Southern Frontier* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 121-122.

[14] Williams, *Adair's History*, 288; Snapp, *John Stuart*, 142-143.

The Lower Creeks settled at first onto a stance of neutrality. Writing to John Stuart in late September, 1775, headmen from Coweta, Cussita, and two other towns declared their intentions:

> We hear there is some difference between the white People and we are all sorry to hear it.... We are all glad to hear you desire us to keep in friendship with all white men, our friends as we dont want to Concearn in the matter but leave you to settle the matter yourselves and will be glad to hear the difference settled and all at peace again.[15]

A second letter to Stuart on behalf of all the Lower towns except the Eutchies and Hitchitas in March of 1776 reaffirmed this stance. However, both letters also relayed Creek concerns over trade and when it might pick back up. It soon became evident to both Stuart and Galphin that whoever could best supply the Creeks would gain their affection. Both parties promised Upper and Lower towns that supplies would be coming and blamed the other when those goods did not arrive. The tactics of both men varied. Galphin was opposed to directly involving the Indians in the war, and felt it was cruel to both the British and Colonials. His goal was to get the Lower towns (with whom he carried the most influence) to commit to a pledge of neutrality, and knew that that would keep pro-British Upper Creeks inactive on the frontier. Stuart did not want to get Indians involved in the war and feared for the lives of Tories in the backcountry. To offset these concerns, he felt it best to

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[15] "Lower Creek Reply to Superintendent Stuart, Declaring Neutrality", September 29, 1775, *Early American Documents: Treaties and Laws, 1607-1789:Volume XII: Georgia and Florida Treaties, 1763-1776.*

hold southern Indians in reserve until they could be used in conjunction with British regular forces landing along the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. He also understood that the ongoing Choctaw-Creek war kept Upper townsmen from committing to a pro-British stance, something that he, and not Galphin, had the ability to affect.

In October, 1776, warriors from the Choctaw nation as well as both Upper and Lower Creek towns met with Stuart in Pensacola to make peace. Both the Choctaws and Upper Creeks strongly pledged allegiance to the English king, while the Lower Creeks present grudgingly agreed to protect St. Augustine from rebel forces.[16]

At the same time, another development kept newly loyal warriors out of the conflict for some time. Cherokee families trickled in to Upper Creek towns seeking shelter. Not heeding the advice of Superintendent Stuart, the Cherokee nation quickly jumped into the war under the lead of Dragging Canoe in early 1776. Striking against villages along the frontier, Cherokee forces mercilessly killed many white settlers in Georgia, North and South Carolina, including both patriots and Tories. The Cherokees, however, were unprepared for the American resistance put together by the southern colonies. A force ranging between 5,000 and 6,000 backwoodsmen soon swept through Cherokee country, burning all towns in its path, including the principal town of Chote. Cherokee refugees fled to the lands southwest and told their Creek hosts of the devastation the Americans had brought upon them. Fear of this

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[16] David H. Corkran, *The Creek Frontier: 1540-1783* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 300-301.

reprisal would weigh heavily on the minds of Creek warriors until the end of the war.[17]

The neutralist forces within the Creek confederacy were soon undone by the actions of Thomas Fee, the same man who had murdered Mad Turkey in 1774. This time his victim was a Coweta warrior. Both Escochabey and Ishenpoaphe, two respected men who had previously supported neutrality, turned against the Americans, along with the dominant town of the Lower Creeks, Coweta.[18]

Despite the setback, Galphin doubled his efforts to recruit the Creeks to the American cause in 1777. He held a meeting with Handsome Fellow and pro-rebel men from Upper towns Okfuskee, Sugatspoges, and Big Tallassee where they discussed assassinating Emistiseguo, who was actively supporting the British. Galphin and fellow Indian agent Robert Rae met a month later with Handsome Fellow, Opeitley Mico, the Cussita King, and several hundred warriors. They passed out presents in the form of guns, ammunition, and rum and invited the Creeks to view the American war effort in Charlestown.[19]

Galphin's work seemed to be successful. By 1778, the Lower Towns were again firmly in the neutralist camp, even Coweta. However, a Coweta raiding party had not received the message of Fine Bones which recently declared an end to hostilities when they killed three American rangers along the

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[17] James H. O'Donnell III, "The Southern Indians in the War for American Independence, 1775-1783," in *Four Centuries of Southern Indians*, ed. Charles M. Hudson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975)

[18] Corkran, *The Creek Frontier*, 297-298.

[19] Ibid., 305-306.

frontier. The flow of American goods into Creek territory promptly evaporated.[20]

With no more goods coming from the Americans, John Stuart was at ease to make overtures once more to the Creeks. The sounds of a reestablished British trade route made them quick to listen. Handsome Fellow was not there to counter Stuart's supporters; he had died of natural causes on the return trip from Charlestown. Neutralist voices within the confederation were slowly drowned out in favor of an anti-American position. They were bolstered by the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell and his British troops near Augusta. A new leader of the Upper Creeks named Alexander McGillivray raised a group of warriors to join him. With McGillivray rode away all remaining hope of Creek neutrality. The people of the swamps and rivers would finish the war as allies of the British.[21]

It has been argued by some that the Creeks chose the "wrong side" of the war. This infers that the Creek nation should have allied with the rebels, that the future of the Muskogee people would have been somehow better should their final allegiance have been with the Americans. The inference is unlikely. Americans, boldly empowered after the war, snatched lands from friend and foe alike.[22]

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[20] Homer Bast, "Creek Indian Affairs, 1775-1778," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (March 1949): 23.

[21] Corkran, *The Creek Frontier*, 317-319.

[22] Corkran, *The Creek Frontier*, 309-325; Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin, *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 289-314

Instead, it is apparent that the combination of natural Creek divisiveness combined with the dueling efforts of John Stuart and George Galphin and the early entry of the Cherokees into the war (the outcome of which greatly hindered any pan-Indian attacks on the colonials) ultimately condemned the Creeks to their later exodus from the region. Before the war, only British authorities had shown interest in restraining the wanton desires of frontier land speculators. Only the British possessed sufficient supplies that Creek hunters so desperately needed. The British also had a government with the intent of having good relations with Indian nations. Unable to decisively unite against a common enemy, the Creeks relinquished control of their post war fates. At the end of the war, the Creeks were forced to cede 800 square miles as reparation for their role in the conflict. What lands that were not ceded soon fell into the laps of American merchants eager to capitalize on Muskogee debts. Within fifty years, the Creeks no longer lay claim to the river valleys that gave them their name.[23]

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[23] Alden, *The South in the* Revolution, 360; Corkran, *The Creek Frontier*, 325.