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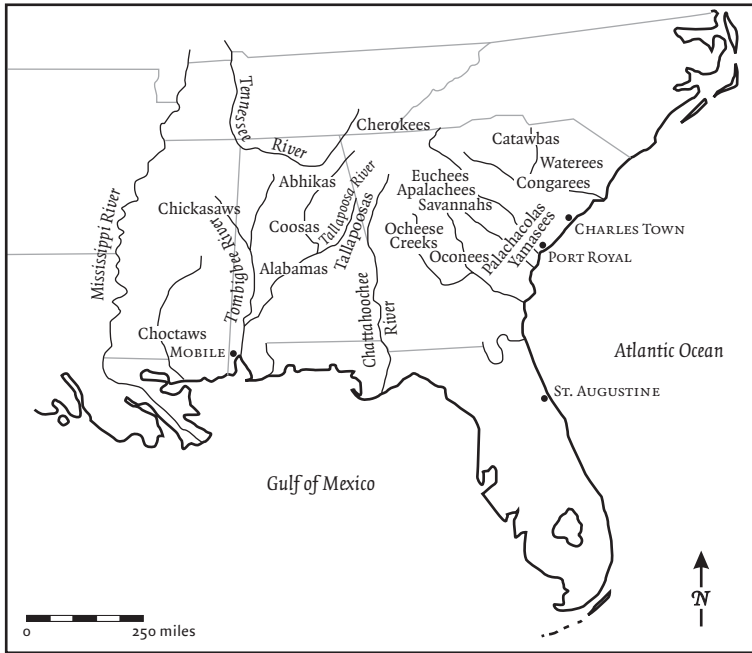
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Introduction

The Problems

On April 14, 1715, the Yamasee Indians welcomed a group of South Carolinians in their principal town of Pocotaligo, south of Charles Town (now Charleston) by about sixty miles. Alarmed at reports of Yamasee unrest, the English had come to reassure the Indians of their friendship and alliance, and the talks appeared to have gone well. Everyone went to bed that evening amicably, “as if seeming well pleased.” In the morning, however, Good Friday, the Yamasees killed the majority of the British negotiators. They spent the remainder of the day torturing those unfortunate enough to have survived the massacre at dawn. When the Carolinians cried out in agony, “My God,” Yamasee warriors danced about repeating, “My God, my God.” Thomas Nairne, as Indian agent for the colony, received special attention. He was “loaded” with wood and roasted for several days “before he was allowed to die.” Clearly, the Carolinians had neglected an important step in the dialogue.¹

In the weeks following, it became apparent that the English had neglected a great deal across the entire region. Warriors from virtually every nation in the South, from the Catawbias and their piedmont neighbors in the Carolinas to the Choctaws of Mississippi (see map 1), joined together in one of the most potent native coalitions ever to oppose the British in colonial North America. Southeastern Indians destroyed most of South Carolina’s plantation districts and came within a few miles of Charles Town itself during the first year of the war. Shocked and bewildered, South Carolinians found themselves surrounded and under attack “on every side but the sea-side.”²



Map 1. The Southeast on the eve of the Yamasee War, 1715

The Yamasee War, as it has come to be known, has long been recognized as one of the most important events in southern colonial history. According to historian Gary B. Nash, Native American combatants came “as close to wiping out the European colonists as ever [they] came during the colonial period.” By 1718 when peace returned to much of the region, over four hundred colonists and an untold number of Native American warriors had perished, making the conflict a serious candidate for America’s bloodiest war in proportion to the populations involved. The war spurred extensive tribal migrations and alliance realignments that changed the diplomatic and cultural landscape of the region for the remainder of the eighteenth century, and it led directly to the collapse of South Carolina’s proprietary government in 1719. British imperial responses to the war, moreover, prompted the first calls for a

buffer colony to protect Carolina's southern border, culminating in the establishment of Georgia in 1733.³

The Yamasee War easily ranks with King Philip's War and Pontiac's rebellion as one of the major "Indian Wars" of the colonial era, yet it has not received the same level of scholarly attention. Pontiac's rebellion has been treated by Francis Parkman and, most recently, Gregory Evans Dowd, while King Philip's War has almost become a field unto itself, boasting at least five major studies in the last six years. For much of the twentieth century, by contrast, the only historical discussions of the Yamasee War were chapter-length treatments in Verner W. Crane's landmark study *The Southern Frontier* and Chapman J. Milling's *Red Carolinians*, both published more than sixty years ago. The conflict has traditionally been cast in moral terms as a righteous effort on the part of Native Americans to exact vengeance against unscrupulous and abusive Europeans. Verner Crane, for instance, viewed it as a "far reaching revolt against the Carolinian trading regime," in which Native Americans across the South rose up in anger over the "tyrannies of the Charles Town traders." John R. Swanton, writing in the same decade, also felt that the "misconduct of some traders" had been the "immediate cause" of the war but went on to add that fears of enslavement may have prompted the Yamasees to action as well. Elements of these versions were refined, interwoven, and reiterated for a generation and indeed continue to influence current scholarship in subtle ways.⁴

"Misconduct" and "abuse" as defined in European terms, however, do not necessarily add up to an explanation of war. Around the year 1711, for instance, a British trader named Alexander Longe became embroiled in a bitter feud with the Euchee Indians. Although the Eucheas were considered allies of South Carolina, Longe got his revenge a few years later when a Euchee warrior unwisely came to his store to purchase gunpowder. According to a Cherokee

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leader named Partridge, the trader piled up the powder next to his unfortunate client and then “sett fier to itt and blew him up.” Outraged over that and other affronts to their alliance network, Charles Town officials moved aggressively to prosecute him, and early twentieth-century historians such as Crane and Swanton followed suit. The Cherokee Indians, however, viewed matters very differently. They remained steadfast in their friendship and support for Alexander Longe even as Carolinians sought to bring him to justice. Indeed, as his fellow Englishmen suffered within their fever-ridden fortifications, he safely spent the entirety of the Yamasee War in Cherokee territory and continued trading there as an honored guest through the 1720s.⁵

“Misconduct” must obviously have meant different things to different people. For purposes of historical analysis, the term does more to obscure than to explain the Anglo-Indian trade relationship prior to the Yamasee War. As such, its use inevitably distorts any effort to assess the origins and root meaning of that seminal conflict. Alexander Longe may well deserve the bad reputation that historians have given him, and his actions undoubtedly did much to alienate the Eucheas from the English interest. But there was clearly another facet to his career among the Cherokees that has not been adequately explored. If Longe was merely abusive, as traditional accounts assert, and Charles Town officials were merely attempting to protect their native allies and administer justice, why did the Cherokees embrace Longe and attack South Carolina? Surely, there are some problems here that demand rethinking.

METHODS

Modern studies of European-Indian exchange relations have moved far beyond the moralistic approach of the Crane and Swanton school. Recognizing that indigenous approaches to commodity

exchange were embedded in complex social, political, economic, and cultural systems, scholars have sought to understand those systems and interpret the significance of intercultural trade for Native American participants. Such efforts have produced a more nuanced portrait of frontier relations in which profoundly different peoples encountered, accommodated, and influenced each other in pursuit of a shared objective: trade. Historian Richard White's study of French-Algonquian relations in the Great Lakes region, *The Middle Ground*, is perhaps the most notable achievement of this new approach. In his view, Indians and Europeans interested in trading with one another were forced to develop new, mutually intelligible ways of communicating that borrowed heavily from each culture. As a result, in certain places and times where the process reached its fullest development, the respective worlds of natives and newcomers sometimes "melted at the edges and merged" to create a new set of common understandings and practices specifically related to the trade.⁶

White termed this new, mutually created nexus the "middle ground," and the metaphor has been eagerly taken up, and occasionally debated, by a broad range of historians, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians. In fact the notoriety of the phrase itself almost seems to have overshadowed White's original methodology. The term is often used simplistically—for instance, as a geographical marker to designate the locus of intercultural relations; the place, that is, where cultures and cultural actors engage each other. As such, it sometimes functions as little more than a fashionable modern equivalent for the word *frontier*. White himself described the middle ground as the "place in between" peoples and cultures where cultural accommodation and change took place. Yet his model involved much more. The middle ground, he argued, was a new creation growing out of those accommodations, "a new set

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of common conventions” built by mutual innovation. Its creation, moreover, depended on a rough balance of power between participants that necessitated accommodation.⁷

In this respect the middle ground presents a challenge of sorts to scholars interested in analyzing specific cross-cultural conversations. Most ethnohistorical studies share White’s interest in the ways that different groups engaged one another in a struggle to influence and determine the meanings, forms, and terms of the encounter. Cultures rarely seem to “melt at the edges and merge,” however, even in discourse studies that employ the middle ground metaphor as a location for intercultural dialogue. Cultures and cultural actors remain distinct, driven by distinct objectives, as they creatively engage in cultural innovation to gain advantage in the relationship. New forms and tactics do emerge, as White points out, yet they are developed and deployed as the characteristic creations of one group or another for its own purposes. In many cases those new forms of discourse reflect or mimic the opposing culture in order to curry influence, yet they remain primarily the products of distinct voices pursuing objectives relevant to group identities. James Merrell’s study of intercultural mediators on the colonial Pennsylvania frontier, *Into the American Woods*, for instance, focuses on what the English and Indians “had to say, and how they said it.” Yet Merrell’s search for “patterns in the tapestry of negotiation” nevertheless draws a clear line between participants. There was, for Merrell, no “debatable land between native and newcomer.” Delaware Indians and Pennsylvania colonists were, instead, “firmly anchored on one side of the cultural divide or the other.”⁸

Much serious thinking about approaches to Indian-white relations has thus made a new consideration of the Yamasee War especially timely, and several studies have begun this work. James Merrell’s groundbreaking work on the Catawbas, *The Indians’ New*

World, sought for the first time to demonstrate regional differences in the motivations of Indian participants, and Tom Hatley's *The Dividing Paths* offered unprecedented insight into the Cherokee experience. Alan Gally's Bancroft prize-winning study *The Indian Slave Trade* provided the first detailed portrait of the traffic in Indian slaves that destabilized the South in the years prior to the Yamasee War. More recently Steven J. Oatis's *A Colonial Complex* challenged the traditional conception of the war as a preconceived conspiracy, arguing that it developed as a chain reaction of various alliance networks working independently. Finally, Steven Hahn's *The Invention of the Creek Nation* sought to assess the importance of the war in helping to shape Creek national identity and foreign policy.⁹

The present study seeks to build on these achievements to provide a new interpretation of the Yamasee War and its place in southern history. Although organized chronologically, the book does not seek to provide a narrative account of the war. Instead, it defines a number of problems associated with each phase of the conflict and pursues the most likely answers. By and large those problems involve the ways in which different peoples and their related cultures and economies—Indian, African, and European—influenced, understood, and interacted with one another before, during, and after the conflagration: phases identified here as tinder, spark, fire, and ash. In many cases, intercultural interactions in each phase were influenced heavily by South Carolina's growing involvement in the Atlantic economy, which spurred a series of complex changes that played a major role in both the origins of the war and the postwar settlement. The study is thus of necessity an attempt to come to grips with prevailing academic ideas about the nature of intercultural exchange and market involvement. In this context Richard White's middle ground metaphor figures less prominently than what historian Philip Deloria has

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called the “dialogic process” of White’s methodology, his focus on the mechanics and import of cross-cultural interaction. The following chapters therefore focus wherever possible on recorded instances of conversation as windows into the competing identities and agendas at work in this history.¹⁰

FIRE AND ASH

The curious anomaly of Alexander Longe, a trader roundly reviled as abusive by colonial South Carolinians and modern historians, cries out for such a new perspective, for he was not regarded in that light by the Cherokees. Why not? Another narrative retelling of his crimes will not likely provide much additional insight to the problem. Somehow we must suspend the moral reflex when Longe blows up a Euchee warrior in his store with gunpowder. Instead we must ask questions. Why did the Cherokees like him in the first place? Was his store located in Euchee or Cherokee territory? Were observers of the event Eucheers or Cherokees? How did the Cherokees feel about the Eucheers? If we regard the episode as a form of dialogue, as a symbolic act, a form of communication intended for an audience, as it absolutely was, new problems of this sort emerge naturally. Even if the answers are sometimes fragmentary, the act of framing new questions goes a long way toward solving the paradox of Alexander Longe.

It also helps build a new foundation for discussing the origins and broader historical meaning of the Yamasee War. As it turns out, Longe blew up a Euchee Indian on Cherokee territory in front of a Cherokee audience who may have had reasons to resent the Eucheers. Either he got lucky on this occasion or he knew what he was doing. The present study argues for the latter conclusion. Indeed, Longe’s “Small Postscript on the Ways and Manners of the Indians Called

Cherokees” reveals him to be a shrewd and sympathetic observer of Cherokee culture, religion, and social practice. If he and other traders were in fact participating in a sophisticated way in local Indian politics prior to the Yamasee War, the nature of that local relationship must be examined. Moreover, if local participation and activism brought British traders like Longe into conflict with the government of South Carolina, as it often did, then it may also have played some part in bringing the native peoples of the South into conflict with the colony.

The violence of the conflict lends itself to scrutiny as a form of dialogue as well. When Native American warriors conspicuously spared English churches from the torch, collected armloads of red fabric, and waged a parallel war against domestic livestock, they communicated a complex set of priorities that need to be considered. By the same token, Governor Charles Craven’s characterization of South Carolina’s native enemies as “monsters of man kind” communicated more than simple anger. Because the low-country plantation regime relied heavily on Indian slave labor in 1715, efforts to dehumanize the external enemy inevitably entailed a reconsideration of the colony’s internal human landscape. For Native Americans and English colonists alike, therefore, the rhetoric of violence expressed during the war was rooted in pre-existing cultural, economic, and social realities.

Such voices expressed existing anxieties, but they also anticipated desired solutions in an era of chronic change and instability. The chapters that follow therefore trace an evolving, multifaceted series of discussions among Indians, Africans, and the English in an effort to understand the multitude of choices that transformed the South. Encoded in these colonial conversations, it is argued, are clues that can help refine and deepen some of the prevailing historiographical debates about southern history. The themes that

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became conspicuous in Peter Wood's classic book *Black Majority*, for instance, were clearly visible in the first year of the Yamasee War for reasons that Wood did not fully recognize. Scholarly debates about postwar Creek diplomacy, elucidated over the last thirty years by David Corkran, Michael Green, Kathryn Holland Braund, Steven Hahn, and Joshua Piker, can be cast in starker relief by restoring the dialogic tension of key negotiations. On an even broader level, Native American trade complaints prior to the Yamasee War, coupled with their postwar trade agreements with South Carolina and the internal economic adjustments made by the English, contain the germs of modern historical arguments about the capitalist or anticapitalist nature of the nineteenth-century southern slave economy, framed by historians Eugene Genovese, Robert William Fogel, James Oakes, and others.

In this sense the current work pursues the same ambition articulated by historian Daniel H. Usner Jr., who endeavored in *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves* to draw southern historical memory—so long mired in its obsession with the nineteenth century and the racial simplifications of the Civil War—farther back into its multiethnic colonial roots.¹¹ Students of history interested in the Old South simply cannot understand it adequately without reference to the older South that gave it birth. To state this more poetically, the nature of the tinder that fueled the fires of the Yamasee War determined the patterns of ash that followed it.