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## *Introduction:*

# *The Question of the “Creek Confederacy”*

In times of calamity, it has been said, any rumor is believable. Calamitous indeed were the rumors circulating among the Creek Indians in the final year of the Great War for Empire, Britain and France’s climactic struggle for supremacy on the American continent. Unsubstantiated reports indicated that British troops were gathering for a great assault on the French towns of New Orleans and Mobile, “with a view, from thence, to attempt the extirpation of the Creeks.”<sup>1</sup> Others feared the English had not been entirely forthcoming about their true war aims, causing one experienced Creek headman to surmise that “the white people intend to take all their lands.”<sup>2</sup> The arrival of British troops at the Spanish post of Pensacola, Florida, scared others into believing that “the English were to surround the Indians and punish them,” the ultimate goal being “to make them tame.”<sup>3</sup> So startling was the rumor of the French defeat in the north that the Creeks sent a party to Canada just “to see if it was true.”<sup>4</sup>

But if calamitous times make it possible to believe what cannot be proven, the Creeks were wise enough to know that rumors often contain a seed of truth. By the summer of 1763 word had begun to spread among the Creeks that Britain, France, and Spain had finally settled on a peace agreement, penned on February 10, 1763, in Paris. There the victorious British forced France and Spain to cede their North American possessions to King George, potentially leaving the Creeks exposed to British encirclement.<sup>5</sup> Sensing that rumor had turned to prophesy, many Creeks responded to this news with horror and indignation. “We have advice from Augusta,” reported the *South Carolina Gazette* on June 4,

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1763, “that the Creeks have been informed the French and Spaniards are to evacuate all they possess on this side of the river Mississippi, and do not seem to relish the news; that they declare they will not suffer them to depart.” The Creeks insisted, the report continued, “that in case the French and Spaniards should be taken from them, we have no right to possess the lands that were never given to us, and they will oppose all our attempt that way.”<sup>6</sup>

Although the Creeks could do little more than watch as British troops marched into the fortresses that had once belonged to the Catholic monarchies, they resisted the transfer of power in various direct and indirect ways. At the former Spanish posts of St. Augustine and Pensacola, Creek chiefs haggled with British officers to fix precise boundaries between British and Creek lands. Eager to vent their frustrations against all outsiders, Creek warriors began killing an occasional Choctaw and Cherokee to punish those two nations for what the Creeks perceived as their support for the British. Creek warriors also murdered several British traders as the transfer of power was taking place, as if to demonstrate to British officials that they would not succumb easily to British encroachment.<sup>7</sup> The Treaty of Paris may have concluded the war between the European powers, but it did little to pacify the Creeks, who were quickly earning a reputation as the “least friendly” Indian nation in the entire Southeast.<sup>8</sup> “Never,” it was observed, had the Creeks been “so audacious as lately.”<sup>9</sup>

To bring the Creeks and their Indian neighbors to more peaceful terms, the newly appointed superintendent of Indian Affairs, John Stuart, invited the Indians and the governors of the southern British colonies to a grand “congress,” scheduled to take place in November 1763 at Augusta, Georgia. At Augusta, Stuart succeeded in convincing representatives of the five Southern Indian nations—the Creeks, Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Catawbas—to sign a peace treaty, commonly known as the Treaty of Augusta. In an attempt to pacify the land-hungry British, the Creeks agreed to cede a portion of their hunting grounds to the colony of Georgia, foreshadowing the infamous Removal of the 1830s.<sup>10</sup>

Hailed in the colonies as a stroke of diplomatic genius, the Treaty of Augusta nevertheless exposed the problems—as they were understood in the colonies—inherent in conducting Indian affairs. The main problem was that the headmen who signed the treaty on behalf of the “upper and lower Creek nation” may have had no authority to cede the nation’s

land. As a Chickasaw headman warned British officials, “Nothing done here will be confirmed by the absent [Creek] leaders, in comparison of whom the present chiefs are inconsiderable.”<sup>11</sup> Many important chiefs, it was argued, had absented themselves in protest, thereby calling into question the legality of the land cession and the nature of Creek political leadership, if not the very definition of the “Creek Nation.”

In this book I tell the political history of the Creek Indians, the native inhabitants of the region of the Chattahoochee, Coosa, and Tallapoosa Rivers, which span the present-day states of Georgia and Alabama. The time frame chosen for this study—1670 to 1763—reflects my belief that the period beginning with the establishment of Charles Town, South Carolina, and ending with the Treaty of Paris should be considered a distinct epoch in Creek political history; it is identified here as the South’s Imperial Era. With the rise of English and, later, French colonies to challenge the long-established Spanish colony of Florida, the American South became a theater of imperial struggle. The Creeks’ territory abutted the lands claimed by each of the three European powers, and at times the Creeks found themselves thrust onto center stage and forced to improvise new political strategies and institutions to meet new challenges.<sup>12</sup>

If it would at first appear that these circumstances led to the swift demise of the Creeks, scholars have long recognized that, to the contrary, the Creeks fared rather well in the early eighteenth century. Writing in 1928, the influential historian Verner Crane dubbed the Creeks the “custodians of the wilderness balance of power in the South,” in recognition of the Creeks’ policy of “neutrality,” which enabled them to play the British off against the Spanish and French.<sup>13</sup> While most scholars concur that the policy of “neutrality” was the centerpiece of Creek foreign policy, few have sought to understand precisely how and when the Creeks put this policy into practice or how neutrality became enshrined as a Creek tradition. Furthermore, because of the decentralized nature of political power among the Creeks, we cannot be sure if the Creeks consciously pursued neutrality as a policy, or if it came about accidentally as the *de facto* result of various Creek political factions acting in their own interests.<sup>14</sup>

In an attempt to answer such lingering questions, I have consulted not only the paper trails of the respective British colonies but also the underutilized archives of Spanish Florida and, to a lesser extent, French

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Louisiana, in an attempt to “triangulate” Creek diplomatic activity. I will demonstrate that the Creeks, reeling from the effects of the Yamasee War of 1715, first formally articulated this policy of neutrality in 1718 in the Creek town of Coweta. Over time the “Coweta Resolution,” as I have called it here, became the political wisdom of much of the Creek Nation, acquiring the sanctity of tradition among later generations.

By demonstrating the evolution of Creek “neutrality” policy in this way, I hope the reader will gain a better appreciation of Creek perspectives on European colonialism. The Creeks believed that their political autonomy was best preserved in the context of imperial competition and feared the arrival of a day when one of the European powers would gain the upper hand. Therefore, from the Creek perspective the Treaty of Paris of 1763 was a radical shift in the political dynamics of the region that brought to an abrupt end a style of politics that had been two generations in the making. Little wonder, then, that the Creeks recoiled in horror upon learning the articles of the Peace of Paris and behaved in a manner befitting their reputation as the “least friendly” Indians.

The subject under scrutiny here—politics—may at first glance appear to be an uncomfortable fit in an ethnohistorical study. As defined by James Axtell, ethnohistory is best thought of as “the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and causes of change in a culture defined by ethnological concepts and categories.” Succinctly put, ethnohistorical studies utilize culture as the central category of analysis, with great attention paid to the patterns of meanings, values, and norms shared by a society and the symbolic expression and transmission thereof.<sup>15</sup> Political history, in contrast, tilts toward a more chronological, event-driven approach, and emphasizes questions of realpolitik rather than questions of cultural change. The goal of this work is to apply the insights of ethnohistory to some of the more traditional concerns of political history and to embed Creek political action in the broader context of Creek culture. In the end I hope the reader will discern new Creek perspectives on familiar events and gain insight into the culturally specific political motives of the Creeks and their leaders.

Increasingly, historians have come to recognize the benefits of what might be dubbed “ethnopolitical” history. Three general points of emphasis are discernable as products of the ethnopolitical approach as it pertains to Native Americans. The first is the importance of kinship as the basis of Native American political concepts and practices. Kinship

not only served as the bond among Native Americans but applied more abstractly to their relationship with Europeans. The Creeks incorporated Europeans into their social and political circles when necessary, subjecting them to rules of reciprocity, giving the Native Americans leverage over traders and colonial governors alike. The second major point emphasized in such works is that broad tribal distinctions such as "Creek," "Ojibwe," or "Sioux" fail to capture the political complexity of loosely organized tribal peoples. For this reason scholars have rightly begun to turn their attention to smaller political units, discovering in the process that local political concerns and loyalties often superseded loyalties to an imagined "tribe." Third, ethnopolitical histories tend to examine in greater detail the roles of individual Indian leaders, who had motives, desires, and goals that sometimes placed them at odds with their own people. Thus, Indian leaders emerge not simply as stock representatives of their tribe or victims of grand historical processes but as complex characters forced to make difficult decisions in a morally ambiguous world.<sup>16</sup>

In this light Creek peoples are better understood not as a nation in the modern sense but as an extended family united by bonds of clan affiliation, marriage, and ritually prescribed friendships. "Creek politics," then, might be considered something of a misnomer, because I devote much attention to smaller political units and networks, the concerns of which often superseded the concerns of the broader "Creek Nation." Where possible, I discuss the political careers of individual Creek leaders to demonstrate the various ways those in positions of authority chose to respond to pressures exerted by the colonists and their peers back home.

The evolution of the Creeks' ambiguous political organization, which scholars deem the "Creek Confederacy," is a recurring theme in this discussion. I explore the longstanding scholarly debate over the timing of the Confederacy's emergence, which has yet fully to be resolved. Was the Creek Confederacy an ancient political arrangement that "coalesced" by the turn of the eighteenth century, as many notable historians and anthropologists have argued? Or did the Confederacy emerge slowly over the course of the eighteenth century in response to the European presence in the Southeast? Is "confederacy" even an appropriate term, or did the Creeks' political organization consist of a series of shifting alliances of kin groups for which we have no good descriptive language?<sup>17</sup>

The use of the term "confederacy" in reference to the Creeks began

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in the late eighteenth century with the publication of several important accounts of the southern Indians. Among the most important of these works was James Adair's *History of the American Indians*, published in 1775, and William Bartram's *Travels*, first published in 1791, both of which assumed the existence of the "Muskogee" or "Creek Confederacy." Adair, who lived among the Indians for more than thirty years, believed that the Muskogee Confederacy became powerful due to an "artful policy" of incorporating the remnants of other tribes. William Bartram, who made several excursions through Creek country in the 1770s, habitually referred to the Creeks as a confederacy, while also noting their linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity.<sup>18</sup>

Like Adair and Bartram, historians and anthropologists working in the twentieth century described the Creeks as a multi-ethnic confederacy but generally neglected to subject its formation to rigorous historical scrutiny. John Swanton, the eminent anthropologist who wrote extensively on the Creeks in the early part of the twentieth century, viewed Creek history through the lens of the "ethnographic present," a method of observation many anthropologists have used to analyze the "savage" cultures that persisted well into the twentieth century. Though useful for analyzing the cultural practices of small-scale societies, the ethnographic present fails to place these cultures in an historical framework. Swanton's voluminous works, which remain classics in the field of ethnography, nevertheless insufficiently question the Confederacy's purported emergence.<sup>19</sup>

Among the first to consider the Creek Confederacy from an historical standpoint was the foremost scholar of the southern frontier, Verner Crane. In an influential 1913 article, Crane argued that the Confederacy arose around the time of the Yamasee War of 1715. In support of his thesis Crane noted that Carolina traders and government officials began to refer to their Indian allies then living on the Ocmulgee River as the "Ochese Creek Indians," which they then shortened to "Creek Indians" by the time of the Yamasee War. When the "Creek Indians" returned to their old homes on the Chattahoochee in 1716, Carolina officials continued to use the "Creek" moniker and began applying it to the linguistically and culturally similar peoples living farther west, on the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers. The name stuck, and Carolina, and later Georgia, officials would continue to refer to the Creeks as a single nation composed of two distinct divisions: the Lower Creeks, who lived

on the Chattahoochee River, and the Upper Creeks, who lived on the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers.<sup>20</sup>

While scholars continue to describe the Creeks as a confederacy that emerged some time during the "long" eighteenth century, most have rightly become somewhat uncomfortable assigning a specific date to its emergence. Moreover, scholars justifiably tend to use equivocal modifiers that raise doubts about the existence of a confederacy, if not the very utility of the term. Ironically, the first scholar to study the Creeks, Albert Gatschet, recommended in 1884 abandoning the term "confederacy" in favor of "war-confederacy," "war league," or "symmachy."<sup>21</sup> Subsequent scholars have generally refused to adopt Gatschet's equally vague terminology but have nevertheless stressed the decentralized nature of the Confederacy. Kathryn Braund, for example, labels the Confederacy "an anomaly of unity and division," and further qualifies it as "loosely structured" and "ill-defined."<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Michael Green describes the Confederacy as a "loosely organized alliance of independent and autonomous tribes" that gradually "evolved into a nation."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, scholars who have most recently written about the Creeks describe the Confederacy variously as "loose," a "loose defensive and offensive alliance," "shifting and diverse," "emerging," or "not a perfect confederation" but one that was "subject to frequent disunity."<sup>24</sup>

How, then, does one explain the rise of a Confederacy so ill-defined that it appears to divest the term of any useful meaning? The strategy employed here will be not to assume the Confederacy's pre-existence but to investigate explicitly the historical dimensions of confederacy building. Confederation, William Fenton reminds us, was not an event but a "process" requiring decades if not centuries.<sup>25</sup> As a process, then, I will not depict the making of the Creek Confederacy through any single event but through a series of what shall be termed "acts of confederation"—episodes of common action requiring broad-based planning and leadership. This is not to suggest that individual acts of confederation inevitably led to the creation of a Creek Confederacy. The persistence of local, kinship-based political units made the Confederacy subject to oscillating periods of decline and renewal, fission, fusion, and factionalism.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, I will draw a sharp distinction between the distinctly political act of "confederation" and "ethnogenesis," which is the emergence of a particular ethnic group's awareness of its own distinctiveness based

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upon perceived similarities in language, folk practices, and mythic traditions.<sup>27</sup> As the following pages will attest, an ethnic group's awareness of its own distinct identity may be a precondition for political confederation. But political affiliation and ethnicity do not coincide so neatly in many cases, particularly in Creek country, where political sentiments could unite persons of different ethnicity and yet divide blood relatives.

So as to assess better the ways in which Creek political culture did change, I will abandon the search for the elusive "Creek Confederacy" in favor of an investigation into the origins of Creek "nationhood." The concept of nationhood is defined here as the drawing of territorial boundaries, the creation of institutions of national leadership, and the invention of ideologies that legitimize the existence thereof. These categories of analysis are preferable because they offer more precise means by which to assess the historical and cultural dimensions of political change.<sup>28</sup> Not incidental to this process, of course, was the influence of Europeans, whose territorial, economic, and imperial ambitions required the Creeks to adopt new territory-based concepts of nationhood and national leadership in defense of their own political autonomy.

In particular, British colonial practices, by way of trade, land acquisition, and the creation of British-sponsored "chiefs," were the stimuli that inched the Creeks toward this new concept of nationhood. This is not to say, however, that the British imposed nationhood entirely upon the Creeks. Some Creek leaders began making innovative territorial claims of their own after the establishment of the colony of Georgia in 1733. By claiming absolute authority over recently conquered territory, the Creeks themselves participated in the invention of a territory-based Creek Nation, as distinguished from the small, traditional kinship groups that lived on the three rivers in Creek country. Certain Creek leaders, eager to aggrandize their own political authority, attempted at times to place themselves at the head of this new political entity, thus establishing a precedent for national leadership. The Creek town of Coweta appears to have figured prominently in this enterprise, and its chiefs can be credited as the first to offer the vision of a "Creek Nation" and an ideological and historical defense—albeit a contested one—for their right to exercise authority over it. The South's Imperial Era, then, did not witness the rise of a monolithic Creek Confederacy. But it saw the invention of an entirely new, ambiguous political concept—the territory-based Creek Nation—which both Creeks and Europeans worked to define and control.<sup>29</sup>

### *A Final Note on Spelling and Terminology*

Because British, Spanish, and French officials often spelled Creek towns in a variety of creative ways, I have adopted the most common English spellings to minimize confusion and facilitate (I hope) readability. Spanish and British officials also often spelled Creek names and titles differently. Generally this work will use the most common English spellings, except for the few individuals who appear more often in the Spanish archival materials. I have also edited many of the egregious anachronisms to reflect modern practices in spelling, capitalization, and grammar. I retain some of those anachronisms in an attempt to preserve some of the characteristics of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century language.

It should be further noted that I use the term “Creek” with some reluctance because this group was a heterogeneous, diverse people that generally lacked a concept of “Creekness.” But, in an effort to demonstrate the gradual processes of nation building, I avoid employing the term “Creek Confederacy” when discussing the Creeks’ mysterious political arrangements. Instead, I have chosen to adopt terms more suitable to each specific period in question, such as “Apalachicolas,” “Ocheses,” “Lower Creeks,” or “Upper Creeks.” I use the term “confederacy” or “confederation” in the lowercase to differentiate these ad hoc political arrangements from the scholarly notion of the “Creek Confederacy.” Last, in an attempt to differentiate the Creek peoples from the political or legal entity known to the British as the “Creek Nation,” I refer to the Creeks collectively as a “nation” using the lowercase.<sup>30</sup> The term “nation,” derived from the Latin root *natus*, means “to be born”; its derivative noun, *natio*, can be used as a synonym for “tribe,” a concept that the Creeks themselves undoubtedly understood.<sup>31</sup>