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Introduction

THE SOUTHEASTERN FRONTIER COMPLEX

When Thomas Nairne went to sleep on the eve of Good Friday, 1715, he had no idea that he would wake to star in his own passion play. Nairne, one of the most prominent and influential residents of the British colony of South Carolina, spent the night in the Yamasee Indian village of Pocotaligo, a few miles inland from Port Royal Sound. Though South Carolinians had begun to hear disturbing rumors of Indian discontent, Nairne considered the Yamasees to be old friends and loyal allies and felt entirely capable of appeasing them in the name of the provincial government. Nairne's small circle of fellow ambassadors put great stock in his abilities; in their eyes he was a highly respected soldier, trader, scholar, planter, and gentleman who knew more about the Indians than did any white man in South Carolina. Most of the Yamasees, however, had gradually come to see Nairne as a leader of an irredeemable collection of bullies, trespassers, and slave mongers. On the morning after the South Carolinians' latest assurances of friendship, a parcel of Yamasee warriors burst into Nairne's lodgings and dragged him to Pocotaligo's town square, where they tied him to a post and pierced his body with burning splinters of wood. While most of his colleagues died quickly in their bedrolls, it probably took Nairne several agonizing hours—and perhaps days—to meet his end.

The murders at Pocotaligo quickly mushroomed into one of the most disruptive and unsettling conflicts in the history of colonial North America. Before the alarm could spread, the Yamasees killed most of the British traders among them and raided several of South Carolina's most prosperous coastal parishes, sacking plantations and killing more than a hundred colonists and slaves. Within weeks they were joined by a number of other disgruntled Indian societies that appeared intent on driving the remaining South Carolinians into the sea. Despite swift and successful countermeasures from the South Carolina militia, by late summer the colony's prospects seemed grim. Terrified sentries

faced the threat of renewed Indian invasion from nearly every direction, women and children began to starve in the streets of a fortified Charles Town, and help proved slow to arrive from the homeland and other British colonies. Only after a timely alliance with the powerful Cherokee Indians in early 1716 did most South Carolinians allow themselves to breathe a little easier. By the time the last of the colony's major Indian foes withdrew from the conflict in the fall of 1717, the South Carolinians had already embarked on the slow and uncertain process of repairing their severely shaken economy, diplomacy, and sense of security.

Most Americans have probably never heard of the Yamasee War, but it has rarely failed to spark at least some interest among those who have. The war not only constituted one of the American Indians' most serious challenges to the dominance of European colonists, but it also stands as one of the most significant episodes in the colonial history of the North American Southeast. While inherently intriguing to anyone with an interest in the histories of early America and European-Indian relations, the Yamasee War also contains epic doses of heroism, scandal, treachery, and revenge. Not surprisingly the Yamasee War has provided inspiration for dramatists as well as historians.

In the mid-1830s one young and ambitious author chose to approach the Yamasee War from both a historical and a literary perspective. *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina* (1835) was William Gilmore Simms's attempt to glorify his home state in the popular style of Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper. As Simms saw it, the Yamasee War boiled down to a noisy and dramatic collision between two incompatible worlds. Simms instilled his Indians with a bit more complexity than the noble savages of Cooper, but he had no trouble concluding that their way of life had to give way before the advance of the South Carolinians, who—led by a core of chivalrous, highborn characters—managed to triumph over the impediments laid down by crude traders, Spanish spies, and other base-hearted colonists. According to Simms, the triumph of a gentrified English civilization over barbarism marked the defining event of South Carolina's history and even the history of the entire South as a region.¹

Simms continues to draw praise as one of the United States' most significant writers of the Romantic era, but his reputation as a historian of the early South has withered over the years. Since Simms's day, however, there have been remarkably few attempts to understand the Yamasee War and its role in shaping the early development of South Carolina. When American history textbooks mention the Yamasee War at all, they afford it little more than a few

lines, and even more specialized works tend to gloss over it. Synopses and broad generalizations about the Yamasee War are no longer difficult to find, but anyone looking to swim in deeper waters is bound to find them murky at best. Nearly thirty years ago one of the foremost scholars of colonial South Carolina lamented that the history of the Yamasee War “has never been adequately pieced together.”² Despite some valuable contributions to the historiography over the last several decades, this judgment still rings true, and those in search of the war’s deeper ramifications have to look to scattered and less accessible sources.

Though often difficult to interpret and analyze, these sources indicate quite clearly that the Yamasee War did not simply amount to Indians and colonists offending each other, betraying each other, and killing each other. The carnage of the colonial Southeast’s most violent Indian war was merely one, short-lived form of expression of the numerous, long-standing ties that connected the region’s distinct and contesting groups of people. Greater appreciation of the causes and consequences of this intense conflict requires a long, hard look at a lengthy period.

During the era of the Yamasee War, three European empires and dozens of Native American societies attempted to assert their own ideas and interests within the vaguely defined areas where they impinged on one another. Such intermediary zones necessarily gave rise to interaction between different peoples and cultures. Here at first there were no rules or rulers acknowledged by all concerned: no universal standards, no established laws, no ultimate appeal, no official truth, no single hierarchy of anything. Stability, when it came at all, was usually fleeting and often came at tremendous cost to one group or another. Within these zones all was in flux and all were at risk, no more so than in the half-century after 1680. Careful study of these fluctuations—some gradual, some dramatic—is essential to understanding the Yamasee War in its proper historical context.

The idea of linking the Yamasee War to these kinds of changes is not a new one. More than seventy-five years ago, historian Verner Crane wrote what is widely considered the most authoritative treatment of the Yamasee War as a twenty-five page chapter of *The Southern Frontier, 1670–1732* (1928). Crane’s eloquent prose, thorough research, and path-breaking scope have established his work as a classic in American historiography, giving it great influence in the study of Indian-white relations in the early colonial Southeast. For all its obvious merits, however, Crane’s book is neither infallible nor exhaustive. While it remains a compelling treatment of Britain’s imperial strategy in the North

American Southeast, it leaves many key aspects of the “southern frontier” unexplained.

Any critique of this important work would have to begin with Crane’s understanding of the “frontier,” a concept that seemed deceptively simple, even intuitive, to most of his generation. Crane’s take on frontiers was based firmly on that of Frederick Jackson Turner, the man who had helped train him as a historian during the early years of the twentieth century. Turner’s brief, eloquent, and phenomenally influential treatise on “The Frontier in American History” (1893) essentially defined the concept as the outer edge of a “wave” of European American settlement making its way through a hostile, character-building wilderness. Turner argued that the patterned phases of westward expansion—from trapper, to trader, to farmer, to merchant, and so on—had molded a uniquely American quality of progress, persistence, and democratic individualism.³ While Turner and his generations of disciples never completely ignored the importance of the peoples on the other side of the advancing frontier, they clearly afforded these peoples much less attention and consideration than they deserve. When Crane concisely depicted his southern frontier as a zone of European influence “merging into the wilderness,” he showed little appreciation for the complex and diverse Indian societies that had inhabited the region for centuries. Crane acknowledged that the Indians—or rather, “a sphere of influence over the Indian tribes”—formed an important part of the frontier, but he held that as this frontier expanded, it did so in only one direction.⁴

For the last forty or so years, Turner’s frontier thesis has taken its lumps, especially from a generation of critics more attuned to its obvious ethnocentrism. Though Crane remains less well known than Turner, his epic work on the early colonial Southeast is subject to similar attacks. But over the years the best critics of the Turner school of frontier historiography have done more than simply wave the banner of cultural relativism. More significantly these revisionists have worked toward alternative models to help students wrestle with questions and themes similar to those that occupied the Turner school: the dynamics of migration and settlement, intercultural contact, cultural ecology, and cultural change. In building a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of frontiers, a recent generation of scholarship has cast a new light on important topics that once seemed so cut-and-dried.

The most forceful challenge to the Turner thesis has developed in the past twenty or so years among historians working with the North American West, a section of the continent more steeped than any other in frontier myths and

legends. For Patricia Nelson Limerick, Donald Worster, William Cronon, and other “New Western historians,” the Turnerian view of an advancing frontier line is too static, predictable, and triumphal to do justice to a history that they see as a patchwork of racial, class, and ecological conflicts, many of which remain relevant to the North American West to this day. The New Western historians share an aversion to the very word “frontier,” believing that more than a century of misuse and oversimplification has rendered it all but meaningless. Instead, they choose to work within the conceptual framework of “region,” staking out a broad geographic space and observing the salient conflicts and innovations that have taken place within it. By highlighting such topics as labor activism, ethnic identity, water usage, and immigration quotas, these historians have helped depict a West far more diverse, dynamic, and contentious than the one defined by dime novels, John Wayne movies, and older frontier histories.⁵

Significantly the “regional” methodology of the New Western historians can also be applied to regions outside the West. In *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670–1717* (2002), the first comprehensive study of the Southeast in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries since Crane’s *Southern Frontier*, historian Alan Gallay tackles the interaction between diverse groups of European colonists, Native Americans, and African slaves and discerns a regionwide pattern of social and economic exploitation driven by the English South Carolinians through their successful trade, diplomatic aggression, and enslavement of racial “others.” Gallay, like Crane, includes a section on the Yamasee War as part of his narrative. Unlike Crane, however, Gallay treats the Yamasee War less as an outgrowth of an advancing South Carolina frontier than as a milepost on the way to the racially cast, plantation-based society that would serve as the basis for the more familiar “Old South” of the nineteenth century.⁶

Gallay and other New Western historians who would study the Yamasee War as an episode in “region making” tend to distance themselves from the Turnerian view that intercultural contact and conflict can be consigned to any single, overarching model. Their cautionary points about the potential pitfalls of frontier studies are well taken, but their outright rejection of the Turner thesis is excessive. In their eagerness to debunk the myths of the “frontier,” these revisionists turn away from a concept that, if qualified properly, remains the best and most concise way to express a historical process of profound importance to early America in general and to the early colonial Southeast in particular.

Unlike the New Western historians, “New Indian historians” such as James

Axtell, James Merrell, Daniel Usner, and Daniel Richter have immersed themselves in the study of frontier relationships. In the past thirty or so years, these and other like-minded scholars have demonstrated that the concept of the frontier popularized by Turner and Crane—while undeniably rigid and ethnocentric—is valuable in its ability to evoke both process and place. Turner and Crane correctly contended that wherever European Americans moved up against unfamiliar cultural and ecological environments, they changed, and were in turn changed by, these environments. What Turner and Crane failed to grasp adequately was the complexity of this process, not only insofar as it shaped the character of Europeans, but also as it challenged and changed human cultures that had some very different needs and priorities from those of Europeans. In contrast the New Indian historians have looked to a wide range of archival and anthropological sources in order to analyze the meaning of intercultural contact, interaction, and conflict for all groups involved. Their efforts have resulted in a far more nuanced and satisfying usage of “frontier” than the usage of old, defining the concept not as an advancing line of civilization against emptiness or savagery but as a broader geographic zone in which various groups of people traded with, lived with, fought with, and ultimately changed one another.⁷

In this book I embrace the definition of “frontier” that has been reshaped by the New Indian history. I find the term to be the most concise and historically grounded way to evoke the interaction of distinct cultures in a context of undefined power relations; such alternative terms as “human ecotone” and “zone of interpenetration” not only are cumbersome but also are absent from primary historical sources.⁸ Like Verner Crane I believe that the process of frontier interaction is the key to understanding the Yamasee War and its historical importance. I also share Crane’s conclusion that the English colonists of South Carolina acted as the most forceful catalysts for many of the Southeast’s frontier relationships. Unlike Crane, however, I emphasize that the frontier history of South Carolina and its surrounding region always depended on various forms of “exchange” between more than one culture. Though one culture in a frontier relationship could always pick and choose the traits that it wanted to adopt from another, extensive contact and interaction could often bring about unwanted or unintended cultural transformations, a phenomenon that James Axtell has described as “reactive change.”⁹ Such transformations tended to appear in situations where one culture began to overpower the other and tended to be most visible within the culture that faced the most outside pressure. But as long as there remained at least some possibility for effective resistance or

confrontation, the process of reactive change could continue to cut both ways. The importance of each competing culture in a frontier relationship therefore compels frontier scholars to study the outlooks and motivations of each side as thoroughly as possible.

While frontier studies in the mold of Turner and Crane fall notably short of the mark in this respect, they are open to criticism on another front as well: their tendency to minimize the variety of the “frontier experience.” Since no one in the early colonial period could precisely define the borders of South Carolina, provincial officials actually claimed authority over most of the territory south of Virginia and east of the Mississippi River. As a result of their territorial ambitions and their demands for creating profitable enterprises, the new South Carolinians were forced into relationships with racial and ethnic groups that many of them would rather have avoided. The demands of mercantilism and imperial rivalry locked them into competition with different groups of fellow Europeans: the Spanish in Florida, the French in the Lower Mississippi Valley, the Scots around Port Royal, and even the English in Virginia. To cultivate the crops on their plantations, South Carolinians imported a growing number of black slaves from Africa and the West Indies. Above all, their colony’s very expansion into the terra incognita of the southeastern interior depended in large part on the aid and cooperation of the Muskogean, Iroquoian, and Siouan cultural groups that had inhabited and shaped this territory long before the arrival of Old World peoples. Some of these different groups shared certain characteristics that allowed South Carolinians to confront them more easily, but for the most part each group remained distinct enough to demand its own brand of give-and-take. The further South Carolinians’ economic and political influence expanded during the early eighteenth century, the more unrealistic it became for them to lump all their various allies and adversaries into a single frontier relationship.

South Carolinians in the era of the Yamasee War engaged different cultures not along a single “southern frontier” but within what historian Jack Forbes has called a “frontier complex.” This term he defines as “a multiplicity of frontiers in dynamic interaction.”¹⁰ Forbes’ concept, unlike Turner’s, invites attention to the cultural diversity that characterized the Southeast in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth century. Moreover, it offers a convenient way to combine the cultural dynamics of “frontier” with the broader geographic implications of “region,” thereby serving as a kind of link between the New Western and the New Indian histories. Finally the notion of a frontier complex also encourages a more careful focus on frontier relationships in which the

English colonists of South Carolina did not play direct roles. As important and dominant as the English eventually became, they could not begin to control or apprise themselves of all that transpired in the region. As a result historians guided by Anglocentric impulses run the risk of missing as much as did the English colonists themselves.

The concept of the southeastern frontier complex therefore allows for a more complete and balanced picture of South Carolina's various frontier relationships. Even so it presents some significant challenges. From the comfort of modern desks and chairs, it is often easy to underestimate both the vastness and the fluidity of the early colonial Southeast. Few of the region's Indian and colonial societies lived in close proximity to one another, and the forces that bound them together often had to cut across several hundred miles of difficult terrain. Today a traveler can go overland from Charleston, South Carolina, to the Lower Chattahoochee River in less than seven hours; in 1700 the same trip often took two or three weeks.

Despite these distances, however, the Indians and the Europeans of the early colonial Southeast often went to great lengths to keep in touch with the groups around them. Just as no southeastern society remained entirely isolated from the outside world, no southeastern frontier was allowed to develop or evolve in a vacuum. In exploring the nuances of a particular frontier, it is important to keep sight of its connections to other frontiers in the region. Even as this book branches out into different, far-flung directions, its overall task remains a synthetic one: to integrate insights about numerous intercultural relationships into a general interpretation of the lengthy power struggle that resulted from South Carolina's incursions into the Southeast.

The frontier transformations of the early colonial Southeast unfolded simultaneously on a number of levels, from the deeply personal to the utterly mysterious. Events that altered the map of the Southeast often had their roots in intimate relations between small groups of people, where basic human emotions like love, trust, jealousy, and fear could have deep and rippling effects on one society's connections to another. The wide-sweeping themes associated with frontier exchange and imperial rivalry had profound and often tragic impacts on human beings who were every bit as real and imperfect as we are. At the same time, however, these themes also involved forces, patterns, and customs that operated far beyond the control of any single person. Whenever individuals and cultures interacted with one another, they opened doors—both voluntarily and involuntarily—to the exchange of everything from biological substances to manufactured goods to revolutionary ideas.

In recent years frontier historians have focused on a wide variety of topics, thereby depicting frontier exchange as a multifaceted process involving all kinds of actors and motives.¹¹ But in a study examining frontier exchange as a protracted power struggle that changed the shape and extent of entire societies, certain aspects of the exchange process warrant more emphasis than others. Generally speaking, the interaction between Indian and colonial polities in the early Southeast most often hinged on the three closely related themes of trade, combat, and diplomacy. While diplomatic history can occasionally come across as a rigidly Eurocentric discipline, it is perfectly possible to discuss trade, combat, and diplomacy in a way that remains sensitive to the different perspectives and passions of different groups. Indeed, this kind of sensitivity is essential in the study of diplomatic relations between peoples who often espoused markedly different views of the world.

For example, colonial North America was home to two dramatically opposing visions of European-Indian warfare. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Europeans and Indians both viewed warfare as an important part of life and a potent expression of deeply ingrained values. Although the process of frontier exchange inspired Europeans and Indians to borrow a great deal from each other in terms of weapons and tactics, the two groups always clung to some distinct ideas about how war should work. For the most part European governments of the day had developed a highly linear view of warfare. In their eyes wars were *exceptional* situations: no matter how intense or costly, they always came to an end sooner or later. Ordinarily European governments waged war with definite territorial, diplomatic, or commercial goals in mind and ended their conflicts through written and officially recognized treaties. For most southeastern Indian societies, however, war was a permanent part of a dualistic worldview: a “red” state of violence that always coexisted with a “white” state of peace. Most societies had designated towns and leaders who had the more or less permanent job of waging war against enemies. Though a certain group of Indians might not always decide to fight exactly the same enemies from year to year, it was almost certain that they would be fighting *someone* every year, usually during the summer. Warfare was a cyclical, ever-present part of Indian life, as essential to a community’s existence as an annual harvest. Not surprisingly southeastern Indian warriors did not always conform to the expectations of colonial governments.

Because colonists found it so difficult to understand these foreign cultures, they were often prone to oversimplification or exaggeration when attempting to analyze Indian behavior. As a result historians who have relied too much

on the colonists' perceptions of the Indians have done little more than give new life to old misconceptions. This mistake is especially apparent in what has long been the conventional wisdom about the outbreak of the Yamasee War. By parroting early South Carolinian rhetoric of a universal Indian "conspiracy," scholars have misrepresented both the nature and the extent of the province's wartime opposition. The notion of a regionwide conspiracy not only attributes too much foresight and cohesion to the various groups of Indians that turned against South Carolina in the spring of 1715, but it also blurs the identity of these Indian combatants. Some of the Southeast's Indian societies proved far more active than others in fueling the Yamasee War and had far more at stake in its outcome. Some fought the South Carolinians to the bitter end; some fought only briefly, belatedly, or half-heartedly; some switched sides in midcourse; some tried to stay out of the maelstrom altogether. Though many of the confused, frightened, and desperate South Carolinians were initially inclined to see all the region's Indians as traitors and conspirators, historians interested in a more accurate picture of the Yamasee War must account for the diversity and complexity of Indian cultures in the early colonial Southeast.

The necessity of drawing more accurate distinctions among the combatants and noncombatants of the Yamasee War requires a general overview of the ethnicity and political organization of the southeastern Indians. Most historical treatments of South Carolina's early frontiers have tended to gloss over internal differences and transformations within Indian societies by lumping these groups into static, easily discernible "tribes." The main problem for those scholars who seek to move beyond such vague and unsatisfying labels is that ethnohistorical evidence for the Indians' cultural and political connections often proves scanty and ambiguous. Though I have had some success in distinguishing certain Indian groups from others, this study occasionally makes use of conventional labels that probably homogenize groups that were actually distinct.

The most serious pitfall here is the potential for describing situations and affiliations that had yet to emerge. This type of counterhistorical mistake is most frequently made in regard to the "Creeks," an influential but extremely malleable group whose origins are only beginning to be pieced together by historians and archaeologists. While it begins to make sense to speak of a Lower Creek or Upper Creek confederacy for the 1720s and 1730s, such terminology simply does not hold up for the 1680s and 1690s, a time when many of the Creeks' forebears were scattered across different parts of the Southeast and living under markedly different circumstances. Consequently, I make a

conscious effort to avoid referring to these Indians as “Creeks” until I reach a point in time when the concept of a Creek nation is more justifiable. In the first several chapters, readers will see these proto-Creeks described either as “Muskogean” to denote their ethnic/linguistic background or as any number of other names (e.g., Ochesees, Tallapoosas, Abeikas, and Apalachicolas) to denote their localized political affiliations. My use of different names and descriptors throughout this book is intended not to blur an already complicated picture but to underscore the point that the Southeast’s Indian polities changed a great deal during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a result of their interaction with other groups. Such interaction was most intense and such change most extensive during the Yamasee War.

On the whole the nomenclature seems far more straightforward in respect to the various European societies of the early colonial Southeast. When examining the region’s rival colonial “empires,” however, it is important to remember that they, like the Indians, were also subject to important transformations and internal divisions. In many ways the English—the “British” following the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland—remained the most factious of the Southeast’s three colonial powers. While disputes and discrepancies frequently strained the relations between different English provinces, they also arose between subjects of the same province. Until 1729 North and South Carolina officially comprised a single colony owned by a small group of aristocratic proprietors based in England. Nevertheless, the residents of the northern and southern sections of Carolina were effectively divided in origin, ambition, and orientation throughout the entire colonial period. From the day they laid out the first crude streets of Charles Town in 1670, there was something distinct about the colonists who gradually expanded this small enclave and forged a common identity as South Carolinians.

The growing commonality between these colonists depended in large part on their ability to fend off the real or imagined challenges of groups they deemed threatening. South Carolina covered a huge section of European maps of the Southeast, but only a small percentage of its residents were seen as “South Carolinians.” As South Carolinian merchants, traders, planters, soldiers, and officials sought to expand their influence over the unsettled areas of their perceived domain, they had to confront numerous Indian, African, and European “outsiders” who had their own views on South Carolina’s boundaries. Though rarely acknowledged by British cartographers, these views were essential to the *real* map of an expanding South Carolina. It is to the task of redrawing and interpreting this map that this book turns its attention.