

Chickasaws: The Unconquerable People

By: Greg O'Brien

“Chickasaws: The Unconquerable People,” Mississippi History Now (May 2003)

Made available courtesy of Mississippi Historical Society: <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/>

*****Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Mississippi Historical Society. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document.*****

Article:

The Chickasaw Indians were Mississippi's second largest Indian group after the Choctaws. Before the United States government forced their removal in the 1830s, the Chickasaw resided in north Mississippi with their villages centered between the headwaters of the Yazoo and Tombigbee rivers around present-day Tupelo. They also claimed lands covering present-day western Tennessee. Their population numbers fluctuated over the 18th century between 2,000 to 5,000 people.

Culturally, the Chickasaws were (and are) similar to the Choctaws; both groups spoke a nearly identical language, their societies were organized matrilineally (meaning that ancestry was traced only through the mother's line), political power was decentralized so that each of their seven or so villages had their own chiefs and other leaders, and they viewed the sun as the ultimate expression of spiritual power for its ability to create and sustain life. But it was their ability to preserve their independence in the face of Indian and European enemies that made the Chickasaws famous throughout the southeast and beyond.



Young Chickasaw warrior

Warriors

Because of their relatively small population and because Indian and European enemies lived all around them in the 18th century, the Chickasaws placed a great emphasis on military prowess. At various times the Chickasaws warred against the Choctaws, the Creeks, the Cherokees, and the French, among other peoples. Numerous observers of the time noted that the Chickasaws were considered perhaps the fiercest warriors in all of the southeast. The governor of French Louisiana wrote in 1726 that the Chickasaws “breathe nothing but war and are unquestionably the bravest of the continent.” Similarly, decades later British Indian Superintendent John Stuart called them “the bravest Indians on the Continent.” The Chickasaws claimed that they had “only to beat drums in our cabins” to scare the Choctaws away from attacking their villages.

From an early age, Chickasaw boys received training in the martial arts and were taught to withstand pain and deprivation without complaint. This culture of war elevated the status of war leaders within Chickasaw society; normally war chiefs only had authority during a war party, but the constant state of war meant that war leaders commanded power and authority at nearly all times. During war, the Chickasaws withdrew into a few fortified

towns for protection against attack. Until the American Civil War, the Chickasaws never lost a major military engagement or war.



Ancient Chickasaw domain. Map from Arrell M. Gibson's *The Chickasaw*, 1971

Arrival of Europeans

Hernando de Soto's ill-fated Spanish expedition encountered the Chickasaws during the winter of 1540-41. The Chickasaws attacked them repeatedly until the Spanish moved west across the Mississippi River. That brief encounter with the Spanish remained the only significant contact that the Chickasaws had with Europeans until the founding of the English colony of Carolina in 1670. The English sought to trade guns, metal goods, manufactured cloth, and other items with Indians for deerskins and Indian captives. The Carolinians then sold the Indian captives as slaves to sugar plantations in the Caribbean islands.

It did not take long for the Chickasaws to take advantage of this new source of trade. By the 1690s, the Chickasaws, well armed with English guns, raided their southern neighbors the Choctaws to seize captives and sell them to the English, capturing perhaps 2,000 or so Choctaws and killing around another 2,000. At the time, the Choctaws did not own guns, making them vulnerable to the Chickasaw attacks, and this started a long era of intermittent Chickasaw-Choctaw warfare.

Beginning in 1699, France established a presence on the Gulf of Mexico coast and supplied the Choctaws with guns, thus ending the Chickasaw captive raids. The Chickasaws hoped to trade with France too, but the French did not have enough supplies to trade with every Indian group in the southeast and they decided to make the Choctaws their principal allies at the expense of the Chickasaws and other native groups. Partly for this reason, around 200 Chickasaws, led by the chief called Squirrel King, relocated farther east to the Savannah River in the 1720s to be nearer the English and their trade goods.

The Chickasaw-French wars

In two periods, 1720-1725 and 1733-1743, the Chickasaws fought against France and her allies the Choctaws. French officials distrusted the strong relationship between the Carolina English and the Chickasaws because every time that France and England were at war the Chickasaws harassed French shipping on the Mississippi River, which disrupted the Louisiana colony's ties with its sister colonies in Canada. The Chickasaws provided the spark for the first war in 1720 by killing a French fur trader who they and the English accused of being a spy. In retaliation, the French gave more guns and ammunition to the Choctaws and encouraged them to attack the Chickasaws, but the Chickasaws repulsed all of the Choctaw assaults on their villages. The Chickasaws then went on the offensive and effectively cut off all French shipping on the Mississippi River. The Chickasaws and Choctaws then settled on peace starting in 1724 and the French were forced to abide by the new peace agreement in 1725.



Chickasaw Indian bust, 1775. Illustration from Bernard Roman's A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida. Courtesy Library of Congress LC-USZ60-680



Map of the lands in Mississippi ceded by Chickasaws in 1832 and 1834. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History, File 8152-1-map.

In November 1729, the Natchez Indians rebelled against the French settlers in their midst, killing more than 200 of them. When the French retaliated in force, they killed many Natchez and took still more as prisoners. Natchez survivors were forced to abandon their home territory and join other Indian peoples. The largest component of Natchez joined the Chickasaws around 1730/1731. Chickasaws provided the Natchez refugees a new home and this did not sit well with the French who already disapproved of Chickasaw behavior in the lower Mississippi Valley.

The Choctaws and other potential French allies refused to attack the Chickasaws alone, so the French mounted their own military expedition against them. In 1736, the French attempted a coordinated attack from the north and south against the Chickasaw villages that failed miserably, despite the fact that the French outnumbered the Chickasaw and Natchez defenders nearly three to one. In 1739 the French mounted a new attack against the Chickasaws with troops sent from France specifically for the purpose of destroying the Chickasaws. That attack also failed and the French and Chickasaws signed a truce in 1740, with the Chickasaws agreeing to allow French boats to travel unmolested on the Mississippi River.

After that time, there were scattered small-scale attacks between the Chickasaws and the French and their sometime ally the Choctaws. When France lost the Seven Years War to Britain in 1763, they no longer posed a threat to the Chickasaws. The Chickasaws and Choctaws also patched up their relations during the Seven Years War, ending decades of conflict. The Chickasaws survived France's attempt to destroy them, but their population suffered as their numbers dropped dramatically during this period.

The American Revolution

With their ally and long-time trading partner the English in control of much of the eastern territory of the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River area after 1763, the Chickasaws experienced few threats to their existence.

That agreeable situation ended when the American Revolution erupted in 1776. The Chickasaws tried to remain neutral but they felt most committed to the British cause because of the long history between the two nations. In May 1779, the Chickasaws received a written threat from the new state of Virginia warning them to remain neutral or risk being invaded. Chickasaw chiefs responded in kind, showing they were not afraid of any nation. They wrote the Virginia government full of swagger and daring:

“We desire no other friendship of you but only desire you will inform us when you are Comeing and we will save you the trouble of Coming quite here for we will meet you half Way, for we have heard so much of it that it makes our heads Ach, Take care that we don’t serve you as we have served the French before with all their Indians, [and] send you back without your heads. We are a Nation that fears or Values no Nation as long as our Great Father King George stands by us for you may depend as long as life lasts with us we will hold him fast by the Hand.”

The only battle between the Chickasaws and Americans during the war occurred in 1780 when the Chickasaws briefly attacked George Roger Clark’s Fort Jefferson in western Kentucky. After the American Revolution, the Chickasaws quickly established relations with the United States and with Spain (Spain now controlled the entire gulf coast from Florida to Texas).

American influence and intrusion

During the 1780s and 1790s the Chickasaws played the United States and Spain off of one another, establishing trade with both countries while refusing to be dominated by either. The Chickasaws signed treaties with Spain in 1784, 1792, and 1793 and with the United States in 1786, 1801, 1805, 1816, 1818, and 1826. The play-off system worked for awhile and prevented either Spain or the United States from making significant inroads on to Chickasaw lands. Skillful diplomacy had always been important for the Chickasaws in retaining their sovereignty, and that expertise became more important after the American Revolution. That state of affairs ended in 1795 when, in the Treaty of San Lorenzo (also called Pinckney’s Treaty), Spain ceded any claim to lands above the 31st parallel, thus placing all Chickasaw lands within the boundaries of the United States.

The Mississippi Territory was formed three years later in 1798, and Americans flooded into lands along the Mississippi River and then along the Natchez Trace that went through the middle of Chickasaw lands. Along with the growing pressure on the Chickasaws to cede their lands came cultural and economic changes. Chickasaw chiefs led a new effort to encourage the production of renewable resources, such as cattle ranching and cotton farming, in order to establish a market economy among the Chickasaws and move away from dependence on the deerskin trade. Along with these new agricultural pursuits came slave ownership, constitutional government, private land ownership, and changing ideas about the role of women that more closely mirrored American mainstream values.

Protestant missionaries arrived among the Chickasaws in the early 19th century, teaching Christianity, writing, arithmetic, and domestic skills. The U.S. government urged these changes among the Chickasaws and other eastern Indians and suggested that Indians could use these new “civilized” abilities to become American citizens. Unfortunately, even though many Chickasaws did adopt the values, economics, and religion of their American neighbors, residents of Mississippi, which became a state in 1817, insisted that Indians had no right to possess lands that more “civilized” (meaning Euro-American) citizens could own and farm. The Mississippi government sided with this racist view and passed a law in February 1829 that relinquished all Indian land claims in the state and extended state jurisdiction over those lands. This duplicitous governmental action, not war, finally defeated the Chickasaws in Mississippi.

Forced removal, 1830s

Chickasaw leaders sought to acquire the best terms possible after Mississippi’s extension of state laws over Indians in February 1829 and after the 1830 passage of the Indian Removal Act by the U.S. government. In the summer of 1830, Chickasaw representatives met with U.S. delegates, including President Andrew Jackson, at Franklin, Tennessee, and a treaty was signed August 31. The Chickasaws agreed to cede their lands east of the

Mississippi River in exchange for an equal amount of land in the west, but this treaty became void when a suitable area could not be found. New negotiations for removal were undertaken in 1832 in Chickasaw territory at Pontotoc Creek. On October 20 a treaty was signed that ceded Chickasaw lands in Mississippi to the U.S. government. The lands were to be surveyed and sold immediately with each adult Chickasaw receiving a temporary allotment that would also be sold and all monies placed in a fund to cover the costs of removal.

Settlers quickly occupied the Chickasaw lands beginning in 1832, despite a provision of the treaty promising that the U.S. government would prevent new settlement until the Chickasaws had actually left Mississippi. A suitable new homeland in the west was not found until January 1837 when the Chickasaws and Choctaws met at Doaksville, Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory, and the Choctaws sold the western part of their new territory to the Chickasaws. Although this agreement between the two tribes was not a treaty with the United States, President Jackson submitted it to the Senate for approval anyway, which was accomplished in February 1837. Further details about the exact extent of territory and rights granted the Chickasaws were decided in two additional agreements between the two Indian nations in 1854 and 1855.

Further Reading:

- Adair, James. *History of the American Indians*. Originally published in 1776. Reprint: Samuel Cole Williams, editor. Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1930.
- Calloway, Colin G. *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 213-243.
- Champagne, Duane. *Social Order and Political Change: Constitutional Governments among the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Creek*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.
- Gibson, Arrell M. *The Chickasaws*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.
- Hoyt, Anne Kelley. *Bibliography of the Chickasaw*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1987.
- Hudson, Charles. *The Southeastern Indians*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976.
- Johnson, Jay K. "Chickasaws," in *Indians of the Greater Southeast: Historical Archaeology and Ethnohistory*. Edited by Bonnie G. McEwan. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000, pp. 85-121.
- Nairne, Thomas. *Nairne's Muskhogean Journals: The 1708 Expedition to the Mississippi River*. Edited, with an introduction by Alexander Moore. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988.
- St. Jean, Wendy. "Chickasaws: Firm Friends of the English?" *Journal of Mississippi History* (1996) vol. 58, no. 4, pp. 345-358.
- Sultzman, Lee. "Chickasaw History," <http://www.tolatsga.org/chick.html>.
- Swanton, John R. "Social and Religious Beliefs and Usages of the Chickasaw Indians," *Forty-Fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1928, pp. 169-273.