

A Primer on Georgia's American Indian Heritage

John E. Worth

Report submitted to the Georgia Council for American Indian Concerns, November 29, 2001.

At least as early as 11,500 years ago, and perhaps even earlier, the land we now call Georgia has been home to American Indians. Beginning with immigrant bands of Ice Age hunters who settled in the state, human populations gradually expanded across the Georgia landscape. As time passed after the end of the Ice Age about 10,000 years ago, cultures gradually adapted and readapted to the changing natural and social environment in which they found themselves. Group size grew, territories became smaller and more rigidly-defined, and communities became increasingly sedentary. A wide range of natural resources were exploited for food, shelter, and tools, and eventually hunting and gathering was supplemented by simple gardening in the rich floodplains across the state. Political organization became more complex and centralized, and public architecture grew increasingly more common, including monumental earthworks such as ceremonial and funeral mounds constructed from earth and rock. And finally, beginning just over a thousand years ago, groups in Georgia began to organize themselves into agricultural chiefdoms, characterized by hereditary chiefs supported by intensive farming of corn, beans, squash, and other staple foods. Ruling from homes atop earthen platform mounds constructed using tributary labor, male and female chiefs exercised sovereignty over multi-village chiefdoms comprising thousands of residents, and multi-chiefdom societies developed extending across broad regions of the Southeastern United States, including Georgia. The rich culture of these indigenous chiefdoms were characterized by long-distance trade, fortified towns and standing militias, craft specialization, and elaborate religious iconography and artistic expression.

By the time of European contact, somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 American Indians may have been living in Georgia. These populations were distributed into roughly 20 relatively distinct chiefdoms scattered across the coast and interior, and speaking languages and dialects of three American Indian language families. The most populous group were probably the Muskogean-speakers, who inhabited the entire Piedmont region, the entire southwestern Coastal plain and portions of upper southeastern Coastal Plain and northern coastline, and the entire Ridge and Valley region of northwestern Georgia. Documented chiefdoms include Capachequi, Apalachicola, Toa, Ichisi, Altamaha, Ocute, Guale, Itaba (Etowah), Ulibahali, and Coosa. The second most populous group were the Timucuan-speakers, who occupied the entire lower southeastern Coastal Plain of Georgia, extending along the coast from the mouth of the Altamaha southward. Known chiefdoms include Cachipile, Arapaha, Utinahica, Oconi, Ibihica, Tacatacuru (later known as Mocama), and Guadalquini. The least populous group in Georgia were the Iroquoian-speakers of the Cherokee language, who occupied the highest mountain valleys of the Blue Ridge province. Little is known about their political organization in the 16th century, though from later evidence it seems likely that there were at least two chiefdoms centered at Tugalo and Chotee/Nacoochee in northeastern Georgia, and portions of several others.

If the preceding 11,000 years had been characterized by slow but steady population growth and cultural development, the subsequent 500 years after European contact were marked by rapid and traumatic population loss, military devastation, and cultural transformation. Beginning at least as early as the coastal expeditions of Lúcas Vázquez de Ayllón in the 1520s and the penetration of the interior by an army of 600 under Hernando de Soto in 1540, Georgia's indigenous chiefdoms were subjected to first contact with representatives of an alien culture which would ultimately overwhelm and absorb them and their descendants. Tragically, the era of European exploration and colonization marked the beginning of the end for one way of life, and the beginning of a new one. For in the first two centuries after European contact, population

loss due to epidemic plague diseases ravaged all of Georgia's indigenous populations, and the subsequent spread of the Indian slave trade within the context of European colonial rivalries left Georgia's interior virtually depopulated, save for a few bands of commercial slave-hunters and fur-traders whose culture was undergoing rapid and substantial change in the new colonial world.

The traumatic post-European contact era can be broken down into five broad periods, each of which witnessed varying degrees of contact and culture change. Since exploration and colonization proceeded at different rates in different regions, there is of course some overlap between these periods. Nevertheless, the following descriptions provide a brief overview of the difficult path that American Indians have traveled from European contact to the present day:

Exploratory Period, 1521-1586: This period was marked by early and generally brief exploration and contact between European soldiers, sailors, missionaries, and other explorers. Georgia's coastline was visited first by Spaniards between 1521 and 1526, and the interior in 1540 and 1560, followed by more intensive exploration along the coast by at least five distinct French and Spanish expeditions between 1561 and 1566. Subsequent missionary efforts along the coast in the late 1560s and mid-1570s were brief and unlasting. All these contacts may, however, have resulted in the spread of European plague diseases such as smallpox across broad areas of the interior, and undoubtedly resulted in extensive population loss by many chiefdoms, potentially causing famine and political destabilization, and eventual relocation by many groups outside Georgia to the west and south.

Spanish Mission Period, 1587-1684: This period was characterized by gradual and ultimately extensive assimilation of indigenous chiefdoms in southeastern Georgia into the Franciscan mission system of Spanish Florida. The coast was missionized between 1587 and 1605, and the farthest interior Timucuan chiefdoms north and west of the Okefenokee had been missionized by 1630. Documented population losses due to epidemics in this period probably exceeded 95%, and English-sponsored slave-raids between 1659 and 1680 by immigrant Iroquoian-speaking Erie Indians armed with muskets pushed all remaining Georgia populations (mission and non-mission groups) west, south, and southeast from their Savannah River base. A new confederacy of refugees known as Yamassees formed along the lower Georgia/Carolina border by 1663, moving southward into the missions for protection shortly thereafter. Interior missions disappeared by 1657, mainland coastal missions were moved seaward by the 1670s, and remaining island missions were assaulted by pirates in 1683 and 1684, withdrawing south into present-day Florida. Many Yamassees fled the missions in 1683, eventually regrouping along the lower Carolina coast with Scottish and later English colonists.

English Commercial Period, 1685-1732: Following the total depopulation of Georgia's eastern and southeastern interior, this period witnessed the establishment of formal trading relations between English colonists in Carolina and remaining Muskogean-speaking groups along the lower Chattahoochee River, as well as Cherokee groups in the northeast Georgia mountains. Shortly after Spaniards built a fort on the Chattahoochee in 1689, many villages eventually known as the Lower Creeks moved east to the Ocmulgee River, but throughout this period between 1685 and 1715,

Georgia Creeks and Carolina Yamassees acted as the principal slave-raiders on behalf of the English, ravaging remaining Spanish missions in Florida, and forcing their total retreat to St. Augustine by 1706. After the Yamassee War of 1715, when the Creeks retreated back west and the Yamassees fled back into the Spanish missions, the Cherokees became principal slave-raiders for the Carolina traders. It appears to have been during this period that ancient hereditary political structures based on an tributary agrarian economy were abandoned in favor of a more egalitarian system centered on slave-raiding and hunting in distant lands, leading eventually to the crystallization of the Creek and Cherokee tribes as distinct political units.

English/American Expansion Period, 1733-1838: This period was dominated by the gradual but inexorable advance of English and later American settlers into long-vacant lands acquired by war and treaty from Creek and Cherokee tribes, who asserted claims to depopulated zones across southern, middle, and eastern Georgia. During this same period Creek and Cherokee populations began to rebound, and Creek settlements began to expand eastward into the Flint River drainage just as Cherokee settlements gradually pushed westward into unoccupied northwestern Georgia. After Cherokee villages were razed in the American Revolution, many thousands of Cherokee refugees also moved west into this region, largely abandoning much of the eastern Blue Ridge mountains for the Ridge and Valley district of Northwest Georgia. Their capitol was relocated into the Coosawattee River valley in 1788 at Ustanali, and later to New Echota just downstream. Ultimately, however, Georgia settlement pressures led to the tragic Removal era of the 1830s, when most remaining Creek and Cherokee residents in newly-acquired treaty lands were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated west to reservations in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

Post-Removal Period, 1838-present day: Despite the physical relocation of Creek and Cherokee tribal bodies outside Georgia, many individuals, families, and communities continued to maintain an existence inside the state, in many cases largely concealing their ethnic identity and cultural heritage, maintaining an outwardly acculturated existence. Many such communities were comprised of intermarried Native-American, Anglo-American, and African-American individuals and families, maintaining traditions that descended and borrowed from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, including Creek and Cherokee cultures. Only in the 20th century were these groups able to openly and legally declare their origins and rediscover an identity that had been suppressed for more than a century.

As can be seen from this overview of the post-contact era, long before the tragic Removal era of the 1830s, Georgia's American Indian population had already experienced substantial change. In addition to uniform population losses probably exceeding 9 out of every 10 persons alive in the 16th century, the concurrent collapse of the political system of many ancient agricultural chiefdoms, and the reorganization and relocation of so many groups across the landscape, resulted in a significant transformation of indigenous cultures between the 16th and 19th centuries. During this period, for example, the entire population of Georgia's second most populous group--the Timucuan--was ravaged first by disease and second by slave-raiding and

piracy, and by 1685 there were no living Timucuan left within the state. When the last living full-blood Timucuan Indian left Florida with the Spanish in 1763, only to die two years later in Cuba, this marked the total extinction of an entire people once native to Georgia.

By the early 18th century, only two groups of American Indians originally native to Georgia were still living within the present-day bounds of the state: the Lower Creeks and the Cherokees. The members of these tribes descended in large part from the Muskogee and Cherokee chiefdoms originally located within the river valleys of western-central and northeastern Georgia, although even by this time they included other groups that had migrated into Georgia, such as the important Creek town of Kasihta, originally native to Alabama. And by the time of the American Revolution and shortly thereafter, the Creeks and Cherokees had expanded both their range of habitation and their territorial claims to the east and south (at that time a buffer between them and the American settlers), effectively comprising the only surviving American Indian groups still native to Georgia.

It is these two groups, therefore, that form the seed populations for any present-day individuals, families, or communities that claim descent from American Indian groups originally native to Georgia. Other than Creeks or Cherokees, there are no known surviving remnants of any other groups once native to Georgia, unless Timucuan, Guale, or Yamassee ancestry can someday be documented for present-day people living in and around Havana, Cuba. These groups were all fully assimilated into the Spanish mission system by the 18th-century, and left the United States as exiles in 1763. The Creeks and Cherokees of the Removal era were in effect the only survivors, and descended from the original precolonial inhabitants of western and northwestern Georgia in the case of the Creeks, and the northeastern Georgia mountains in the case of the Cherokees. And it is their descendants, both in the Removal reservations to the west and in hidden families and communities in Georgia, who can rightfully claim a genealogical and potentially cultural connection with Georgia's indigenous inhabitants.