

The Chickasaws

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The first historic accounts we have of the Chickasaws are the result of their encounter with the DeSoto expedition and, in many ways, they set the tone for the relationship between the Indians and Europeans for the next several centuries. Hernando DeSoto and his men met stiff opposition when they crossed the Tombigbee River to enter the Chickasaw territory in November of 1540. They were successful in driving the Chickasaw back and marched for four days through what is now called the Black Prairie in northeastern Mississippi until they reached Chicasa, the principal village of the Chickasaw somewhere in the vicinity of West Point.

Chicasa had been abandoned in the face of the advancing Spanish army and DeSoto and his men took over the village, living in the houses and eating from the store of corn the Chickasaw had put away for the winter. This was the site of the first Christmas to be celebrated in Mississippi. DeSoto continued to make demands of the Chickasaw and matters came to a head early one morning in January when the Indians attacked and burned their own village. The only thing that saved the Spaniards from complete annihilation, according to one account, was a thunder shower which soaked the bow strings of the Chickasaw warriors, making their weapons useless.

The DeSoto expedition retreated to the west, leaving the Chickasaw to live without direct interference from Europeans for another 140 years. We know from the archaeological record and what little that can be gotten from the chronicles of the DeSoto expedition that the Chickasaw lived in small villages scattered across the uplands of the Black Prairie. Their primary crop was corn but they also relied a great deal on hunting and fishing. Deer and buffalo bones are often found when ancient Chickasaw villages are excavated. Buffalo were a relatively new animal in Mississippi, having migrated from the north just a few decades before the DeSoto came through.

The houses that the Spaniards took over at Chicasa were made by setting closely spaced post into the ground to make a circular wall 15 to 20 feet in diameter. Split cane was woven in and out of the posts to form a framework for a coating of clay. The roof was made of grass. Each house belonged to the women who lived there and men left their mother's house when they married to move in with their wife's family. The importance of women in Chickasaw society is also emphasized by the fact that when the Peace Clever died, he was not replaced by his son but rather the son of his sister, leadership as well as property was passed through the female line.

The Peace Chief ruled in the council house when the discussion dealt with everything but war. When the Chickasaw went to war, they were led by the War Chiefs, men who had proven themselves in battle. The role of the War Chiefs became much more important following the founding of the English colony at Charleston in 1670 and the French colony at Biloxi in 1699. In fact, warfare became a way of live for the Indians of the Southeast and few were as successful during the early 18th century as the Chickasaw. They raided far and wide and were recognized as fierce and ruthless warriors.

There are at least two reasons for the importance of warfare to the Chickasaw and both have to do with their relationship with the French and English. The initial trade between the Indians and the Europeans was in slaves. The French but especially the English were buying Indians from other Indians for use on their plantations in the Southeast and the Carribean. The Chickasaw and other natives of the Southeast were more than happy to sell their traditional enemies to the Europeans but the Chickasaws: had the advantage of being situated at the western limit of the English trade routes. They had access to muskets, ammunition, and horses before the their neighbors in Arkansas and western Tennessee and were quick to use these new tools of war to capture slaves. Of course, the slaves were traded for more guns and ammunition, making the Chickasaw even more effective.

Indians did not make good slaves, they often caught and died from European illnesses like measles or the flu and they could easily run away to join with a nearby tribe. The slave trade ended by about 1720 and deer skin became the major item of commerce. The same tools, horses and muskets, that made the Chickasaw successful earlier, were essential in the deer skin trade. Also, the Chickasaw had carved out a huge territory because it was not safe to live near them during the slave raiding times. They controlled the northern third of Mississippi, the western half of Tennessee, and a portion of Alabama. They continued to live in the Black Prairie, having moved to the present day location of Tupelo by the beginning of the 1700s.

Not only were the Chickasaw successful in the deer skin trade, they became key players in the struggle between the French and the English to control the southern colonies. The French used the Chickasaw to bolster the French alliance with the Choctaw who lived in south Mississippi, closer to the French. There were three to four times as many Choctaw as Chickasaw and the Choctaw were eager to collect a bounty from the French for the scalps of their traditional enemies.

The English feared the possibility that the French colonies in Illinois and Louisiana would join, claiming the entire Mississippi River valley for France, and used the Chickasaws to drive a wedge between them. Thomas Nairne, an English trader, visited the Chickasaw villages in 1708 to strengthen trade relations with the tribe and learn more about their politics and social organization so that the English could be more effective in dealing with them. He wrote four letters which were sent back to Charleston by returning trader and those letters were recently discovered in an archive. They give a remarkably detailed picture of the Chickasaw at the turn of the century in the transition between their prehistoric economy and the colonial economy.

The conflict between the Chickasaws and the French came to a head in 1736 when the Chickasaw refused to turn over the Natchez who had been living among them since the Natchez rebellion of 1729. The French developed an elaborate plan of attack in which an army of French and Indians from Illinois would march south and meet a similar army from Louisiana at the Chickasaw villages and crush the Chickasaws between them. Unfortunately for the French, one army was delayed by a few weeks and the Chickasaws were able to defeat the two forces one at a time.

The Chickasaw victory at the battle of Ackia marks what might be considered the high point of Chickasaw power in the region. Following that attack, the Chickasaw location on the western end of the English trade route became a liability in terms of the distance that separated them from the British ports. Their neighbors to the west and north now had guns and ammunition and had not forgotten the ruthless slave raids of a generation before. By mid 1750 the Chickasaw numbers reached an all time low, less than 2,000, and it was becoming more and more difficult for them to participate in the deer skin trade.

The Chickasaw transformed themselves once more. Free range cattle became a common feature of the landscape of northeast Mississippi and, although the Chickasaw continued to live in several small villages in and around Tupelo for defensive purposes for most of the 18th century, the relative stability brought about by the American Revolution allowed them to spread out from that location, settling in loose, rural communities across north Mississippi. In addition to cattle, the Chickasaws began to grow cotton and other cash crops, developing many prosperous plantations.

Chickasaw territory was established and then drastically reduced in a series of treaties with the United States government beginning in 1800. By 1836 their position in Mississippi had become intolerable. White settlers were regularly moving on to Indian lands, inevitably leading to conflicts which were taken to court where the Indians always lost. Under increasing pressure from the federal and state government, the Chickasaw agreed to sell their holding in Mississippi in exchange for money and land in Oklahoma. The Chickasaw removal was nearly absolute. Few Chickasaw remained in Mississippi and almost none live here today.

Suggested Reading

Adair, James

1930 *History of the American Indians*. Promontory Press, New York.

James Adair was an English trader who lived among the Chickasaws in the Tupelo area from 1744 to 1750 and again from 1761 to 1768. He wrote a long account of the Indians of the Southeast which contains a great deal that is specifically about the Chickasaw.

Atkinson, James R.

1985 The Ackia and Ogoula Tchetoka Chickasaw Village Locations in 1736 During the French-Chickasaw War. *Mississippi Archaeology* 20:53-72.

1987 Historic Chickasaw Cultural Material: A More Comprehensive Identification. *Mississippi Archaeology* 22(2):32-62.

Jim Atkinson is an archaeologist who has done a good deal of work on the Chickasaws, both archaeology and history. These two articles are good examples of how what we dig up can be related to what we read.

Gibson, Arrell M.

1971 *The Chickasaws*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman Oklahoma.

This is the standard and only book-length reference on the Chickasaw. Written by an historian, the early chapters are not nearly as good as the chapters dealing with the late 18th and early 19th centuries which are quite useful.

Johnson, Jay K.

2000 The Chickasaws. In *Indians of the Greater Southeast: Historical Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, edited by B. G. McEwan, pp. 85-121. University of Florida Press, Gainesville.

This article reviews the considerable amount of archaeology which has been done on Chickasaw villages in northeast Mississippi.

Nairne, Thomas

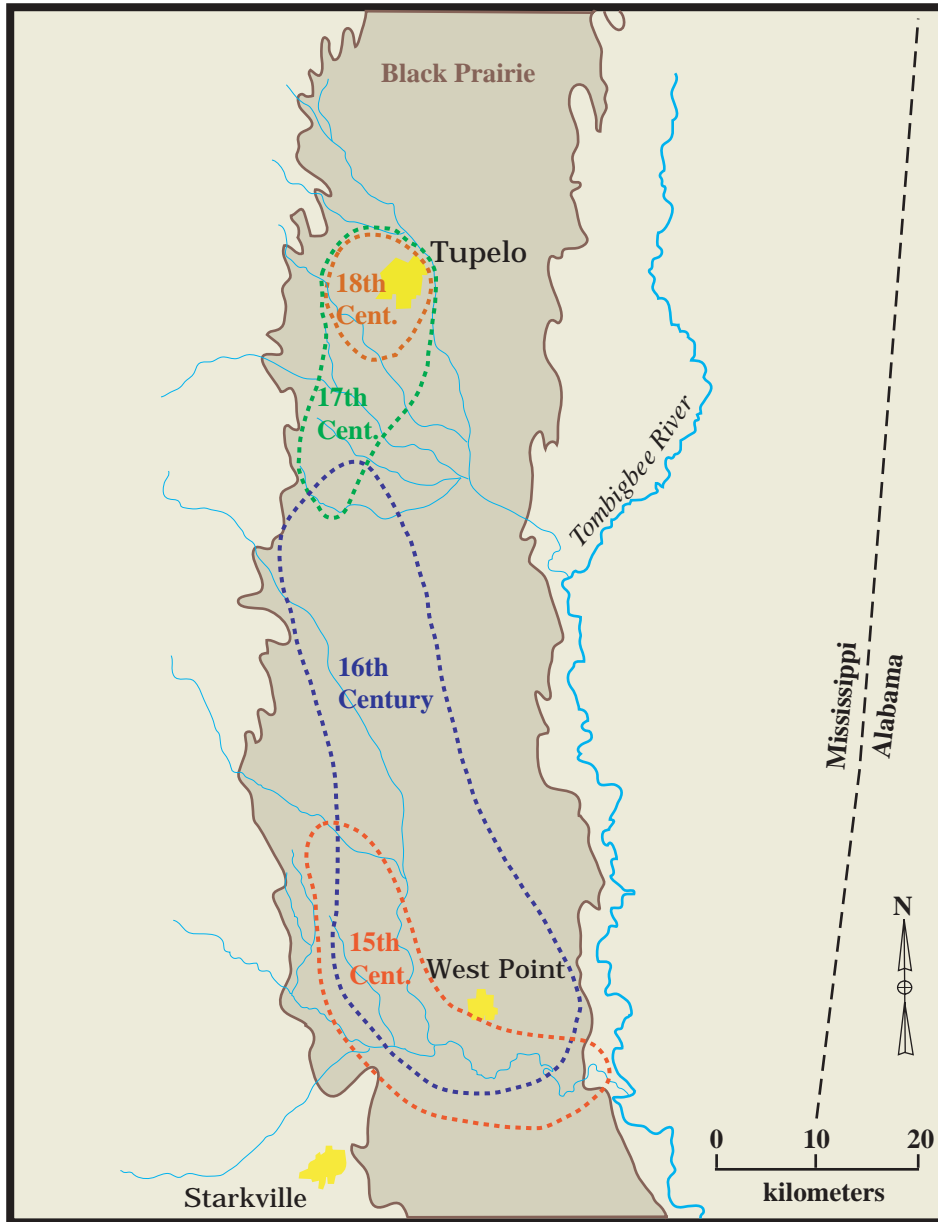
1988 *Nairne's Muskhogean Journals, the 1708 Expedition to the Mississippi River*. University Press of Mississippi, Jackson.

These four letters were written in Mississippi in 1708, describing the Chickasaws and their villages. They are the best single source on the Chickasaws and are quite fun to read.

Varner, John G. and Jeannette J. Varner

1951 *The Florida of the Inca*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

There are four chronicles of the DeSoto expedition. This is, by far, the most readable with accounts of heroic adventure and strange lands. It is also the least reliable but can't be beat for getting a sense of the scope of the expedition and what the Spaniards encountered.



Map showing the location of the Chickasaw villages in northeastern Mississippi.