History of the Southeastern Mvskoke Nation

The modern Southeastern Mvskoke Nation is located near Troy, AL, but the ancestors of the Nation have lived in the Deep South since time immemorial. The Mvskoke people were the leading cultural group in the Creek Confederacy, which was split by the Creek Civil War, the First Seminole War, and the Trail of Tears. A remnant of the Creek Confederacy, primarily Lower Creek veterans of the U.S. Volunteers during the Creek and Seminoles Wars, were permitted to stay on their ancestral land. A few were awarded small tracts of land by Congress in 1836 for their service. The Creek society which emerged after the Indian Removal Era organized first in extended family networks, and then came together in a formal government in the mid 1900s- the Creek Indians East of the Mississippi. After the death of Chief Calvin McGhee, the Creek Indians East of the Mississippi and its citizens split along regional and political lines into the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, Ma-Chis Lower Creek Indian Tribe of Alabama, and the Southeastern Mvskoke Nation in Alabama, as well as the Lower Muskogee Creek Tribe (East of the Mississippi) in Georgia.

Traditional Origins

Indigenous peoples have lived in the Deep South for over 11,000 years. According to tradition, the Mvskoke people lived first in a land where the land swallowed many. The ancestors journeyed to the East to find a safer and more stable homeland. After many years and challenges, the ancestors reached the land where the long grasses end. From there, they settled for four years at a time before moving East until they reached the Atlantic Ocean. The ancestors found a place plentiful with fish, shellfish, fruits, vegetables, and game.

Some of the People remained by the ocean, but the ancestors turned back to settle the rich river lands through which they'd just passed. Among the Muskogean peoples who inhabited the river lands were the Choctaw and Chickasaw, and our Mvskoke ancestors who founded Koweta, Kasihta, Tukabatchee, and Abhika tribal towns (talwas). They maintained broad trade networks spanning the Atlantic Coast, Southern Interior, and the Caribbean Sea. Maritime trade and travel has been documented between the Mvskoke peoples, the island of Cuba, and the nearby Mayan Yucatan peninsula. The Creeks were at the center of the Southeastern world.

Colonial Era

After the European invasion of North America, the early Mvskoke peoples gathered together their allies into one of the continent's greatest nations. The Creek Confederacy was formed from about 50 autonomous talwas of Mvskoke, Euchi, Miccosukee, Alibamu and Natchez speaking peoples. The English called the Mvskoke and their allies "Creeks" in reference to the rich river lands our ancestors lived in- what would become Alabama, Georgia, and North Florida.

In the 1600s and early 1700s, the small settler colonies of the English, Spanish, and French empires that surrounded the Creek Confederacy vied for the favor of the Creek peoples. Creek Country was a rich land with expansive chestnut and oak forests and corn, bean, squash,

grape, and tomato fields, and the European colonists needed to pass through the Creek Confederacy to trade between Spanish Florida, French Louisiana, and English Carolina.

Eventually, the French loss in the so-called "French-Indian War," the American Revolution won by the newly-founded United States, and the Napoleonic Wars raging in Spain led to the United States being the only powerful European settler-colony in the region. Our ancestors had carefully maintained a political balance between the empires in which the Creeks were an equal and neutral power limiting the Anglo-Franco-Hispanic expansion around the borders of Creek Country. However, he American Revolution split the Creek Confederacy into factions aligned with the British-French and American sides of that European conflict.

In the 1780s, Alexander McGillivray (Hoboi-Hili-Mico, a silent partner in the British Panton & Leslie fur traders) began to centralize the Creek Confederacy in the Creek National Council, subverting the traditional divisions of power within individual talwas. After the American Revolution, Creeks were divided by geopolitical ties into the "Upper Creeks" living in the river basins of central Alabama and the "Lower Creeks" peoples living in the river basins of the Chattahoochee watershed at the Alabama-Georgia border. The Upper Creeks had largely allied with the British and bordered the former British Colony of West Florida. The Lower Creeks now bordered the U.S. State of Georgia. British agents continued to smuggle arms and supplies to the Upper Creeks, while many Lower Creeks began to adopt the plantation-style agriculture and slavery of their U.S. neighbors and volunteered to serve in the U.S. military.

After a peace treaty signed by McGillivray of the Lower Creeks and Hopoithle Mico of the Upper Creeks and U.S. President George Washington, federal agents began to control aspects of the Creek Confederacy. When McGillivray died, U.S. agent Benjamin Hawkins assumed his title of Iste-Atkakagi-Thlakko and with it the power to call meetings of the Creek National Council. Shortly thereafter, the United States began exploiting inter-tribal tensions to pressure Creek talwa leaders (micos) friendly to the colonists to sign land away on behalf of other talwas. In 1795, the newly-founded State of Georgia began illegally auctioning off Mvskoke land to settler-colonists.

In 1805, the first federal road bisected the Creek Confederacy connecting Mobile and Savannah. In 1811, Hawkins began laying the highways through Creek Country. That same year, Tecumseh and his brother the Prophet Lalawethika, both half Creeks of the Locvlke clan, brought their message to their Creek relatives. They predicted that the Lower Creek aligned Tukabatchee tribal town in Upper Creek country collapse for their alliance with the United States. In 1811-1812, a series of great earthquakes shook Creek Country. In some places, hot springs emerged from the earth. A tsunami rocked the Mississippi River, causing it to flow backwards for some time. In West Tennessee, an 18 mile lake emerged along the broken

riverbanks of the Mississippi. The Upper Creek prophet Sam Isaacs saw a vision of a horned serpent who shook the earth and unleashed powerful new forces.

Also in 1812, 8 Mvskoke were sentenced to death by the Creek National Council for crimes against settlers. One of those Creeks sought refuge in Tallassee, which was designated as a traditional place of peace and refuge. Tustunugee Hvtke (William McIntosh Jr.) an ancestor of some of the Southeastern Mvskoke Nation's tribal members, traditional mico of Koweta talwa, and the commander of the Creek Light Horse, chased down the man who had been sentenced (Little Warrior) and killed him as he sought refuge at the Hopoithle Mico's seat.

Anti-colonial leaders Heles Harjo, Cussetaw Harjo, and Paddy Walch of the Upper Creeks denounced McIntosh for polluting a sanctuary town with violence. They preached that the giver and taker of breath, Hessagedemasse, himself shook the earth as a sign that the Creek peoples had been corrupted by the Anglo-American colonists, fulfilling the prophecy of Tecumseh and Lalawethika. A rebellion began within the Confederacy.

Creek (Civil) War

By July 1813, nearly all the Upper Creek towns had joined the Red Stick Rebellion. The town of Tukbatchee fell under siege for eight days before it fell, at which point all the prominent Upper Creek towns had aligned with the Red Sticks. Those within the Upper Creek towns that opposed the war sought refuge in McIntosh's Koweta, while pro-Red Sticks from the Lower talwas (primarily Euchi, Miccosukee, and Eufala Creeks) fled to the West to join with the Red Sticks. The anti-war faction was called the White Sticks. The factions took their names from the great stickball origin story, wherein one warlike twin was known by his red club and one peace-minded twin was known by his white reed.

Also in 1813, the first cotton gin was built in Creek Country, empowering the growing planter-class in Lower Creek Country. Red Sticks began burning their European clothing, killing their and others' invasive livestock, and returned to traditional practices in camps apart from the talwas that the Indian agents knew how to reach. The Red Sticks, like Tecumseh's Prophetstown on the Tippecanoe, were aligned with British and Spanish financial interests and used as proxies in the empires' political competition with the United States. On their return journey from a supply run to Spanish Florida, a group of Red Sticks were ambushed by the Mississippi Militia in the swamp at Burnt Corn. The Red Sticks easily defeated the U.S. force, but the battle brought the United States into the conflict. General Andrew Jackson declared that "The whole Creek nation will be covered in blood."

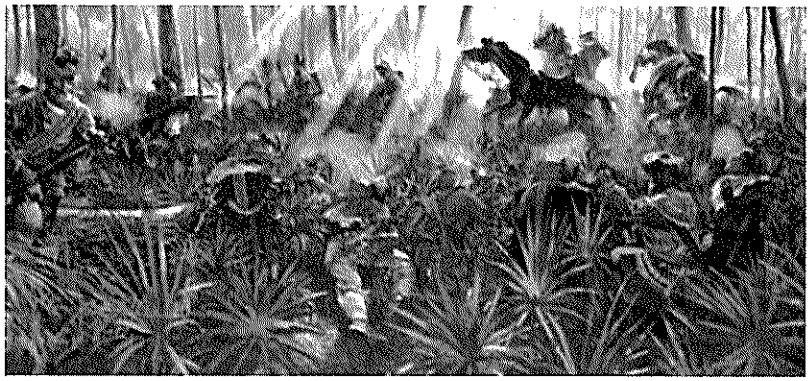
The Red Sticks next attacked Fort Mims, winning a victory but losing almost half their army in the brutal siege. Fort Mims had a small group of civilians in residence, whose stories further encouraged the United States to engage militarily in the conflict. Andrew Jackson assembled an army of Tennessee Volunteers which pushed into Creek Country and massacred 200 civillians and abducted 80 women and children at Tallushatchee, killed 300 warriors in Talladega, and killed 60 civillians and abducted 200 in Hillabee after the talwa had surrendered. At Eccanachaca, 33 warriors and 12 African allies were killed, and at Calabee Creek the U.S.-Lower Creek coalition won another victory, but at the cost of many soldiers.

The Red Sticks made their final stand at Horseshoe Bend. They withstood siege from 1500 militiamen, 100 Lower Creek White Sticks, and 500 Cherokee for the night, until McIntosh led a flanking maneuver by canoe. 800 Red Stick warriors were killed, 557 in battle and another 250-300 trying to flee through the water. Another 350 women and children were taken captive. About 2,000 Red Sticks, many who were not at the battle, fled to Florida and joined the nucleus of the modern Seminole nations. At the conclusion of the Creek Civil War, which in many ways was one of the U.S.'s earliest proxy wars and part of the broader War of 1812 between the U.S. and Britain, Jackson demanded 23,000,000 acres of land from both the Red Stick and White Stick factions in the Treaty of Fort Jackson. Several micos wrote an outraged letter, which Jackson promised his personal secretary would carry to Washington, D.C. The letter never arrived.

By 1814, the Creek Confederacy was profoundly divided, bled dry of warriors, and had lost most of Georgia. The colonial powers had exploited the internal divide to set the Creeks against each other until the Confederacy was practically destroyed. McIntosh obtained some security for the Lower Creeks by aligning with the new Indian agent to control regular deliveries of supplies and negotiate reimbursements for Lower Creek expenses in the war, but Creek Country was wracked by famine for years as traditional networks of trade, farming, and mutual aid were destroyed.

First Seminole War

In 1816 the United States commenced an invasion of Spanish Florida, chasing the Red Stick Seminoles deeper into the swamps of Florida. Many Lower Creeks served in the U.S. Volunteers under now-Brigadier General McIntosh, largely because the United States was their primary source of supplies in the middle of a famine. The battles began first in the panhandle and around the Tallahassee bend. The Lower Creek warriors under McIntosh's command led several successful attacks that pushed the Seminoles farther east and south. By 1819 General Jackson and Brigadier General McIntosh had pushed the resistance east of the Suwanee River and out of traditional Creek Country towards central and south Florida and forced Spain into the Transcontinental Treaty, which ceded Florida to the United States and guaranteed the rights of Seminole peoples. Those terms would be honored until the Second Seminole War in the 1830s.



Trail of Tears

The pacification of a common enemy left Lower Creek Country vulnerable to the appetites of our ancestors' colonial neighbors. Federal officials began putting pressure on Creek leaders to sign away land. On the urging of McIntosh, the Code of 1818 was passed by the Creek National Council, codifying traditional law, adopting elements of federal jurisprudence, formalizing a Law Menders police force, and enacting a death sentence for any Creek who signs away their land. But by 1825, McIntosh and a small group of other micos without the permission of the Council agreed to cede all of Creek Country except south Alabama in exchange for a reservation west of the Mississippi and personal payments.

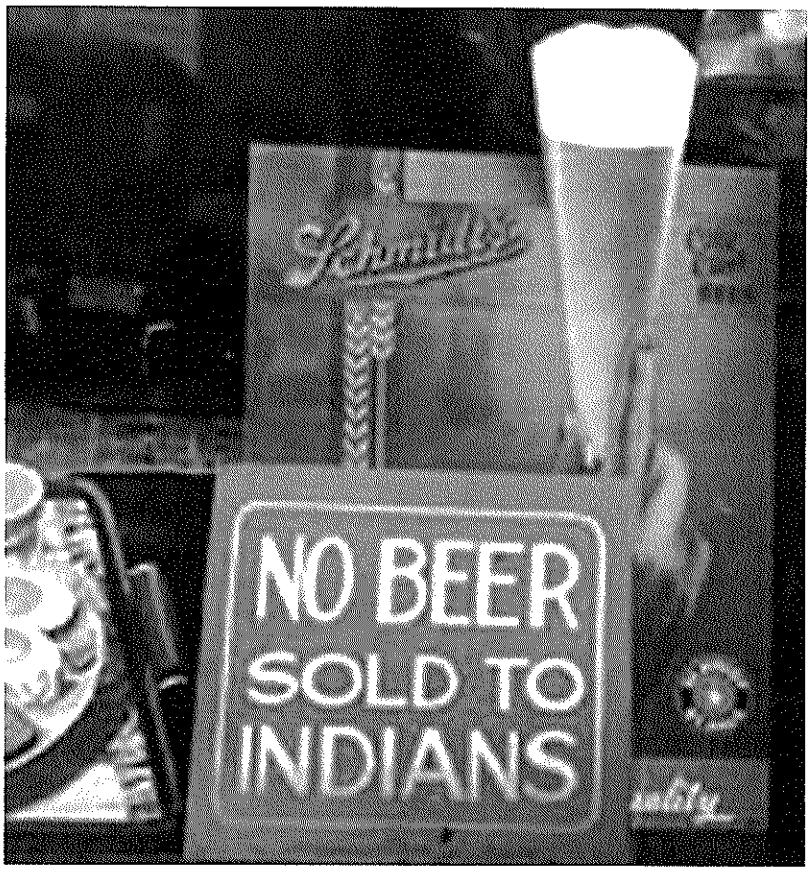
Upper Creek mico Menawa, who had helped lead the Red Sticks in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend which had been lost to McIntosh and the U.S. several years earlier, led a party of 50 Law Menders to execute McIntosh and the other mico of Koweta, Etome Tustunnuggee. They killed him in a hail of bullets outside the door of his home. Both descendants of Menawa and McIntosh are enrolled in the Southeastern Mvskoke Nation today. While that 1825 treaty was voided, the 1826 Treaty of Washington was signed a year later by representatives of the Council. It had many of the same terms, but retained more of the Upper Creek land in Alabama.

In violation of the treaty, the Governor John Murphy of Alabama led a policy of expansion into Creek Country which was supported by the new President, Andrew Jackson. In 1832, the Creek Confederacy ceded all of their land east of the Mississippi and removed to Oklahoma. However, a contingent of Lower Creeks who had served with McIntosh in the U.S. military were able to remain behind, as did a number of Upper Creeks who resisted removal in rural Alabama. Several years after the majority of Creeks had been removed in a series of waves to Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas, a number of Lower Creeks who had remained in Eastern Creek Country retained their land or were awarded late bequests from the 1814 Treaty of Fort Jackson by an 1836 congressional act. The last of those tracts of land was held in trust until 1924 when it was converted to fee-simple for the heirs of Lynn McGhee, one of the original 1836 beneficiaries.

Jim Crow

The Indian Wars were followed by the four-year U.S. Civil War, and then by the much longer Jim Crow era while the Indian Wars spread to Oklahoma Creek Country west of the Mississippi. After the Trail of Tears, Eastern Creek landholders lived in extended family networks and absorbed landless Creeks into their properties, families, and communities. Creek communities in Alabama then and now are organized as much by traditional networks of extended family as by tribal government. However, the racial apartheid of the Jim Crow which set in after the Civil War classified all residents of Eastern Creek Country as either "White" or "Colored." Creeks that could pass as White did their best to. Most Creeks East of the Mississippi had already begun to intermarry with White families, having been isolated from the majority of the Creek and Seminole peoples for two generations and ruled by a racial hierarchy that rewarded White blood.

In population centers, Creek churches, despite representing the religious efforts of colonizers, preserved traditional language and culture through Mvskoke-language hymns and communal meals. The Creek community by the early 1900s had become concentrated between Mobile Bay and the Choctawhatchee River in south-central Alabama. U.S. Indian agents documented the Creek population in the region for several decades, finding a scattered group of small communities united by kinship and shared history. The community also absorbed successive migration waves of Cheraw and Catawba peoples, as documented by Mvskoke-Cheraw historian Hoda Sewell.

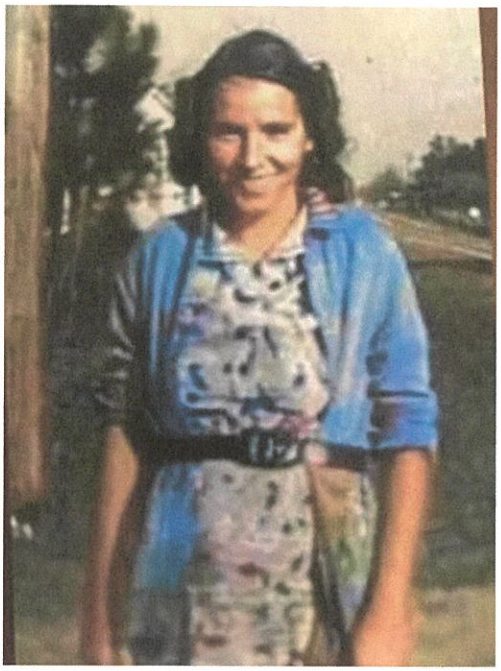


Creek Indians East of the Mississippi

The federal 1950 Indian Land Claims Commission identified over 4,000 Creek families living in southern Alabama, Georgia, and just over the Florida border in the panhandle, all of whose parents or grandparents had met with federal agents in the early 1900s. Calvin McGhee, the last of the descendants of the 1836 Alabama land recipients to retain their family's land, began to formally organize the Creek Indians East of the Mississippi, and his land and the surrounding Poarch community were established as the base of the Nation. The Chief met with President John F. Kennedy in 1962 and was a powerful advocate for Eastern Creek peoples. His vision of the Nation was an inclusive one, "My people are all one family… We are what you would call a Creek Nation… There are many different families which are all Creek and all some way or another run back into the line with others."

In 1970, McGhee passed on. The Eastern Creeks were at first united by the late McGhee's vision for federal recognition of Eastern Creek sovereignty. However, a series of disputes and the intervention of the non-Native anthropologist Anthony Parades led the Tribe to

split along regional lines in the mid-1970s. At first, those regions were governed cooperatively as part of the greater Creek Indians East of the Mississippi. However, in 1979 the Poarch Band's leadership split from the Creek Indians East, instituting a blood quantum that only accounted for ancestors from Escambia or Monroe Counties in Alabama, effectively splitting the government of the Eastern Creeks back along regional lines. The Poarch Band held the only land base legally recognized as Indian Country, the Lynn McGhee reserve allotment, and most of the Eastern Creek population, including the leadership that had succeeded McGhee.



Southeastern Mvskoke Nation

Of the regional governments that emerged, none could obtain federal recognition through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in large part because the Eastern Creeks had not maintained a formal central government or an unbroken relationship with the federal government or its subsidiaries. However, by 1984 the Poarch Band had achieved federal recognition after the Alabama delegation successfully pushed the legislation through Congress. Three years prior in 1981, shortly after the 1979 split of the Eastern Creeks, the Southeastern Mvskoke Nation was organized from the pieces of the Creek community in and around Pike and Coffee County, Alabama. The Nation was first established as the Lower Muscogee Creek Tribe East. But in an effort to distinguish itself from the Ma-Chis Lower Creek Indian Tribe of Alabama and the Lower Muskogee Creek Tribe (East of the Mississippi) in Georgia, which emerged on either side of the Nation around other communities of Eastern Creeks, the Nation voted to revise its name twice until arriving at the more geographically and culturally specific "Southeastern Mvskoke Nation."

For a decade, the Nation sought to establish a central land base and expand government capacity. The late Southeastern Mvskoke Nation Chief Tommy Davenport also helped to found the Alabama Indian Affairs Commission, which has since provided for government-to-government consultation between the State and the Tribes of Alabama. The commission was established by the legislature of Alabama in 1984 to represent the American Indian Tribes of Alabama. Chief Davenport was serving as Chair of the Commission when he passed on in 1991.

By the turn of the millennia, the Nation began to collaborate with traditional authorities in the Muscogee (Creek) Nation in Oklahoma. Many Western Creeks sought to reconnect with their traditional lands and would make delegations to the East two or three times a year. The Southeastern Mvskoke Nation and its leadership helped to connect our Western relatives to their ancestral tribal towns and members of the Nation opposed the Poarch effort to build a casino on the sacred Hickory Grounds.

During this period, the late mico Sam Proctor of Tvlahassee Wvkokaye tribal town and his late son David who succeeded him brought traditional medicine and the sacred fire back to the Southeastern Mvskoke Nation, which had been lost in the upheaval of the Trail of Tears. This sparked a period of religious and cultural revival in the Nation. Today our square grounds remain active and the Nation has restored its ties of kinship with the greater Creek Confederacy. The Nation and its new Council seek to further establish and formalize intertribal cooperation between its sister and mother nations and complete the construction of new Tribal housing. The Tribe has 180 enrolled citizens.

Today, the Southeastern Mvskoke Nation is a modern Tribe with traditional values, embracing the culture of our ancestors and the industries of today.