From Creeks to Crackers

Edward Cashin

"The present intruders I am informed are persons who have no settled habitation and live by hunting and plundering the industrious settlers," Acting Gov. James Habersham of Georgia wrote to Gov. James Wright, who was in England in 1772. "You will easily distinguish," he continued, that the "people I refer to are really what you and I understand by Crackers."[1] Honest James Habersham was not being supercilious, he was stating a fact. Georgia's backcountry was in the throes of a social revolution. The Creek Indians were even more disturbed than Habersham by what was going on. They called the newcomers "Virginians." "English men and Scotch men I have long been acquainted with," said one chief, "but these Virginians are very bad people; they pay no regard to your laws."[2]

Until the year 1763, Augusta was an Indian town. It was not so much that Indians lived there, but rather that the town was situated in Indian country and was established for the better regulation of the Indian trade. After the Yamasee War of 1715, the Creek headman whom the English called "Emperor" Brims concluded a treaty with the governor of South Carolina which recognized the Savannah River as a boundary between the British and the Creek Nation. During the two decades which followed the Yamasee War, Carolina traders were careful to cultivate the good will of the Creeks. The traders, aware of the competition of the Louisiana French, lived among the Creeks, fathered children of mixed blood, and established bonds of friendship and kinship as well as those of trade. One astonished visitor to the Creek country in 1736 commented that there were more than four hundred racially mixed children in the Creek villages.[3] European wares and European blood changed the social and economic lives of the Creek Indians, tying them more closely to their lifeline, the great trading road which led through Augusta to Charlestown.

Augusta had been established by James Oglethorpe in 1736, in response to Indian complaints that the Carolinians were beginning again to cheat the Indians as they had before the Yamasee uprising. Oglethorpe persuaded Parliament to give him control of the Indian trade by requiring Georgia licenses for anyone doing business west of the Savannah River. Before leaving England to return to Georgia in 1736, he secured another law forbidding the use of rum. In June of that year, he authorized the building of the fort and town of Augusta.

The Creek Indians regarded Oglethorpe as their great good friend for his efforts to regulate the trade and entertained him lavishly when he paid a complimentary visit to Coweta town in 1739. Oglethorpe was equally delighted with his efforts on behalf of the Indians, especially because not much else was working out the way he planned. He ascribed the friendly relationship with the Indians to the establishment of Augusta. "The settlement of Augusta is of great service," he informed his fellow Trustees, "it being 300 miles from the sea and the Key of all the Indian Countrey."[4]

A band of Chickasaw Indians abandoned the land given them on the Carolina side of the Savannah River because they preferred to frequent Augusta and disliked swimming across the river to get there. They set up camp in the area known as New Savannah, around the bend of the river below Augusta. Like the Creeks and the Cherokees from the upper reaches of the Savannah River, the Chickasaws regarded Augusta as their town. The actual trading of goods was supposed to take place out in the Indian villages, where deerskins were exchanged for goods, but the Indians liked to visit Augusta and shop around. They were intimidated by Charlestown but felt comfortable in Augusta.

Augusta gradually assumed the requisites of a proper British town. It acquired a church, a school, and a jail, as well as a twice-repaired fort. However, as the population grew, the attitude of the people remained one of cooperation with the Indian clients and customers. The tradition of friendship paid rich dividends during the Cherokee War of 1759–60. The Cherokees, driven to desperation by encroachments on their lands, took to the warpath. Terrified refugees from the Long Canes district of South Carolina flocked to Augusta and to Fort Moore, across the Savannah River from Augusta. When one Augusta magistrate proposed declaring the town a neutral zone, he reflected a prevailing opinion that Augusta was unwilling to take sides against Indians. However, the Cherokees refused to regard Augusta as neutral. Their war parties attacked people within a few miles of the town. The Creek Indians saved Augusta. This was their land, after all, and they defended it against the invading Cherokees. A few brave locals, Lachlan McGillivray among them, joined the Indians in opposing the hostile warriors.[5]

The British officer sent to take command of Fort Augusta was unaccustomed to the easy familiarity of the Creeks. "Their manner is they come to the fort gate, unsaddle their horses, demand victuals for themselves and their horses, which if not given they are highly affronted," he wrote.[6] Even as the lieutenant penned his dispatch, three of the headmen were seated comfortably at the same table, smoking companionably. They seemed to say that Augusta was their town.

The year 1763 was the crucial year, the year when the great change began. The long war with the French in Louisiana and the Spanish in Florida was over. The British now possessed Florida and all the vast interior as far as the Mississippi and Canada as well. The Indians were called in to Augusta to meet with the governors of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia and to be told that the war was over and that the French were gone. Except for Georgia's Governor Wright, the governors grumbled about having to go to a frontier town like Augusta. They preferred Charlestown. The Indians sent the message that they would meet in Augusta or not at all, so the governors had no choice but to go there.

Before the dignitaries reached Augusta, the Creek chiefs worked out an agreement with Lachlan McGillivray and George Galphin. As a gesture of friendship, the new boundary would be the Ogeechee River, some forty-five miles west of Augusta. The surprised dignitaries accepted the cession, presents were distributed, and everyone went home in good humor.[7]

In the same year, the royal proclamation of October 7, 1763, assigned new boundaries to Georgia's southern frontier. The Saint Marys River, rather than the Altamaha River, divided Georgia from the new British province of East Florida. The proclamation forbade settlement across the Appalachian Mountains, reserving the interior for the Indians' hunting grounds.

The effect of the proclamation, together with the Creeks' cession of 1763, was that the pioneer settlers were directed down the mountain valleys and into the Georgia backcountry. The newcomers differed from the older residents of Augusta in their attitude toward Indians. They did not know, or want to know, Indians. Their overriding motivation was to possess the land. The new Georgians, alike in their opposition to Indians, differed among themselves in most other respects. There was a community of Quakers on the Little River who called their town Wrightsborough and were models of good behavior.[8] The town of Queensborough was established on the Ogeechee River for a colony of Irish Protestants who soon scattered in search of better land.[9] Some immigrants were what Governor Wright would call "the middling sort"—not quite the better sort but not the worst, either. Many of them were from Virginia and brought books, good manners, and some slaves with them in the hope of establishing Virginia-style plantations in Georgia's backcountry. Such folks could afford only a log cabin at first, but they planned to erect another cabin when they could and to connect the two with a common roof and porch. Then they would close the breezeway between the two cabins with a front and back door. Still later they would cover the logs with clapboards, so that their houses would resemble those in Virginia. One of these aspiring Virginia gentlemen wrote:

> New Georgia is a pleasant place.
> If we could but enjoy it
> Indians and Rogues they are so great.
> They almost have destroyed it.[10]

Other newcomers brought with them the evangelical religions of the Great Awakening. In 1722, the famous Baptist preacher, Daniel Marshal, with his brother-in-law Shuball Stearns and their families, established Kiokee Church, the first Baptist Church in Georgia.[11] Soon after, evangelists were preaching the exciting gospel throughout the countryside. Their message was simple: If you feel saved, you are saved, and your life will be changed forever. You will be blessed in this life and in the next. You will be selected out from all those who are not saved and are therefore on their way to hell. As one of the favored, God has given you dominion over the land, therefore the land belongs to the Christians and not the heathen Indian. These two influences—that of the Virginia plantation and that of the evangelism of the Great Awakening—flowed together into the Georgia backcountry and were formative in shaping its future social mores.

Some of the newcomers were untouched by the civilizing effects of the Virginia and evangelical attitudes. They were the lower sort, described by Governor Wright as "a set of almost lawless white people who are a sort of borderers and often as bad if not worse than the Indians."[12] Travelers were appalled and fascinated by the behavior of these people. According to one, the men let their fingernails grow and hardened the nails with tallow, the better to scoop out the eyes of an opponent.[13] A French visitor to the Georgia backcountry told of how the woman of the house wanted to impress him with her social amenities. She sent her husband to buy tea. Then she put the tea in a kettle and a large ham in with it. When the ham was cooked, she dumped out the tea and served the leaves on a platter along with the ham. The woman took the first bite of the leaves, spat them out and threw the platter of tea leaves at her husband, accusing him of buying inferior tea and saving the money for whiskey.[14]

The incendiary factor in the backcountry social mix was the fact that the Indians continued to come and go along the old trading road. Inevitably, there was friction. Frontierspeople made no secret of their dislike of the Indian visitors and of the Augusta merchants who sold firearms to the Indians. One Creek chief reminded Governor Wright of the British promise that the trading path "should always be free for their friends the Indians to pass and repass upon."[15]

Soon the Indians had another complaint. The settlers were crossing over the Ogeechee boundary into Indian country. In a futile effort to placate the Indians, Governor Wright had a team of surveyors mark the boundary and invited the chiefs to Augusta in 1768 to celebrate the occasion. The ceremony of marking the trees failed to deter the restless borderers, who regarded laws as rules made for other people. Encroachments over the line grew in number.

In December 1770, the Cherokee Indians informed the Augusta traders that they were willing to cede land on the upper Savannah River in exchange for the cancellation of their debts to the traders. The traders informed Governor Wright, who quickly embraced the plan. The royal government would accept the land, sell it to the better sort of settlers, and with the proceeds pay off the claims of the trad-

ers. The Augusta merchants were enthusiastic, their London suppliers added their endorsement, and Governor Wright presented the case in person to the British ministry. Approval was conditional upon agreement by the Creeks, who also claimed the land in question.[16]

The Indians were invited to meet with the governor and Indian superintendent in Augusta in November 1773. The Cherokees came readily, the Creeks reluctantly. Governor Wright hoped to obtain a cession west of the Ogeechee to the Oconee, but the Creeks refused to consider that idea. Only after much talk and many presents did the Creek chiefs agree to the Cherokee cession along the upper Savannah River.[17] Governor Wright had the "ceded lands" surveyed, and he advertised in Great Britain for buyers. Meanwhile, he attempted to clear the region of those people he and James Habersham called "Crackers." The region indeed was cleared, but not by the governor.

Young Creek warriors, angry at their chiefs for yielding their land in the Augusta treaty, attacked the squatters as well as the peaceful Quakers of Wrightsborough. The Augusta militia marched out to do battle, but when its members saw painted, war-whooping Indians, they fled in panic.[18] Governor Wright had only one weapon in his arsenal—he put a stop to the Indian trade. For the moment, he was a hero in the backcountry. When Savannah merchants protested the British Coercive Acts in 1774, the people of the backcountry signed petitions pledging loyalty to the king and governor.[19]

The trade embargo worked. The Creek chiefs came into Augusta to ask for peace. A treaty conference was arranged for Savannah in October 1774. The backcountry was elated; this was an opportunity to acquire the Oconee cession from the chastened Creeks.

The Augusta traders, on the other hand, argued that if the Indian boundary were moved that far away, the Creeks would look to Mobile and Pensacola for their trade goods. Augusta would lose its position as the premier center of Indian commerce.[20]

The governor had a difficult choice. Should he appease the land-hungry settlers, or should he maintain the Indian trade? He decided in favor of the trade and refrained from demanding an additional cession. The decision was fateful. It marked the point when the backcountry leaders joined with the radicals of the lowcountry in the movement which climaxed in the American Revolution.[21]

The Revolution in Georgia can be seen as war against British-allied Indians and against those who did business with Indians. The Revolution was a turning away from the sea lanes which led to Europe and a turning toward the frontier with its promise of new land. The Creeks were displaced by the Crackers, and the Crackers aspired to become planters.

The character of Augusta changed dramatically. Although commerce remained its essential economic enterprise, the town served the convenience of backcountry farmers, not Indians. Augusta lost the deerskin trade, but it gained the tobacco and cotton trades.

Notes

1. Habersham to Wright, Aug. 20, 1772, in Georgia Historical Society *Collections*, Savannah, 6:203–7.
2. Quoted in Louis De Vorsey, Jr., *The Indian Boundary in the Southern Colonies, 1763–1775* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1966), 160–61.
3. The young man was John Tanner, Oglethorpe's agent to the Creeks; see his letter to Mr. Cadownhead, *South Carolina Gazette*, Oct. 16–23, 1736.
4. Oglethorpe to the Trustees, Mar. 8, 1739, Georgia Historical Society *Collections*, Savannah, 3:68.
5. For McGillivray's heroics, see Edward J. Cashin, *Lachlan McGillivray, Indian Trader: The Shaping of the Southern Colonial Frontier* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1992), 194–98.
6. Lt. Lachlan Shaw to William Henry Lyttelton, Mar. 6, 1760, in Lyttelton Papers, William L. Clement Library, Ann Arbor, Mich.
7. *Journal of the Congress of the Four Southern Governors and the Superintendent of That District, with the Five Nations of Indians at Augusta, 1763* (Charlestown, 1764); also in British Public Record Office, Colonial Office 5/65, pt. 3.
8. Robert S. Davis, Jr., *Quaker Records in Georgia: Wrightsboro, 1772–1793, Friendsborough, 1776–1777* (Augusta, Ga.: Augusta Genealogical Society, 1986).
9. E. R. R. Green, "Queensborough Township," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 17 (1960): 189–96.
10. Edward Butler, diary, in Hargrett Collections, Univ. of Georgia Libraries, Athens.
11. Waldo Harris III, "Daniel Marshall: Lone Georgia Baptist Revolutionary Pastor," *Viewpoints: Georgia Baptist History* 5 (1976): 51–64.
12. Wright to Shelburne, Aug. 15, 1767, in "Colonial Records of Georgia" (manuscript), 37, pt. 1:240–42.
13. Louis LeClerc de Milfort, *Memoirs, or a Quick Glance at My Various Travels and My Sojourn in the Creek Nation* (Savannah, Ga.: Beehive Press, 1959), 87.
14. Ibid., 88–89
15. Philemon Kemp to Gov. of Georgia, June 6, 1771, in K. G. Davies, *Documents of the American Revolution* (Shannon: Irish Univ. Press, 1972–81), 3:118.
16. "List of Papers Relative to My Memorial about Indian Affairs and with Some Notes and Remarks Thereon," in Wright to Hillsborough, received Dec. 12, 1771, in "Colonial Records of Georgia" (manuscript), vol. 28, pt. 2B, pp. 669–73; Dartmouth to Wright, Dec. 12, 1772, in "Colonial Records of Georgia" (manuscript), vol. 38, pt. 1A, pp. 31–35.
17. Francis Harper, ed., *The Travels of William Bartram* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), 22.
18. Wright to Dartmouth, Jan. 31, 1774, in "Colonial Records of Georgia" (manuscript), vol. 38, pt. 1A, pp. 163–71.
19. "A Protest of Declaration of Dissent of the Inhabitants of St. Paul's Parish," (Savannah) *Georgia Gazette*, Oct. 12, 1774.

20. "Petition of the Inhabitants of the Parish of St. George and St. Paul, including the ceded lands in the Province of Georgia," July 31, 1776, in *Collections of the New York Historical Society for the Year 1872* (New York, 1873), 181.
21. Extract of a letter from Savannah to a gentleman in Philadelphia, Dec. 9, 1774, in *American Archives*, ed. Peter Force, 6 vols. (Washington, D.C.), 4th series (1837–46), 1:1038–39.