Shifting Indian Alliances in the Revolutionary Era

In the spring of 1776 as the American Colonists were readying themselves for an assault by the British empire, the Cherokee launched an assault on the settlers of western North Carolina. The immediate cause was the crossing of the Indian boundary line by settlers in the area where the three states of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia meet, the location of the Lower Towns, the Middle Towns and the Over Hill Towns of the Cherokee nation, some 10,000 inhabitants. But there were deeper issues involved.

By Jenifer Dixon

Triangles don't work, or they do, depending on what you are trying to achieve. In the Cherokee War of 1776, there were three main players. The first would be the British Empire. The second would be the Amerindian tribes of that region—the Cherokee, the Creek, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw and the Catawba, but first among these were the Cherokee. And third were the settlers of those southernmost states, who were largely the Scots-Irish, among the earliest colonists of the new land. These Scots-Irish, as they were called, derived from the clans of the Scottish Highlands who were driven off their land by the Enclosure Movement that grabbed up huge tracts of their land for the tremendous sheep farms of the 17th century in Scotland.

In America, the British were trying to hold on to what they considered theirs by right. They had established a vital portion of their empire on the North American continent and had had to fight not only the other colonial powers of Europe, the French and the Spanish, but also their own increasingly disaffected colonists. Having won the French and Indian War in 1763, the Crown issued the Land Proclamation of 1763, declaring the Appalachian Ridge as the western boundary of the colonies and all land beyond that as Indian Territory. Why they ever agreed to that is even today a complete mystery.

Settling the turf wars between Indians and settlers was of paramount importance to the British for several reasons. One, it was simply a headache that might cost them even more after financing a costly war. Second, they needed to hold onto the productive settlers who shipped out raw materials to the mother country to be manufactured into profitable product. Mercantilism held that this was the function of colonies and the British felt no need to justify their actions. Those actions included taxation, such as the Stamp Tax and the Sugar Tax as well as the requirement that settlers house and feed British soldiers in their own homes. These soldiers were sent to protect them from the Indians or so the settlers were told. The colonists rankled at both, but most important was the fact that the Land Proclamation of 1763 cut them off from what they felt was theirs by conquest, the continent of North America. It also declared that all trade with the Indians was to be controlled by the British.

Colonists had fought in the French and Indian War and expected to be rewarded with land grants, but that was not to be. Penned in on the East Coast, they could be more easily controlled by the crown and more efficiently taxed. In addition, many of them already lived in the Ohio Valley and others had bought up land in the forbidden territories, which rendered the proclamation unenforceable.

The Indians for their part were growing increasingly incensed as they watched colonists arrive in greater numbers, and work the land, reducing the acreage available for hunting. Having lost their chief ally in the New World, the French, the Ottawa and several other northern tribes, led by charismatic leader Chief Pontiac, attacked British forts and colonial settlements in the Ohio Valley, beginning with Fort Detroit in May of 1763. Over 600 colonists and soldiers were killed.

The British knew they had to make peace with the Indians and so they did, most particularly with the Cherokee. Seven Cherokee had even traveled across the Atlantic to meet with King George II, toured St. James Park, Canterbury
Above, British General Burgoyne addressing American Indians to secure an alliance during the Revolutionary War.

While the British had some success in recruiting Indians to fight on their side, the Americans generally failed. An attempt by the U.S. government to enlist the aid of 2,000 braves was abandoned after little response from the Indians. The Cherokee in particular took a stand against the white settlers in North Carolina led by Dragging Canoe in 1776. But the settlers had been forewarned. In retaliation for the attack, a Colonial militia group was sent to deal with the Cherokees. The Americans destroyed most of their food crops and burned 50 Cherokee settlements.

Cathedral and Tottenham Court Fair in 1730 and returned after having signed the Treaty of Friendship and Commerce. Trade relations that had begun with the British continued up until the time of the American Revolution.

Trade was vitally important to the Indians. The trade relationship between European and Amerindian is often characterized as one where the vulnerable, naive Indian is duped by the crafty, duplicitous and greedy European. However, the Indian profited by the trade as much as the white man and sought it out. He obtained metal knives, awls and kettles, steel flints for starting fires, woven woolen blankets, and, yes, porcelain beads. And most importantly, they received guns and ammunition.

The trade also changed the way of life for the Indians. The Cherokee were living in towns and farming corn and other staples by the mid-18th century. Entranced by gingham cloth while settlers were wearing buckskin breeches on hunting trips, they did not at the time of the Revolution live solely by hunting or in their traditional stone-age manner.

The Creek was the largest group of Indians in the southeastern United States when the Cherokee arrived from up north. Exactly when that was is hard to say. The Cherokee claim to have inhabited these woods for some 10,000 years; other say that it had only been 1,000 years. In any case, this invasion by the warlike Cherokee tribe, who are said to be a branch of the Iroquois as they speak an Iroquois language while the other tribes of the southeast spoke in the Muskogean, Algonquian or Eastern Siouan language families, came at the expense of the Creek in particular.

Another theory claims that the Cherokee were in fact the feared Rickohocen Tribe of the southeast whom the Virginians “loosened on the other tribes of the region enslaving them and selling them to the colonists,” which did in fact happen to the Creek as well as other tribes. The Cherokee sided with the British against the other tribes in the Yemassee War of 1715, which was fought over trading rights. The Cherokee had also fought with the British in the French and Indian War, supplying some 1,000 warriors to the Brits.

The largest southeast tribe, or rather confederation of tribes, the Creek controlled the regional trade when the first English traders arrived in the late 17th century and drove the Spanish out for their friends in the new colony of South Carolina. In the 18th century, as the Cherokee started to pressure the Creek out of their lands, they sided with the French and Spanish against the Carolinians and the Cherokee. The Cherokee and the Creek fought a 40-year war over land in the mid-18th century. For their part, the Creek also captured and sold other tribes as slaves.

Because of these past conflicts and due to the war between the Choctaw and the Creek at the time, it was difficult
for the Creek and Cherokee to maintain an alliance against the American rebels when the time came in 1776.

Enter the trader. The two traders most connected with the events of the Cherokee War were John Stuart, a descendant of the Royal House of Stuart, and Alexander Cameron. Stuart was the superintendent for Indian Affairs as well as the owner of 10,000 acres in South Carolina and another 5,000 in Georgia, making him one of the largest landowners and slaveholders residing in luxury in the port of Charleston. He also owned 200 slaves. He had cultivated a warm relationship with the Indians and used that relationship to ally with them against the rebels. Cameron, deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs, had also lived among the Cherokee, even being honored with the title of "Beloved Man." He married a half-Cherokee woman.

The game plan was to use the Cherokee to frighten the American rebels, but they were to be "restrained from committing any outrages or acts of violence to which their natural ferocity of temper might hurry them." This proved to be a fantasy when the young charismatic Cherokee warrior Dragging Canoe scalped, tomahawked, shot or burnt to death 500 colonists across the border line.

The attitude of the ruling class towards the white settlers was at least as contemptuous as it was of the Cherokee. Stuart said of them, "Inhabitants of the back country are in general the lowest and worst part of the people and they and the Indians live in perpetual jealousy and dread of each other." The Scots-Irish traders might have fit into Stuart's low esteem as well. Some had married Cherokee women, spoke the languages of the Indians, and had sons who came to be Indian tribal leaders, such as the Creek leader William McGillvray, who signed a treaty with the Spanish in 1784 to trade guns and ammunition.

You could see the Cherokee War of 1776 as the result of a misunderstanding of the meaning of land ownership by the Cherokee, or as a cynical misuse of the term by all parties involved. But it was the settlers who seem to have been the most vulnerable. Most of those who bought land over the line, specifically the Watauga settlers at the head of the Nolichucky River, were illiterate farmers who were sold the land by unscrupulous land speculators as was often the case in the colonies. Once there, there was no going back as they had no means to survive other than the crop in the field.

It is clear, too, by statements made by the Cherokee, that the land "sold" to settlers was actually just a lease for rent although not understood as such by the settlers. There were also instances in which the Cherokee had sold the same land several times and also cases, such as land in what today is Kentucky, which they sold without having any clear claim.

Settlers refused to move particularly because of the time-span given, 20 days, which meant no crop. Dragging Canoe and his young warriors wanted "their hunting land" back, something older Cherokee leaders were not so concerned with. The slaughter of the settlers was met in turn by a war of retribution waged by settler militia leaders Williamson and Rutherford of North Carolina and Christian of Virginia, in which most of the Cherokee towns in the immediate area were put to the torch. The militias by and large did not kill women and children and the elderly; however the destruction of the corn fields led to a famine the following winter in which many Cherokee died. Militia soldiers, largely unpaid, suffered from wounds and disease as a result of the war. By late 1776 Dragging Canoe had assembled a confederacy of Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, some Creek, loyalists and traders but even so, the patriots prevailed. Cherokee diplomatism even met in Williamsburg with Patrick Henry of Virginia.

A treaty was finally signed in June of 1777. Most agreed, but not the diehard followers of Dragging Canoe, who continued his war against the settlers until 1785.

Things continued to go downhill for the Cherokee after that, resulting in the extinction of all Cherokee lands in the east and their forced relocation in 1838.

In an update to the tragic events of those years, the Cherokee today have a large reservation in western North Carolina complete with a five-star hotel and casino and a 14,000-seat entertainment venue. The freedmen, the former black slaves of the Cherokee who traveled with them on the so-called Trail of Tears, are suing for part of the action. So far no luck, as the latest decision by the Cherokee nation is that one must be at least one-fourth Cherokee to be considered part of the nation and thus entitled to benefits. Benefits include profits from the casino. There are today some 468 Indian casinos in the continental United States generating over $26 billion in profits. The Cherokee derive 13% of their income from tribal activities and 87% from the U.S. government and other sources.

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