

Ocmulgee Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

Ocmulgee Mounds NHP



Colonial Southeast Indians



EUROPEAN EXPLORERS ENCOUNTER THE LAMAR CULTURE

The early Spanish explorers of the 16th century who traveled the southeastern region of the present-day United States encountered the villages of the Late Mississippians. Also called the Lamar culture, their way of life covered a vast area. The village complexes were centered around paired mounds and an open court, very much like the ones found at the Lamar site near Macon, Georgia. Houses surrounded the central plaza within a log palisade and the inhabitants tended large agricultural fields that stretched along the fertile areas beside waterways. The villages were small but numerous and had a rich culture with beautiful pottery, personal ornamentation, and religious symbols.

In 1539 and later in 1558 the Spanish ventured into the interior of the southeast looking for gold and trying to establish successful colonies. After the final failure of Tristan de Luna in 1558, the Spanish established missions and outposts along the Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida coasts, abandoning the interior for about 150 years. In that time, the vast majority of Mississippian mound cultures vanished. Hernando de Soto and other European explorers disrupted native society by stripping the villages of vital food crops and shelter, killing and enslaving many Indians, and humiliating the chiefs, all of which led to political upheaval. But European diseases took the most toll on the natives who had no immunity. Thousands died as a result.

BRITISH INTERACTIONS WITH INDIANS

The pace of European history in the Americas quickened as the Spanish established missions in northern Florida between 1633 and 1650 and the British landed in Charles Town (now Charleston, South Carolina) in 1670. Both wanted the allegiance of Indians living along the Chattahoochee River. Contentions in Europe between England, Spain and France were played out in the Americas as well, and Europeans did not hesitate to use the Indians as pawns in these disputes. In return for British trade items, the Indians raided northern Florida to capture slaves for the English and at the same time helped weaken Spanish influence.

The British offered trinkets and metal tools for trade, but more importantly they offered horses and guns. In return, the Indians gave animal pelts and slaves. The yearning for English goods shifted from

luxury to necessity and altered Indian life. Indian hunters slaughtered deer in unprecedented numbers, often taking the hides and leaving the rest of the deer to rot, instead of using every part of the slain animals for food and tools. They also captured slaves in numbers far exceeding any they had ever taken before the Europeans arrived.

In 1690 the British established a trading post along the Ocmulgee river, near present day Macon, Georgia. The Muscogee Indians relocated from the Chattahoochee River to be closer to the trade. The English came to call the Muscogee the Creeks, because of their new location along the Ocheese Creek (the Ocmulgee River). The Yuchi Indians also moved to the banks of the Ocmulgee River a few years before the Creeks.

THE SLAVE TRADE ESCALATES

South Carolina planters did use Indian slaves for their thriving plantation economy, but, being so close to home, the

Indians were more likely to run away than African slaves. As a result, many Indians were sent to New England or shipped to

THE SLAVE
TRADE
ESCALATES
(CONTINUED)

the sugar plantations in the Caribbean Islands. Not all settlers approved of the trafficking in human beings and recognized the havoc the slave trade caused among native groups. Colonial proprietors attempted to regulate and limit the trade, but the lure of profits proved too great.

Florida Indians, aided by the Spanish, retaliated against slave raids by destroying Creek settlements in 1695. South Carolina Governor Colonel Thomas Moore responded by entering northern Florida with Creek and other Indian allies. In the winter of 1704, they destroyed Indian

villages and 13 Spanish missions, killing several hundred people and capturing about a thousand slaves.

Raiding for slaves continued with native groups in Georgia traveling as far as Mississippi. However, growing numbers of Indians became disenchanted with the English. The slave trade escalated combat between Indians and disrupted traditional societies. Many came to see English traders as dishonest scoundrels. They also saw European settlers as a threat, grasping for more and more territory.

YAMASEE
INDIAN WAR
OF 1715

A number of loose alliances arose among various Indian leaders to confront pressures from Europeans. These networks became more obvious in 1715 when disenchantment with whites reached a boiling point and spilled over into war. The conflict began with the Indians launching coordinated attacks against English settlements along the South Carolina coast.

Warriors slipped into white homesteads, catching settlers by surprise. Simultaneously, they killed traders caught within Indians villages and stole their supplies. More than 200 Europeans died, and traders fell under attack as far west as Alabama in Creek and Choctaw villages. The alliance included the Creeks, Yuchis, Yamasees, possibly some Cherokees, and others. Despite the diverse collection of fighters, the uprising became known as the Yamasee War.

Colonial authorities also began negotiating an alliance with the Cherokee Indians in return for bargain-priced trade goods and guns. The Cherokee did not easily agree to fight other Indians, and two opposing factions formed. The issue reached a climax when a group of Cherokee in favor of the colonists killed Creek emissaries, violating Indian rules that guaranteed safe passage for negotiators. The murders required Creek retaliation and poisoned relations between the two groups for years after.

With the Cherokees' aid, the colonists defeated the uprising. Indians living in South Carolina and the eastern half of Georgia abandoned their homes and fled west. Creek Indians, including residents associated with the Kawita and Kasita communities, relocated back to the Chattahoochee River, along with the Yuchi and others. By 1717, the Yamasee War was over.