



## Who Were the Mysterious Yuchi of Tennessee and the Southeast?

The Tsoyaha (Yuchi) are not well represented in the history books. This is for several reasons. First, while the Yuchi were a large and powerful tribe according to reports of the De Soto expedition, evidence indicates that disease epidemics ravaged the Yuchi after the Spanish men visited the East Tennessee area. The Yuchi were known to have widely scattered villages that ranged from Florida to Illinois, and from the Carolina coast to the Mississippi River. Legend has it that the tribe split in half over politics, and the fate of remaining half is not known. This actually seems to have happened several times over the past as portions of the tribe were absorbed into the Shawnee, Lenape, Cherokee and Creek peoples, as well as into the dominant culture. We do know that for at least 6 or 8 centuries much of what is now Tennessee was occupied by a tribe with cultural characteristics that like the Mouse Creek site had significant elements of the Yuchean cultural footprint. The Yuchi villages were very often intermingled with those of the neighboring tribes. It was widely theorized that the Yuchi in their widely scattered villages throughout the Southeastern United States, represented the original inhabitants prior to the influx of the Muskogean, Iroquoian, and Algonkian Peoples. The Yuchi themselves avow that only the Algonkian (Lenape) were already here when they came -- and call them the "Old Ones" still. It is certain that the Yuchi were among the Mound-building People, and therefore among the oldest recognizable permanent residents of the Southeast United States. They held a pivotal role in this rather sophisticated society as priests, leaders and traders in what was a very metropolitan culture.

History clearly records, that many of the Yuchi residing in East Tennessee were evicted/exterminated by the Cherokee under the armament and direction of Eleazer

Wiggan and Alexander Long (traders from South Carolina) just as the Historic Period took hold of East Tennessee. At Chestowee (Mouse Creek) the heavily armed Cherokee stormed the walls in 1714. The surviving old men, women and children gathered in the communal house and committed mass suicide, rather than be taken captive. At least one woman and five children survived, and were taken as slaves back to South Carolina where they told their story to officials. Mr. Long and Mr. Wiggan were arrested, tried and convicted of inciting Indian war, for which they were stripped of their trading licenses -- but only temporarily.

The arrival of the Europeans destabilized the delicately balanced alliances that allowed the Yuchi to live in widely scattered villages among many other peoples -- as priests in white towns, and warriors in palisaded red towns. The Yuchi maintained extended trade along the trails throughout the Southeast. They also served as the Sun Priests in White Towns throughout the region. It remains inconceivable to the Dominant Culture of "ownership" that a people could or would share their lands with people that spoke very different tongues, but the ownership idea won the day as the Dominant Culture stripped the land of essential resources, and further starved the Indigenous people. The remaining Yuchi villages in East Tennessee, decimated by disease and hostile neighbors, fled to join other Yuchi living down on the Savannah and Chattahoochee Rivers and the Panhandle of Florida, where they failed to be distinguished from the Creek (Muskogean) peoples that surrounded/dominated the area (some Yuchi remained and were ultimately incorporated into the Shawnee, Cherokee, Seminoles and probably other Nations, and/or "assimilated" -- a scattered people absorbed into a desperately changing world). The Federal Government has never recognized the Yuchi tribe despite the fact that they are not related by language or culture to any other indigenous peoples here. This is probably the result of never signing a treaty or fighting a war with the Yuchi per se. It seems they "obtained" title to Yuchi lands by treaty/purchase from the neighboring tribes, and the Yuchi just sort of fell through the cracks and were forgotten in their own land.

Additionally, the tribe has been known by so many names: Chisca (Spanish), Tongora, Oustack, Westo (SC), Rickhokans (VA), Tomahittans (VA), Tahogalewi (Algonkin), Hogoheegee or Hogologe (Algonkin) & Yuchi or Euchee, Uge (Uchean) - - although the Westo & Rickhokans may have been of an unrelated Northern tribe. This has led to much confusion among historians. This is due both to the very sketchy and patchy histories that were recorded in these early times, and to the widely spread Yuchi villages which often were called by the village names and not by their tribal affiliation. During the "Dark Times" as the Yuchi call the centuries of cultural strife, the Yuchi people often split over the politics of whether to mollify or to defy the encroaching Dominant culture. While other tribes became agglomerative foci for the resulting disintegration of tribal cultures, the Yuchi more often folded into their

nearest neighbors -- so today the Yuchi seem to be a mere shadow of former selves. As traditionalist the Yuchi became the epitome of the "wild Indian," i.e. enemies of the writers of history. Dragging Canoe was an AniKutane (Cherokee/Yuchi) warrior that led a resistance. Therefore like the Creek Nation, the Yuchi were allotted much less treatment by history and the Federal Government than the more dominant culture-friendly Cherokee.

The Yuchi are a very staunchly proud and traditional people, and this alone has kept them from complete assimilation by either the Creek or the Dominant culture. That they are a very distinct people derives from their insistence on their direct descent from the Sun, based in the tradition that their ancestors descended from beings that came down from the Sun and brought them their mound building culture. While they lived among several other tribes, they remained distinct and held themselves, their language and culture separate as well. It remains one of the chief mysteries of the Southeast, how a people could live so intimately with others for so long and maintain a pristine language as an isolate. Languages usually evolve fairly quickly, but Yucuan shows little change over the nearly four hundred years since it was first sampled. The Uchean language has never been certainly classified, and bears little resemblance to any of the known tongues of the Americas. It has not borrowed many words from neighboring languages, and yet has lent quite a few to those neighboring languages. Its structure and etymology bear proof of its having coevolved with the Green Corn Rite. Today it is at the edge of extinction with only a couple of elderly speakers fluent in the Uchean language remaining -- the results of many years of Federal repressive efforts to stamp out Indigenous languages. However, there is a valiant effort for a new generation to learn the language with classes being held and a dictionary finally being published.

The Yucuan Cultural footprint, not only includes a unique language and royal descent from the Sun, but consists of several very persistent and unique characteristic cultural traits. The Yuchi long built their homes half subterranean with a palisaded wall surrounding the village and squareground. They buried their dead fully extended on their backs, often within wooden or stone-lined graves and only a few sparse grave goods. They crafted small crude animal figures in clay during story telling as illustrations for the story. It is cultural traits like these that distinguishes their archaeological sites from their neighbors. However, it is not uncommon to find a few Yucuan graves and houses in neighboring tribal villages.

A faint similarity between religious practices has led a few to theorize a Hebrew connection. Proof that at least a small such connection might have existed resides in the Bat Creek Stone (Smithsonian Collection) which was removed from an East Tennessee mound, and contains a Hebrew inscription. The enigmatic stone is on

current display at the McClung Museum. However, despite much wishful investigation by many, this is not a lost tribe of Israel. The Yuchi are a mysterious indigenous people with a separate and distinct heritage from the other indigenous people of the United States. All myths aside, the Tsoyaha were one of the mound building peoples in the Southeast, and a contemporary culture of the great Mayan culture. They were at the heart of an extensive trade network that could have included an infrequent contact with the Old World. Despite firmly held myths that claim current era discovery, America has been a melting pot of ideas, culture and genes since long before the Colombian Era, and well into the Neolithic times as the intercontinental Maritime Archaic culture so clearly demonstrate.

The name Yuchi is very probably from the Yuclean language. Elders say it is "Yudjiha" -- probably meaning a people of significance -- as they would say, "we are Tsoyaha yuchi" ("Children of the Sun, a people of significance") It is not likely to refer to "faraway" as Frank Speck theorized in his Yuchi Ethnology writings. Indian tribes are frequently known by names other than what they call themselves, i.e. Sioux, Navaho, Delaware, Creek, etc. The Yuchi apparently were an exception, being known by a self-appellation. As staunchly proud as they are, this is not at all surprising. The most accessible information on the Yuchi is in *Tribes That Slumber* by Kneberg & Lewis, Univ. of Tenn. Press. Any university library ought to have *Red Carolinians* by Chapman Milling, *Ethnology of the Yuchi* by Frank Speck, and *Yuchi Tales*, by Gunter Wagner -- these latter two are older texts and are available in Adobe Acrobat Reader PDF format on the web.

## Of Lost Roots and Forgotten Tribes

The name of the State of Tennessee is a minor mystery. The origin of the word was lost to history. Now, this is not a great matter of import, but such trivia can be enjoyable to learn and know. An example is the name, "Chicago" which means "onion-place." About half the states and thousands of cities, rivers, lakes, and other sites in the United States have place names that are derived from aboriginal names. The difference is that many of these names' origins and meanings are well known.

The origin of the name, Tennessee, remains a bit of a mystery because the name is most probably from the nearly extinct Uchean Language. This is a language which enigmatically seems unrelated to any of the other 500 North American Indian languages, but has been theorized by a few to have some Siouan influences. The Yuchi themselves are almost as forgotten as the origin of the word, Tennessee.

The name, Tennessee, is not Cherokee. The Cherokee told the early settlers that the name was used by "the people who lived here before we came." The Cherokee

continued to use the name, Tannassee or Tansi, for a town on the Little Tennessee River at Nine-Mile Creek (near Chota or Echota, a Yuclean word for sacred tobacco fire). The white settlers would use this name for the rivers and later the state itself.

Archaeological evidence suggests that for hundreds of years the Yuclean-type culture flourished over much of eastern and middle Tennessee often thoroughly mixed with that of their Koasati allies and friends. This was before the white settlers came, and pushed the Cherokee ahead of them into the area. The Yuchi had operated trade routes throughout the Southeast, and the Great Valley running through East Tennessee held the main North-South connection in the trail system. Saltville just over the Virginia border was a strategic resource in their control of trade. The Yuclean control of trade is deeply written into the Southeastern languages where the word translator/interpreter in most of them derives from the Yuclean, yatik'e -- as language translation was also a specialty of the Yuchi since no one else spoke their language, and it is so very necessary to trade transactions.

Noted ethnologist John R. Swanton has stated that the name Tennessee was either Muskogean (Creek) or Yuchi. Swanton, not knowing the Uchean language, proposed that it might be a contraction of Talwa-ahassi, i.e. talasi as in Talahassee, Florida. This means "Old Town" in Muskogean (literally means "old fire"). Swanton did not have access to speakers of the Uchean language. The journals of the Juan Pardo expedition of 1567 records the Yuchi (Chisca) village of Tanasaqui in the East Tennessee area. Note: the "el" sound isn't that likely to have transformed to an "en" sound.

After studying the Uchean language and linguistics in an effort to learn something of the Yuchi, this writer believes there is a more likely origin. On various maps, several towns in the Tennessee Valley carried names homophonic (sounding-like) with the State name, Tahnisee, Tunnashe, Tamasttee, Tasechee, Tanasqui, and Tasache. These were all located at the junctions of streams on the Little Tennessee, Hiwassee, French Broad and Tellico Rivers. The Yuchi refer to the confluence of streams as Tana-tsee-dgee, which translates roughly to "where-the-waters-meet," and literally means "brother-waters-place." (also Tana-tsee, Brother-waters) The term also carries the meaning of a "meeting-place," because if two people going different ways in the forest want to agree on a place to reconnect with each other, the ideal would be the junction of two streams. The Muskogean languages also have a word Tennes'etu (trade with) but it most likely derives from the Yuclean for "meeting place."

The official view (now falling out of popularity) has long held that the name derives from a Cherokee word, "but they forgot what it means." Unfortunately most people seem to believe that the Cherokee are the ancient indigenous people of Tennessee, and the State academics have done nothing to educate the people in this regard. Tennessee

State Tourism, though, has recently embraced the Yuchean derivation as more and more evidence has mounted for it as the source of the State's name.

While the Cherokee do not recognize the word "tennessee," and the Creek have a word that contextually links through the Yuchean, it would seem that the explanation has been found. The Yuchi and Koasati are known to have been among the immediate predecessors of the Cherokee in this area. Historical evidence on many maps from the 16th to 18th century show these similar names throughout this area at the junctions of streams. The Yuchi term for such town sites definitely sounds very much like Tennessee. Many early maps have "Hogoheegee" as the name for the Tennessee River (this is the Algonkin name for Yuchi People). We have both proof that the Yuchi resided here, and language validation of the likely derivation of the name. Therefore, this seems to adequately account for the mystery of the State's name better than any other explanation that has been given, though it is not something that is ever likely to be established as a proven fact.

The reasons for the name being lost to history are also interesting. The Yuchi were first visited at "Tanasqui" by the Hernando de Soto expedition in 1540 and the Juan Pardo expedition in 1567. Both these expeditions also fought battles with them. The Yuchi are said to be a powerful tribe that raided the coastal colonies of South Carolina, Virginia and Florida and were feared by the neighboring tribes. By the early 18th century the Yuchi were greatly diminished, by either war or disease. They had lived as the immediate neighbors to Melungeons, likely colonists brought from Spain by Juan Pardo in the late 1560s (fleeing the Inquisitions), and so were more intimately exposed to European diseases. Their decimation by disease and warfare made it easy for them to be driven from the land that had been their stronghold. But the Yuchi were adaptable and not at all likely to have all left.

In 1714, messrs. Eleazer Wiggan and Alexander Long, traders from South Carolina, provided guns to the Cherokee and encouraged them to attack the Yuchi at Chestowee (South Mouse Creek) on the Hiwassee River. It seems that Mr. Long had cheated a Yuchi and subsequently lost some hair when the Yuchi objected. He and Wiggan then killed a young Cherokee man, and told the Cherokee they had seen the Yuchi do it. They then sold the Cherokee guns and ammunition and led them on a revenge raid on the town of Chestoe. The Yuchi fought valiantly, but mere bows and arrows were no match for deadly musket fire. Unlike spears and arrows, guns are easily fired between the poles of a palisade wall. For the first time the walls were little protection for the people. When the battle was all but lost, the Yuchi not killed in battle gathered their families and committed mass suicide in the communal house rather than be taken captive. Six survivors were taken as slaves. Other battles may have been fought at a place still known as Euchee Old Fields in Rhea/Meigs County (near the present

community of Euchee). Some remaining Yuchi communities left Tennessee to live down on the Savannah and Chattahoochee Rivers, and some were known to be assimilated into the Cherokee and Melungeon Peoples of East Tennessee.

The Yuchi, now only a small tribe in the middle of a European struggle for North America, were forced to ally themselves with the Creek Confederacy for survival, and in an ongoing part of this American travesty have never been recognized by the Federal Government as anything but a part of the Creek Nation. Yet, they still continued to play a small part in history, despite attempts to write them out of it.

In the Creek War of 1814, a Yuchi named Timpoochee Barnard, fought along side Andrew Jackson at the battle of Callabee Creek. This battle was against the Red Stick Creek including their Yuchi allies ( i.e. a group of Creek/Yuchi also). Timpoochee led a bloody charge against the overwhelming Creek forces saving the forces of Captain John Broadnix. Though wounded severely twice, he continued to fight until the Creeks were repelled. President Andrew Jackson later praised Timpoochee Barnard to his son, "a braver man than your father never lived." Despite such valiant efforts, President Jackson soon forced all Indians that could be found, friends and foes alike on a death march to exile along the Trail of Tears. In the end neither resistance or cooperation could prevent bigotry and lust for land from driving the indigenous people into a deeply marginalized existence in either Oklahoma exile or internal exile.

In May of 1836, a Yuchi named Jim Henry participated in raids on encroaching settlements in Alabama and Georgia. By July of that year, the government rounded up 2500 Creeks (including 900 Yuchi) and ferried them to Indian territory (where only 216 Yuchis are recorded in the 1930 census). The Indian removal was the beginning of the end for the Yuchi tribe. Some live on in and around Sapulpa. Some Yuchi fled to Florida and joined the Seminole, where Uchee Billy was Chief a century ago. Others of mixed heritage successfully "passed as white," and remained on eastern lands. However, this required hiding all evidence of their Indian heritage for generations and often subjected them to enduring racial slurs, loss of voting rights and many other marginalizing attacks from the Dominant culture.

Today, the tribal Yuchi in Oklahoma number a few hundred and are partly assimilated into the Creek and Seminole Nations. Hardly anyone speaks the language, and only books and a few oral traditions preserve the "Eastern" traditions of the Yuchi. And recently, a few people of Yuchi heritage have begun to come out of hiding in the Tennessee hills. Little else but dusty records ties the Yuchi to their role in Tennessee history, and even this is slowly being erased by revisionist history writers bent on memorializing the Cherokee. And yet, this tenacious people cling to their culture and language after centuries of Federal repression aimed at making them disappear. The

Internet has given the down-trodden Yuchi a voice again, wherein they can tell their story.

In summary, the Yuchi language is nearly extinct with less than five speakers. The tribe was expelled from East Tennessee or driven underground before the settlers begin to record the area's history. Reduced to only a small and scattered tribe, they were largely ignored by scholars. It is little wonder that their tie to this State and its name has been nearly lost to us. Just a forgotten tribe and a nearly meaningless name hidden in a few musty records. If we ignore the Yuchi long enough they will be extinct, and therefore one less Indian problem to concern an arrogant majority bent on reducing them to naught but forgotten myths.

It should be noted that in most early maps of the Southeast, Kentucky and Tennessee are shown as voids with the annotation: "Uninhabited Territory." This is ludicrous given the fertility of the area. Since existing records show scattered Yuchi Villages from southern Indiana and Illinois South into Georgia, South Carolina and Florida, and the Yuchi were known Moundbuilders, it is more likely that the Yuchi who once occupied this area were decimated by disease. Archaeological evidence supports the idea that a culture with a Yuchean footprint once spread through this region. There was after all over 100 years between the arrival of the Melungeon colonist with Juan Pardo, and the later arrival of the French and English settlers who wrote the subsequent history. This would be more than enough time for disease to ravage the once numerous Yuchi as reported by both De Soto and Pardo. It should also be noted that the histories when written omitted both the Melungeons and Yuchi still living in East Tennessee. Proof of Yuchi presence here, even after the expulsion of many of them 1715, exists in the town, boat dock, and area known by the name, Euchee. If they still weren't here when the first white settlers arrived, how could they have recorded their name on these sites in Meigs/Roane Counties? What history has been recorded properly shows the Yuchi to have lived here in Tennessee right up to the present. A people like the Melungeons, ignored and left out of the official history and politics, but nonetheless Tennessee's longest residents. Some of these people who have kept bits and pieces of their family heritage alive are again feeling safe in sharing it with their neighbors.

*[While the unequivocal origin of the name can never be established, this explanation is very compelling. It treads on the myths of the Indians as an inferior people who some how owed forfeiture of their lands to the invading Europeans, or those simplifications that portray the Cherokee as the Indians from the Southeast. Perhaps it is just easier to simplify and rewrite history to fit the conscience of the dominant culture. I submitted for publication several years back in the State magazine -- They didn't think it was "appropriate" for their publication. Yet the records of the Yuchi are*

*all still in our academic archives being quietly forgotten, just as the source of the State's name has been.]*

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## **Related Sites:**

[Mission Statement of Yuchi.org](#)

**NEW ▶** [\*Happy Thanksgiving -- read the story of Tisquantum: the Origin of Thanksgiving\*](#)

[\*Euclache Heritage Festival & History Symposium, Oct. 8-9, 2010, Kellyville, OK June 9-10, 2012: Spread the Word the Yuchi are Gathering! Details Here!\*](#)

[\*Photos of 2011 Yuchi Heritage Gathering\*](#)

[\*"Yuchi Town" Including photos of the Dedication Ceremony\*](#)

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[\*"The Yuchi Language Primer"\*](#)

[\*Additional Linguistic \(Etymology\) Articles\*](#)

[\*Listing of Major Holdings of the Yuchi National Archive\*](#)

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**NEW ▶** [\*"Missed Museum Opportunities; Neglected History & Forgotten\*](#)

[\*Peoples," a paper written by David Hackett \(Woktela\) and presented at the World Archaeological Congress -- "Intercongress on Indigenous Peoples and Museums; Unraveling the Tensions" June 22-25, 2011\*](#)

[\*Examples of Yuchi Pottery\*](#)

[\*Yuchi Clothing and Tools\*](#)

[\*Downloadable Version of Yuchi Language Primer\*](#)

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*For more information about the Yuchis, contact:*

Yuchi Historian, David Hackett (Woktela)  
Oak Ridge, Tennessee 37830 • Phone (865) 483-0058



Send e-mail to [woktela@comcast.net](mailto:woktela@comcast.net)

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