

Coweta Town and its Historical Importance to this Area

By W. J. Shannon

There are various spellings of this Creek Indian people and town name, but the generally accepted version is Coweta. Due to on-going research and the help and support of the Butts County Historical Society, archaeologist Stephen Hammack, historian Sam Lawson and other members of the Ocmulgee Archaeological Society now believe they have located the approximate site of the upper Ocmulgee "Coweta Town" only a few miles downstream from Lloyd Shoals Dam. Why is this historically important to this area?

Coweta was a large Indian settlement that is thought to have originally been located in north-central Alabama on the Coosa River. The Coweta may have been contacted by De Soto in 1540 during his exploration of the Southeast, in the area of Childersburg, AL. They later moved to the falls of the Chattahoochee, at present day Columbus, GA, around 1662 per Spanish records. Coweta also produced a 'daughter' town called Kasihta during their journey to the Chattahoochee River. Kasihta settled on the Georgia side near present day Fort Benning, and archaeologists have located this site. Coweta settled on the Alabama side a short distance downstream, and this site has also been located by archaeologists. The Coweta settlement was near the site of Apalachicola Town; the Apalachicola were indigenous to the area. The recollections of the Creeks tell how they politically "merged" with these local Apalachicola people when Coweta/Kasihta arrived at the Chattahoochee River.

The Coweta/Kasihta people spoke the Muscogee dialect of the Muskogean language, while the indigenous inhabitants spoke the Hitchiti dialect. Since they came from different backgrounds and spoke different dialects of a common tongue, this caused some friction in their alliance in the 1680's, when, after meeting English traders on the Chattahoochee, they began a political struggle for the leadership. It was at this time that the civil chief of Coweta, called Emperor Brims by the English, began his rise as the leader of the towns along the Chattahoochee, with an ambitious plan to become the supreme civil and military ruler of all the Lower Creek towns. Politics haven't changed.

Thereafter, the Chattahoochee towns witnessed the development of two distinct groups. One group was pro-British, and traded for British goods of higher quality at lower prices, while the other group wished to maintain their former diplomatic and trade ties with the Spanish. Once the

Spanish found out that traders from Carolina were dealing with the Creeks, a period of rough diplomacy began.

The Spanish first tried to gain Creek allegiance by forcing the Carolinians to back off, but when this was unsuccessful, the Spanish next forced the Creeks to choose sides. Those who refused to side with Spain had their towns, fields and stored crops burned in the winter of 1685, endangering their survival that year. The Carolina traders, however, continued to trade regularly with the Chattahoochee towns. The trade goods included many items such as beads, cloth, and tools, but perhaps most important were firearms, which the Spanish were not allowed to trade to Indians. For the next 30 years, Creek-Spanish relations went downhill.

Spanish records tell us that in 1686 the talk among the pro-British faction began to turn to relocating to be nearer to Carolina's traders. By 1690, they were well underway in re-locating to the Otchisi-hatchee, the Indian name for what is today's Ocmulgee River. Other Spanish records tell us that the entire Chattahoochee valley had been abandoned by the Creeks by 1692, and that they had moved to settlements on the Otchisi-hatchee. This was the era of the British trading houses at Ocmulgee National Monument in Macon, and at other strategic places along the river, and from this point forward each new generation of Creeks would grow up having never known a time without British trade goods.

The English-speaking Carolinians called the river by its older native name,

Otchisi-hatchee, meaning either Hickory Leaf or Hickory Nut Creek. Ten or eleven towns along its banks were inhabited by these peoples, who collectively became known to the British as the Ocheese Creek Indians. The traders shortened this to "Creek Indians," the name by which they have been called up until the present day. Among these Indian towns that came from the Chattahoochee was one called Ocmulgee, which was settled on the grounds of today's Ocmulgee National Monument. The name Ocmulgee begins to appear in the English records of Carolina around 1703, and shortly thereafter the name Ocmulgee began to be applied to the river as well, a name it retains today.

"Coweta on the Ocmulgee" is signally important for several factors. It was the residence of the civil chief Brims, and thus it was the site of the signing of a trade alliance with Britain's Queen Anne via the Carolina traders in August 1705. As one of the signers, Brims called all the Creek groups, including the Middle and Upper Creeks of what is now Alabama, to enter into this agreement and sign the treaty. Trade relations, however, failed due to both the unscrupulous practices of some of the traders, and due to Brims' political ambitions. In 1715, war broke out between the Creeks and the British settlers, when the Indians began an assault on the Carolina colony. The fear of Carolinian reprisals forced the Creeks to relocate to their previous settlements along the Chattahoochee River that year. Although the contest was in doubt for quite some time, the

matter was finally decided when the Cherokee abandoned their alliance with the Creeks and entered the war on the side of the British. By the time the Georgia colony was founded, Brims had consolidated his political position as the "supreme ruler" of the Lower Creeks and he passed

away leaving his political conquests in the hands of his brother Chekilli, who would serve as chief ruler until Brims heirs came of age.

When Gen. James Oglethorpe landed at the future site of Savannah in 1733, he knew he would need an interpreter to facilitate his dealings with the Creek Indians. Brims' niece, Coosaponakeesa, was born at Coweta on the Ocmulgee around 1700, would

fill this role admirably. She later took the English name Mary, and married Johnny Musgrove, son of Col. John Musgrove, who had served as the interpreter at the signing of the 1705 Creek-English trade alliance. Mary Musgrove was one of Oglethorpe's first contacts in Georgia, and for many years served as a mediator between the colonial government and the Creeks. Today, Georgia owes a great debt to Mary for the invaluable work she did in helping to establish friendly relations between Georgia and the Creeks when the colony was being established. One of the historical results was that the colonial Southeast was won by the British, and it could even be said that without Mary's help we could very well be speaking Spanish today instead of English.

This article was written in memory of my good friend Samuel J Lawson III, who passed from the bonds of this earth on Oct.28, 2009 at the early age of 58. I first met Sam in Macon about fifteen years ago when he was a ranger at Ocmulgee National Monument. Sam earned an MA in History/Archeology and was a history teacher at several colleges. His greatest passion was researching the Creek Indian towns along the Ocmulgee River from 1686-1716. He also studied De Soto's explorations of the southeast and was an expert in Native American pottery/ceramics. His contributions and support of the Artifacts ID Days sponsored by the Butts County Historical Society, and held at the Indian Spring Hotel, will always be remembered and greatly appreciated. Sam helped to make this the successful event it has become.