

Chocochatti

An early Creek-Seminole Town (1767-1842)

A Florida Heritage Landmark

Brooksville, Hernando County



Vision Statement: 2020

Future Interpretation
&
Development Proposals

The Historic Hernando Preservation Society, Inc.
Archaeology Committee
April, 2020

CHOCOCHATTI VISION STATEMENT: 2020

Future Interpretation & Development Proposals

Introduction:

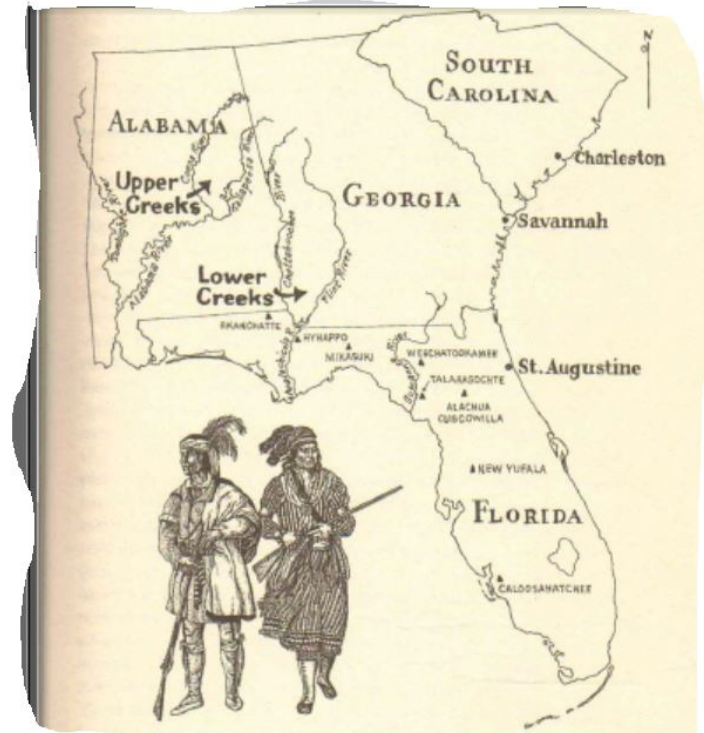
By David P. Letasi, Archaeology Chairman
Historic Hernando Preservation Society, Inc.

Chocochatti, "Red House," was an early settlement of the Creek-Seminole Muscogee-speaking people that migrated into northern and central Florida during the mid-eighteenth century. The Seminole heritage and cultural identity evolved here in the Big Hammock environment of the Cove of the Withlacoochee River. The history of the Chocochatti traditionally began in 1767 when Muscogee Creeks broke from the Creek Nation in Alabama and Georgia and moved south into the Big Hammock of the Cove of the Withlacoochee River. Known as "Red House," it was documented by early nineteenth century English and American traders and cartographers. They left accounts of occupation of villages to the north and eastern perimeter of the Chocochatti prairie.



Florida Historical Museum

1837 lithograph of a Seminole village



Creek Country and early Seminole towns prior to 1783.
(Drawn by Theodore Morris: in *Unconquered People* by Dr. Brent Weisman)

The Historic Hernando Preservation Society, aka “Hernando Past,” has developed a strategy in association with GARI, Gulf Archaeological Research Institute, to research historical documents, promote technical support to employ scientific archaeological methods to determine the actual footprint of the Chocochatti Seminole. Our objective is to discover direct evidence of the cultural remains that will define the band of Seminoles known as the Chocochatti. This joint project is collaboration by HHPS (Historic Hernando Preservation Society), GARI (Gulf Archaeology Research Institute) and the THPO (Tribal Historic Preservation Office) of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. GARI has provided immense historical information and research projects in Hernando County previously, including Chinsegut Hill and Bayport. The Seminole Tribe of Florida and their representative, Dr. Paul Backhouse were instrumental in the creation, funding, and dedication of the Chocochatti state historical marker project in 2014.



State Historical Marker dedicated on May 30, 2014 in Brooksville, Hernando County, FL
 Chocochatti: A Florida Heritage Landmark
 (Pictured from left to right: Bobbie Henry, Chairman James Billie, & Dannie Tommie)

The Archaeology Committee of the HPS has developed this aforementioned strategy of documenting the archaeological footprint of the Seminole Chocochatti in conjunction with GARI's research. This will lead to a future interpretation of the Chocochatti, centering on the Chocochatti prairie, including an Interpretive Cultural Center focusing on the traditional Seminole lifestyle and possibly events of the Second Seminole War, including battles in and around Chocochatti Prairie. The main interpretive focus will be on the unique agro-pastoral prosperity of the Chocochatti for a period of almost 70 years.

Such an interpretive vision necessitates the possible land acquisition for the protection of historical-archaeological cultural material sensitive to commercial construction development that would destroy any future research. By protecting such culturally sensitive areas, we could then promote the development of historical-cultural tourism in Hernando County. HPS is committed to developing public awareness and a future vision of the

Chocochatti Project, which includes historical interpretation and development of historical-cultural tourism. We will work to develop a strategy for future land acquisition for an interpretive cultural center and educational facility. We encourage the development of historical tourism and historical preservation of the sites. Our goal is to develop a commonsense strategy to preserve this critical historically sensitive area before urban encroachment destroys the possibility for historic preservation and future historical-cultural tourism. We are committed to focus on the rich heritage of the Seminole Tribe of Florida and rely on their expertise and assistance in developing a future Seminole Historical & Cultural Center.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE CHOCOCHATTI PROJECT

**By Jon Yeager
Chocochatti Committee
Historic Hernando Preservation Society, Inc.**

In the initial Chocochatti Vision of 2018, we raised a question in light of all the research and preservation efforts of Chocochatti conducted over the years 2005-2018, “Where do we proceed from here?” The Archaeology Committee of the Historic Hernando Preservation Society concluded that “we must continue building a framework of support from our community, while maintaining strong ties with our strategic partners, including GARI (Gulf Archaeology Research Institute), the Seminole THPO (Tribal Historic Preservation Office), and local governments including the City of Brooksville, Hernando County, and the State of Florida.



Major Billy L. Cypress Building
THPO (Tribal Historic Preservation Office) Big Cypress Reservation
Dedication & Opening Day: October 23, 2019
Courtesy of the Seminole Tribune

Several of our strategic goals enumerated in our original vision statement of 2018 have come to fruition, which leads us into a new phase with the updated 2020 vision statement of future interpretation and development proposals. Most notably, the previous goals included the commencement of archaeological studies of Chocochatti by GARI, Gulf Archaeology Research Institute, the consistent meeting of the Historic Hernando Preservation Society Archaeology Committee to guide the process among our strategic partners, and the presentation of our vision to the Brooksville City Council, the Hernando County Board of County Commissioners, and the Hernando County Legislative Delegation in 2019.

GARI began its Chucochatti (variously spelled) Archaeological Documentation Project with an ABPP (American Battlefield Protection Project) grant. Their statement of

purpose asserts, “The American Battlefield Protection Project (ABPP) grant project will use multiple, complimentary research methods to evaluate the nature and extent of Chucochatti Town, the largest Seminole refuge town in central Florida. In partnership with the Seminole Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) and Historic Hernando Preservation Society (HHPS), Gulf Archaeology Research Institute (GARI) will conduct intensive historic, ethnographic, and archaeological research to locate and identify the town, and perform a systematic archaeological field survey.” This two year project will be completed in late 2020.

In addition to the archaeological work by GARI, HHPS met with local governmental bodies, informing them of the Chocochatti Project, including the Brooksville City Council and the Hernando County Board of County Commissioners. Mr. David Letasi represented HHPS before these bodies, and finally before the Hernando County Legislative Delegation in 2019, with State officials. This is another goal we have attained in this process, the commencement of archaeological work by GARI, while at the same time facilitating interpretive ideas and concepts, emphasizing the importance of acquiring the sensitive cultural-historical land areas related to Chocochatti for future development. All governmental bodies from the City of Brooksville, to Hernando County, to the State of Florida are aware of this momentous opportunity we have to preserve the area of Chocochatti, parlaying this into an economic engine to help drive the economic vitality of our area, which is a win-win for all involved.

Since 2018 and the presentation of the initial Chocochatti Vision Statement, we have seen a “fast-forward” on the progress and goals we enumerated then. The Chocochatti

Project project necessitates a rapid movement in both archaeological survey field-work and the facilitation of ideals, concepts, and future interpretation and development goals. Why? The properties on which these historically documented sites are located are now for sale on the commercial real estate market. The largest area of concern at this point is the Chocochatti Prairie. This is an area of special concern for preservation and protection, to ensure a future for Chocochatti's historical-cultural interpretation by the Seminole Tribe of Florida.



Spring Hill, Brooksville, and all of Hernando County are on the cusp of a historical-cultural and eco-tourism boom. Hernando County is the "Adventure Coast," and aggressively promotes its unique historical-cultural resources and eco-tourism. Weeki Wachee State Park has undergone major renovations to the park with a world-wide tourist draw to the famous springs and mermaid attraction. Recently, Chinsegut Hill and the Tampa Bay History



Weeki Wachee Springs State Park, FL
Courtesy of weekiwachee.com



Chinsegut Hill Manor House, Brooksville, FL
Courtesy of the TampaBayHistoryCenter.org



Courtesy of active.fdot7studies.com



Courtesy of Floridasadventurecoast.com



Courtesy of historicdowntownbrooksville.com

Center and Mid-Florida Community Services have launched a wonderful partnership with Hernando County to manage this historic gem and property, again with both statewide and world wide appeal. Brooksville Main Street is helping immensely to revitalize the city of Brooksville and its historic character. The Coast to Coast Good Neighbor Bicycle Trail will “close the gap” and join the Suncoast Trailhead to the Good Neighbor Trailhead, bringing riders into the county to experience our unique cultural historical resources. And now, Chocochatti, is poised to become the next major cultural-historical eco-tourist destination draw. It is all about the Seminoles and their history, which centered in the Chocochatti region. This leads us to possible future interpretive ideas, concepts, and development proposals.

FUTURE INTERPRETATION & DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

**By Doug Davis
Chocochatti Committee
Historic Hernando Preservation Society, Inc.**

Chocochatti was the location of the first introduction of Muscogee-speaking Upper Creeks from Alabama into Florida, where they then became known as "Seminoles." First named New Eufaula after a town they emigrated from. After the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814 in Alabama, these Muscogee-speaking Upper Creeks grew the numbers of the area to become known as Chocochatti, "Red Town." It became the seat of government, ceremony, and culture for these Seminoles. What makes it unique is that it was continuously inhabited for approximately 70 years, a rarity in the strife of these earlier centuries. This ended in the 1840's due to the war and Indian Removal Act of 1830. Four military battles are recorded in official records that took place on and near the Chocochatti Prairie. It is a part of the historical record and documentation, in military after-action reports.

We must capitalize on this area to preserve it. It has become clear to me and others that in order to save something, it must have value-added to be so. That being our situation today, there is a clear need in Brooksville and Hernando County to develop a permanent economic venue. Our area is laden with history. Historical tourism is a four-billion dollar a year industry. We would experience an economic boom to develop this industry around the Seminole history. With the Coast to Coast Good Neighbor Bicycle Trail running

from Tarpon Springs to Titusville already under development, there is expected to be hundreds of thousands of visitors looking for accommodations. It would be a clear draw for them to visit a museum/cultural center of Chocochatti, to learn of the origins of the Seminoles, and to stay overnight in a facsimile early Seminole village where cultural interaction would take place.



Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum: Big Cypress Reservation (Clewiston, FL)
“A Place To Learn, A Place To Remember”
Courtesy of floridaseminoletourism.com



Village site at Big Cypress Reservation (Clewiston, FL)
Courtesy of aaslh.org (American Association for State and Local History)

This would include a cultural center (museum), campground, cattle ranch, native food, cultural rites, dances, a nature trail with boardwalk and possible nature zoo with gators, buffalo, eagles, and other fauna. The entrance to the town of Chocochatti would be just east of the convergence of Highway 50 and the 98 Truck Route. The cultural center/museum should be nearby, with a facsimile village of Chocochatti rebuilt with a square-ground dance area and houses as they would have looked at that time. Visitors would be able to stay in an adjacent campground area with cabins and amenities, similar to those found at the Big Cypress Reservation.



Cabins at Big Cypress Reservation: Clewiston, FL
Courtesy of bigcypressrvresort.com

On the Chocochatti Prairie, Seminoles would be seen tending the cattle of original stock, with their horses. These Seminole cowboys would come most likely from the Brighton Reservation, which has Muscogee-speakers and manage the Tribe's Natural Resources, which



Two Day Smith Family Cattle Drive : Brighton Reservation 2017 (Okeechobee, FL)
Courtesy of The Seminole Tribune

includes cattle. Native foods would be grown and served to the visitors, including Seminole pumpkins, sofkee, and other Native foods. A boardwalk would take visitors from the village site to the open prairie, with native flora and fauna included in the experience. An overlook observation tower would give the visitors a grand view of the prairie, similar to Payne's Prairie Preserve State Park in Micanopy, south of Gainesville. Bike trails would also be present to



Payne's Prairie Preserve State Park Observation Tower
Micanopy, FL
Courtesy of reserveamerica.com

Welcome those from the Good Neighbor Coast to Coast Trail. This would be an adventure for all who will enjoy “The Seminole Experience.”

This experience would transport the visitors over two centuries into the past into a different time and place, when Chocochatti was thriving as a ceremonial, cultural, and agro-pastoral center of the Seminoles before the dark times of war came. The aspects of the vision stated herein are open for refinement and suggestion. It is the main intent of this endeavor to provide a venue to the Seminole Tribe of Florida they they may *tell their story, in their words, in a fashion that is conducive with their culture and values*. By doing so, the public will see the true dignity of the Seminoles, and respect them for it. The economic impact for the Seminoles, for Brooksville and Hernando County would be immense. This would also create an environment that promotes *reconciliation* which is my personal purpose to be involved in this endeavor.

CONCLUSION

**CHOCOCHATTI COMMITTEE
HISTORIC HERNANDO PRESERVATION SOCIETY, Inc.**

It has been the stated goal of the HHPS (Historic Hernando Preservation Society) to facilitate interpretive ideas, concepts, and goals into a realistic plan for the future historical interpretation and development of Chocochatti, a Florida Historical Landmark. The past two years have brought us to a pivotal point in this overall process. GARI (Gulf Archaeology Research Institute) launched its *Chucochatti Archaeological Documentation Project* with the *Unites States Department of the Interior NPS (National Park Service) ABPP (American Battlefield Protection Program) Grant*. Contemporaneously, the HHPS presented the *Chocochatti Vision*

before three governmental bodies, including the City of Brooksville Council, Hernando County (BOCC) Board of County Commissioners, and the Hernando County Legislative Delegation of 2019. All local officials and state officials are now aware of *The Chocochatti Vision*.

Our next step is to present this *Vision Statement 2020: Future Interpretation & Development Proposals of Chocochatti*. At this point, it is very important to note that this future interpretation and development of this Seminole cultural center/museum would center on the area of land just southeast of Brooksville known historically as the *Chocochatti Savannah or Prairie*. Sean Norman, archaeologist and Acting Executive Director of GARI (Gulf Archaeology Research Institute) states, “Chocochatti appears to represent a band of people and an area, rather than just a single town.” Yes, these Muskogee-speaking Creeks from Alabama and Georgia came to this area of Florida during the early settlement phases of the Seminole formation, in approximately 1767. However, they apparently moved many times and had satellite villages around the prairie and the entire Big Hammock Region, or Cove of the Withlacoochee. The Chocochatti Prairie was the central “hub” around which these Seminoles settled. It is here where we will focus the primary goal of land acquisition for this interpretive/development proposal.

Sean Norman of GARI adds, “The unique aspect of Chocochatti is their Muskogee heritage. The Seminole has a majority Mikasuki heritage, while the Muskogee heritage is a minority heritage. Chocochatti is important because 1) it represents the Muskogee heritage, 2) it represents an early prolonged occupation by the Seminoles in one area, which is rare, and 3) the Chocochatti area/band is important in the enterprise phase of Seminole

cultural development and the reservation era that directly led to the Second Seminole War.”

The Chocochatti had a large “footprint” across the landscape, around the centralized hub of the prairie, which was vital for raising their cattle, similar to the Mikasuki villages to the north in Payne’s Prairie, such as Miconopy, and Cuscowilla. Therefore our focus for land acquisition will be upon this area, known historically as the Chocochatti savannah (prairie).



Theatre of Military Operations in Florida (1835-1837)
Courtesy of the University of South Florida Digital Collections

This *Vision Statement 2020: Future Interpretation & Development Proposals for Chocochatti* hinges upon *land acquisition* to make it possible. As Historic Hernando Preservation Society (HHPs) Archaeology Committee Chairman David Letasis stated in his introduction, “Our goal is to develop a commonsense strategy to preserve this critical

historically sensitive area before urban encroachment destroys the possibility for historic preservation and future historical-cultural tourism.” Doug Davis, Chocochatti Committee member echoes this by saying, “It is the main intent of this endeavor to provide a venue to the Seminole Tribe of Florida so they may *tell their story, in their words, in a fashion that is conducive with their culture and values.*”



Land for Sale Sign located on Highway 50 & 98 Truck Route: Brooksville, FL (2019)

Without land acquisition to preserve this historically-culturally sensitive area of the Seminole’s history, a tremendous opportunity would be lost. As Doug Davis commented in his earlier remarks, “We must capitalize on this area to preserve it. It has become clear to me and others that in order to save something, it must have value-added to do so. That being our situation today, there is a clear need in Brooksville and Hernando County to develop a

permanent economic venue. Our area is laden with history. Historical tourism is a four billion dollar-a-year industry. We would experience an economic boom to develop this industry around the Seminole history.” The Seminole Tribe of Florida could *tell their story, in their words, in a fashion that is conducive with their culture and values.*”

TELLING THEIR STORY IN THEIR WORDS



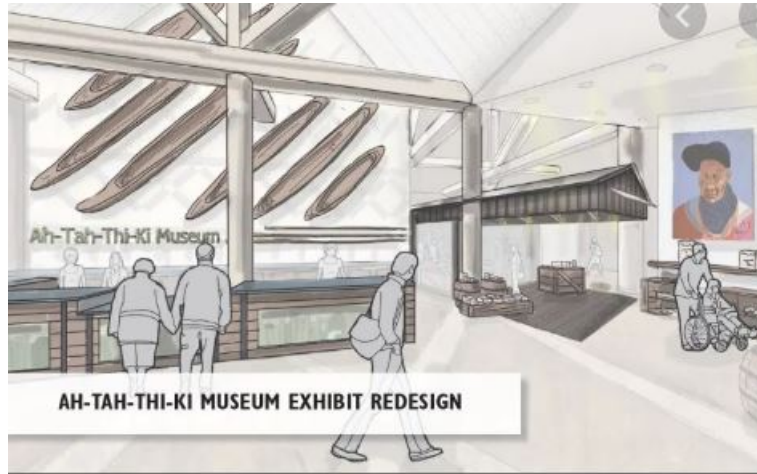
In the November 4, 2019 edition of the Seminole Tribune, Beverly Bidney writes, “The Tribal Historic Preservation Office finally has a home befitting its service to the Tribe. The Major Billy L. Cypress Building opened to great fanfare on October 23. With about 10,000 feet of interior space, the building houses 20 THPO and 11 Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum employees. THPO’s mission is to support the Tribe’s efforts to sustain its cultural and historic resources. It also investigates, interprets, preserves and manages the Tribe’s cultural resources through community engagement. The building’s sprawling ground floor houses the archeology department, a lab to process archeological artifacts and a large temperature and climate controlled vault to store them. The second floor contains a bright and airy conference room with ample space to house project files, maps and other papers collected over the years. ‘This is the first time everything is in one place,’ said Anne Mullins, THPO director. ‘This is an amazing space.’”

AH-TAH-THI-KI MUSEUM EXHIBIT REDESIGN



In March of 2018, an exhibit redesign of the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum, which is next to the newly dedicated THPO (Tribal Historic Preservation Office) was published. In its overview it states, “For the last 20 years the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum has shared Seminole culture and history with audiences from around the world. While our temporary galleries highlight current events and specific topics, our permanent galleries focus on Seminole life from the 1890’s to the 1910’s. Thanks to the strong foundation laid by Billy Cypress and other key founders of the Museum, coupled with the strength of the Tribal community, our collection and research on Seminole history and culture have grown enormously over the past two decades. The proposed exhibit redesign will help tell a more complete story, one that showcases a

longstanding history and a vibrant, living culture. It will reflect the voices, the stories, the history, and culture of the Seminoles.”



Courtesy of ahtahthiki.com

The Seminole Tribe of Florida is committed to the preservation of its history and culture while adapting continuously in a modern context. A quote from the exhibit redesign says, “We’re modern people, determined to remember our past as we look to the future. Our ability to adapt to changes taking place around us has been critical to our centuries of survival- we accept parts of the outside, non-Indian, world while preserving and protecting our cultural core. Our traditions live on so there will continue to be Seminoles for centuries to come.

This is the goal of the HPS (Historic Hernando Preservation Society) *Vision Statement 2020: The Future Interpretation & Development Proposals* for Chocochatti, “Red House.” Let us demonstrate our commitment to the principle that our past is the Seminole past. Let us focus on land acquisition of the historic Chocochatti Savannah (prairie) so that the Seminole Tribe of Florida may preserve & protect their cultural core, telling their story in their words for generations to come, including the proposals stated herein.



Seated behind Brent Weisman (*left to right*): Seminole Tribe of Florida THPO Director Paul Backhouse, Chairman James E. Billie, Bobby Henry, & Dannie Tommie. Dedication of the Chocochatti State Historical Marker: May 30, 2014 in Brooksville, FL
Courtesy of Peter Gallagher, The Seminole Tribune



HernandoPast.org

Chocochatti2020VisionStatement