

## Ancient America

### Introduction

It used to be that American history textbooks and course lectures, if they mentioned America before Columbus at all, focused on the elaborate urban cultures of Central Mexico and Peru, the Aztec and Inca Empires. Increasingly, however, American history narratives now start by surveying the many different Native societies north of Mexico: the Anasazi in the Southwest, who were the ancestors of the Pueblo peoples; the Moundbuilding societies, who resided for the most part east of the Mississippi River; and the Five Nations (Iroquois) Confederacy, which formed around 1450 in the Northeast. Diversity, often a dominant theme in US history courses, existed in America well before 1492.

Neal Salisbury's article "The Indians' Old World: Native Americans and the Coming of Europeans" could be considered part of this revisionist trend to incorporate more pre-Columbian history in how American history is told. Appearing in the premier journal for early American studies, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, this article speaks to an audience consisting mainly of scholars specializing in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American studies. Salisbury argues that American Indian history has been undeservedly neglected and marginalized. By highlighting the continuities in pre- and post-Columbian North America, he reconfigures the standard approach, which has tended to trace colonial American beginnings solely back to Europe.

"The Indians' Old World" is a play on words, the idea for which Salisbury borrowed from James H. Merrell's book *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact Through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill,

NC, 1989). Europeans viewed the Americas as their discovery. This was for them a “New World.” In turn, Europe, Asia, and Africa became known as the “Old World.” Merrell argued that European settlement of the Americas created a New World for Indians, too. European diseases, trade goods, and desire for Indian land disrupted Indian communities and set in motion rapid changes in Native economies, political structures, cultural practices, and identities. Merrell’s larger thesis is, however, very much about adaptation. In contrast to, in Merrell’s own words, “the tragically plummeting trajectory so commonly charted,” the many Indian groups inhabiting the Carolina piedmont region met every challenge and crisis with creative responses that enabled them “to rearrange their lives in accordance with new imperatives.”

One issue to consider while reading Salisbury’s article is to what extent his interpretation resembles Merrell’s. They may seem different on the surface. Merrell starts his narrative with European contact and limits himself to a small region, especially small when compared to Salisbury’s vast reach across time and space. But where does Salisbury stand on how Indians and Europeans responded to change? Also notice how much Salisbury depends on archaeological evidence for information about pre-Columbian America. What can archaeology tell us about the past, and what are its limitations? Finally, pay particular attention to Salisbury’s discussion of Cahokia and the moundbuilding societies of the Mississippi River Valley and Southeast. The two documents that follow his article shed further light on the significance of mounds to one southeastern people, the Choctaws.

*The Indians’ Old World: Native Americans and  
the Coming of Europeans*

Neal Salisbury

Scholars in history, anthropology, archaeology, and other disciplines have turned increasingly over the past two decades to the study of native peoples during the colonial period of North American history. The new work in Indian history has altered the way we think about the beginning of American history and about the era of European colonization. Historians now recognize that Europeans arrived, not in a virgin land, but in one that was teeming with several million people. Beyond filling in some

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of the vast blanks left by previous generations' overlooking of Indians, much of this scholarship makes clear that Indians are integral to the history of colonial North America. In short, surveys of recent textbooks and of scholarly titles suggest that Native Americans are well on their way to being "mainstreamed" by colonial historians.

Substantive as this reorientation is, it remains limited. Beyond the problems inherent in representing Indian/non-Indian interactions during the colonial era lies the challenge of contextualizing the era itself. Despite opening chapters and lectures that survey the continent's native peoples and cultures, most historians continue to represent American history as having been set in motion by the arrival of European explorers and colonizers. They have yet to recognize the existence of a North American – as opposed to English or European – background for colonial history, much less to consider the implications of such a background for understanding the three centuries following Columbus's landfall. Yet a growing body of scholarship by archaeologists, linguists, and students of Native American expressive traditions recognizes 1492 not as a beginning but as a single moment in a long history utterly detached from that of Europe. These findings call into question historians' synchronic maps and verbal descriptions of precontact Indians – their cultures, their communities, their ethnic and political designations and affiliations, and their relations with one another. Do these really describe enduring entities or do they represent epiphenomena of arbitrary moments in time? If the latter should prove to be the case, how will readings of Indian history in the colonial period be affected?

Far from being definitive, this article is intended as a stimulus to debate on these questions. It begins by drawing on recent work in archaeology, where most of the relevant scholarship has originated to suggest one way of thinking about pre-Columbian North America in historical terms. The essay then looks at developments in several areas of the continent during the centuries preceding the arrival of Europeans and in the early phases of the colonial period. The purpose is to show how certain patterns and processes originating before the beginnings of contact continued to shape the continent's history thereafter and how an understanding of the colonial period requires an understanding of its American background as well as of its European context.

In a formidable critique of European and Euro-American thinking about native North Americans, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., demonstrates that the idea of "Indians" as a single, discrete people was an invention of Columbus and his European contemporaries that has been perpetuated into our own time without foundation in historical, cultural, or ethnographic reality. On the contrary, Berkhofer asserts,

The first residents of the Americas were by modern estimates divided into at least two thousand cultures and more societies, practiced a multiplicity of customs and lifestyles, held an enormous variety of values and beliefs, spoke numerous languages mutually unintelligible to the many speakers, and did not conceive of themselves as a single people – if they knew about each other at all.<sup>1</sup>

While there is literal truth in portions of Berkhofer's statement, his implication that Indians inhabited thousands of tiny, isolated communities in ignorance of one another flies in the face of a substantial body of archaeological and linguistic scholarship on North America and of a wealth of relevant anthropological literature on nonstate polities, non-market economies, and noninstitutionalized religions. To be sure, indigenous North Americans exhibited a remarkable range of languages, economics, political systems, beliefs, and material cultures. But this range was less the result of their isolation from one another than of the widely varying natural and social environments with which Indians had interacted over millennia. What recent scholars of precolonial North America have found even more striking, given this diversity, is the extent to which native peoples' histories intersected one another.

At the heart of these intersections was exchange. By exchange is meant not only the trading of material goods but also exchanges across community lines of marriage partners, resources, labor, ideas, techniques, and religious practices. Longer-distance exchanges frequently crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries as well and ranged from casual encounters to widespread alliances and networks that were economic, political, and religious. For both individuals and communities, exchanges sealed social and political relationships. Rather than accumulate material wealth endlessly, those who acquired it gave it away, thereby earning prestige and placing obligations on others to reciprocate appropriately. And as we shall see, many goods were not given away to others in this world but were buried with individuals to accompany them to another.

Archaeologists have found evidence of ongoing exchange relations among even the earliest known Paleo-Indian inhabitants of North America. Ten thousand years before Columbus, in the wake of the last Ice Age, bands of two or three dozen persons regularly traveled hundreds of miles to hunt and trade with one another at favored campsites such as Lindenmeier in northern Colorado, dating to ca. 8800 B.C. At the Lindenmeier site, differences in the flaking and shaping of stone points distinguished regular occupants in two parts of the camp, and the obsidian each used came from about 350 miles north and south of Lindenmeier, respectively. Evidence from a wide range of settlement

sites makes clear that, as the postglacial warming trend continued, so-called Archaic peoples in much of the continent developed wider ranges of food sources, more sedentary settlement patterns, and larger populations. They also expanded their exchanges with one another and conducted them over greater distances. Highly valued materials such as Great Lakes copper, Rocky Mountain obsidian, and marine shells from the Gulf and Atlantic coasts have been found in substantial quantities at sites hundreds and even thousands of miles from their points of origin. In many cases, goods fashioned from these materials were buried with human beings, indicating both their religious significance and, by their uneven distribution, their role as markers of social or political rank.

While the Archaic pattern of autonomous bands persisted in most of North America until the arrival of Europeans, the complexity of exchange relationships in some parts of the continent produced the earliest evidence of concentrated political power. This was especially so for peoples who, after the first century A. D., developed food economies that permitted them to inhabit permanent, year-round villages. In California, for example, competition among communities for coveted acorn groves generated sharply defined political territories and elevated the role of chiefs who oversaw trade, diplomacy, and warfare for clusters of villages. Similar competition for prime fishing and trading locations strengthened the authority of certain village chiefs on the Northwest Coast. Exchange rather than competition for resources appears to have driven centralization in the Ohio and Illinois valleys. There the Hopewell peoples imported copper, mica, shell, and other raw materials over vast distances to their village centers, where specialists fashioned them into intricately crafted ornaments, tools, and other objects. They deposited massive quantities of these goods with the dead in large mounds and exported more to communities scattered throughout the Mississippi Valley. Hopewell burials differentiate between commoners and elites by the quantity and quality of grave goods accompanying each. In the Southwest, meanwhile, a culture known as Hohokam emerged in the Gila River and Salt River valleys among some of the first societies based primarily on agriculture. Hohokam peoples lived in permanent villages and maintained elaborate irrigation systems that enabled them to harvest two crops per year.

By the twelfth century, agricultural production had spread over much of the Eastern Woodlands as well as to more of the Southwest. In both regions, even more complex societies were emerging to dominate widespread exchange networks. In the Mississippi Valley and the Southeast, the sudden primacy of maize horticulture is marked archaeologically in a variety of ways -- food remains, pollen profiles, studies of human bone (showing that maize accounted for 50 percent of people's diets), and in

material culture by a proliferation of chert hoes, shell-tempered pottery for storing and cooking, and pits for storing surplus crops. These developments were accompanied by the rise of what archaeologists term "Mississippian" societies, consisting of fortified political and ceremonial centers and outlying villages. The centers were built around open plazas featuring platform burial mounds, temples, and elaborate residences for elite families. Evidence from burials makes clear the wide social gulf that separated commoners from elites. Whereas the former were buried in simple graves with a few personal possessions, the latter were interred in the temples or plazas along with many more, and more elaborate, goods such as copper ornaments, massive sheets of shell and ceremonial weapons. Skeletal evidence indicates that elites ate more meat, were taller, performed less strenuous physical activity, and were less prone to illness and accident than commoners. Although most archaeologists' conclusions are informed at least in part by models developed by political anthropologists, they also draw heavily from Spanish and French observations of some of the last Mississippian societies. These observations confirm that political leaders, or chiefs, from elite families mobilized labor, collected tribute, redistributed agricultural surpluses, coordinated trade, diplomacy, and military activity, and were worshipped as deities.

The largest, most complex Mississippian center was Cahokia, located not far from the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, near modern East St. Louis, Illinois, in the rich floodplain known as American Bottoms. By the twelfth century, Cahokia probably numbered 20,000 people and contained over 120 mounds within a five-square-mile area. One key to Cahokia's rise was its combination of rich soil and nearby wooded uplands, enabling inhabitants to produce surplus crops while providing an abundance and diversity of wild food sources along with ample supplies of wood for fuel and construction. A second key was its location, affording access to the great river systems of the North American interior.

Cahokia had the most elaborate social structure yet seen in North America. Laborers used stone and wooden spades to dig soil from "borrow pits" (at least nineteen have been identified by archaeologists), which they carried in wooden buckets to mounds and palisades often more than half a mile away. The volume and concentration of craft activity in shell, copper, clay, and other materials, both local and imported, suggests that specialized artisans provided the material foundation for Cahokia's exchange ties with other peoples. Although most Cahokians were buried in mass graves outside the palisades, their rulers were given special treatment. At a prominent location in Mound 72, the largest of Cahokia's platform mounds, a man had been

buried atop a platform of shell beads. Accompanying him were several group burials: fifty young women, aged 18 to 23, four men, and three men and three women, all encased in uncommonly large amounts of exotic materials. As with the Natchez Indians observed by the French in Louisiana, Cahokians appear to have sacrificed individuals to accompany their leaders in the afterlife. Cahokia was surrounded by nine smaller mound centers and several dozen villages from which it obtained much of its food and through which it conducted its water-borne commerce with other Mississippian centers in the Midwest and Southeast.

At the outset of the twelfth century, the center of production and exchange in the Southwest was in the basin of the San Juan River at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, where Anasazi culture achieved its most elaborate expression. A twelve-mile stretch of the canyon and its rim held twelve large planned towns on the north side and 200 to 350 apparently unplanned villages on the south. The total population was probably about 15,000. The towns consisted of 200 or more contiguous, multistoried rooms, along with numerous kivas (underground ceremonial areas), constructed of veneered masonry walls and log beams imported from upland areas nearly fifty miles distant. The rooms surrounded a central plaza with a great kiva. Villages typically had ten to twenty rooms that were decidedly smaller than those in the towns. Nearly all of Chaco Canyon's turquoise, shell, and other ornaments and virtually everything imported from Mesoamerica are found in the towns rather than the villages. Whether the goods were considered communal property or were the possessions of elites is uncertain, but either way the towns clearly had primacy. Villagers buried their dead near their residences, whereas town burial grounds were apparently located at greater distances, although only a very few of what must have been thousands of town burials have been located by archaeologists. Finally, and of particular importance in the arid environment of the region, the towns were located at the mouths of side canyons where they controlled the collection and distribution of water run-off.

The canyon was the core of an extensive network of at least seventy towns or "outliers," as they are termed in the archaeological literature, and 5,300 villages located as far as sixty miles from the canyon. Facilitating the movement of people and goods through this network was a system of roads radiating outward from the canyon in perfectly straight lines, turning into stairways or footholds rather than circumventing cliffs and other obstacles.

What archaeologists call the "Chaco phenomenon" was a multi-faceted network. Within the canyon, the towns controlled the distribution of precious water. The abundance of rooms reinforces the supposition

that they stored agricultural surpluses for redistribution, not only within the canyon but to the outliers. The architectural uniformity of towns throughout the system, the straight roads that linked them, and the proliferation of great kivas point to a complex of shared beliefs and rituals. Lithic remains indicate that the canyon imported most of the raw materials used for manufacturing utilitarian goods and ornamental objects from elsewhere in the Southwest. Particularly critical in this respect was turquoise, beads of which were traded to Mexico in return for copper bells and macaws and to the Gulf of California for marine shells. The Chaco phenomenon thus entailed the mobilization of labor for public works projects and food production, the control and distribution of water, the distribution of prestige goods of both local and exotic origin, and the control of exchange and redistribution both within and outside the network. In distinct contrast to Cahokia and other Mississippian societies, no evidence exists for the primacy of any single canyon town or for the primacy of certain individuals as paramount leaders.

Given the archaeological record, North American "prehistory" can hardly be characterized as a multiplicity of discrete microhistories. Fundamental to the social and economic patterns of even the earliest Paleo-Indian bands were exchanges that linked peoples across geographic, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. The effects of these links are apparent in the spread of raw materials and finished goods, of beliefs and ceremonies, and of techniques for food production and for manufacturing. By the twelfth century, some exchange networks had become highly formalized and centralized. Exchange constitutes an important key to conceptualizing American history before Columbus.

Although it departs from our familiar image of North American Indians, the historical pattern sketched so far is recognizable in the way it portrays societies "progressing" from small, egalitarian, autonomous communities to larger, more hierarchical, and centralized political aggregations with more complex economies. That image is likewise subverted when we examine the three centuries immediately preceding the arrival of Europeans. In both American Bottoms and the San Juan River basin, where twelfth-century populations were most concentrated, agriculture most productive, exchange most varied and voluminous, and political systems most complex and extensive, there were scarcely any inhabitants by the end of the fifteenth century. What happened and why?

Cahokia and other Mississippian societies in the Upper Midwest peaked during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Data from soil traces indicate that even then laborers were fortifying Cahokia's major earthworks against attack. At the same time, archaeologists

surmise, Cahokia was headed toward an ecological crisis: expanded settlement, accompanied by especially hot dry summers, exhausted the soil, depleted the supply of timber for building and fuel, and reduced the habitat of the game that supplemented their diet. By the end of the fourteenth century, Cahokia's inhabitants had dispersed over the surrounding countryside into small farming villages.

Cahokia's abandonment reverberated among other Mississippian societies in the Midwest. Fortified centers on the Mississippi River from the Arkansas River northward and on the Ohio River appear to have been strengthened by influxes of people from nearby villages but then abandoned, and signs from burials indicate a period of chronic, deadly warfare in the Upper Midwest. One archaeologist refers to the middle Mississippi Valley and environs during the fifteenth century as "the vacant quarter." A combination of ecological pressures and upheavals within the alliance that linked them appears to have doomed Cahokia and other midwestern Mississippian centers, leading the inhabitants to transform themselves into the village dwellers of the surrounding prairies and plains observed by French explorers three centuries later.

The upheavals may even have extended beyond the range of direct Mississippian influence to affect Iroquois and Hurons and other Iroquoian speakers of the lower Great Lakes region. These people had been moving from dispersed, riverside settlements to fortified, bluff-top villages over the course of several centuries; the process appears to have intensified in the fourteenth century, when it also led to the formation of the Iroquois and Huron confederacies. The Hurons developed fruitful relations with hunter-gatherers to the north, with whom they exchanged agricultural produce for meat and skins, and Iroquois ties with outsiders appear to have diminished except for small-scale interactions with coastal peoples to the south and east. Across the Northeast, political life was characterized by violence and other manifestations of intense competition. Whether the upheavals in exchange ties occasioned by the collapse of Cahokia were directly linked to the formation of the Iroquois and Huron confederacies, as [archaeologists] Dena Dincauze and Robert Hasenstab have suggested for the Iroquois, or were simply part of a larger process generated by the advent of farming and consequent demographic and political changes, the repercussions were still evident when Europeans began to frequent the region during the sixteenth century.

Violence and instability were also apparent across the Southeast. Unlike in the Midwest, where enormous power had been concentrated in a single center, southeastern Mississippian societies were characterized by more frequently shifting alliances and rivalries that prevented any

one center from becoming as powerful as Cahokia was from the tenth to thirteenth centuries. A pattern of instability prevailed that archaeologist David Anderson terms "cycling," in which certain centers emerged for a century or two to dominate regional alliances consisting of several chiefdoms and their tributary communities and then declined. Whole communities periodically shifted their locations in response to ecological or political pressures. Thus, for example, the great mound center at Etowah, in northwestern Georgia, lost its preeminence after 1400 and by the time of Hernando de Soto's arrival in 1540 had become a tributary of the nearby upstart chiefdom of Coosa.

From the mid-twelfth century through the fourteenth, the demographic map of the Southwest was also transformed as Chaco Canyon and other Anasazi and Hohokam centers were abandoned. Although southwesterners had made a practice of shifting their settlements when facing shortages of water and arable land and other consequences of climatic or demographic change, they had never done so on such a massive scale. Most archaeologists agree that the abandonments followed changes in the regional cycle of rainfall and drought, so that agricultural surpluses probably proved inadequate. They point to signs that the centralized systems lost their ability to mobilize labor, redistribute goods, and coordinate religious ceremonies and that such loss was followed by outmigration to surrounding and upland areas where people farmed less intensively while increasing their hunting and gathering. Trade between the Southwest and Mesoamerica was disrupted at the same time, though whether as a cause or an effect of the abandonments is unclear.

Most Anasazi peoples dispersed in small groups, joining others to form new communities in locations with sufficient rainfall. These communities are what we know today as the southwestern pueblos, extending from Hopi villages in Arizona to those on the Rio Grande. These dispersals and convergences of peoples reinforced an emerging complex of beliefs, art, and ceremonies relating to kachinas—spirits believed to have influence in both bringing rain and fostering cooperation among villagers. Given their effort to forge new communities under conditions of severe drought, it is not surprising that southwestern farmers placed great emphasis on kachinas. The eastward shift of much of the southwestern population also led to new patterns of trade in which recently arrived Athapaskan speakers (later known as Apaches and Navajos) brought bison meat and hides and other products from the southern Great Plains to semiannual trade fairs at Taos, Pecos, and Picuris pueblos in exchange for maize, cotton blankets, obsidian, turquoise, and ceramics as well as shells from the Gulf of California. By the time of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's *entrada* in 1540, new ties of

exchange and interdependency bound eastern Pueblos, Athapaskans, and Caddoan speakers on the Plains.

When Europeans reached North America, then, the continent's demographic and political map was in a state of profound flux. A major factor was the collapse of the great centers at Cahokia and Chaco Canyon and elsewhere in the Midwest and Southwest. Although there were significant differences between these highly centralized societies, each ran up against the capacity of the land or other resources to sustain it. This is not to argue for a simple ecological determinism for, although environmental fluctuations played a role, the severe strains in each region resulted above all from a series of human choices that had brought about unprecedented concentrations of people and power. Having repudiated those choices and dispersed, midwestern Mississippians and Anasazis formed new communities in which they retained kinship, ceremonial, and other traditions antedating these complex societies. At the same time, these new communities and neighboring ones sought to flourish in their new political and environmental settings by establishing, and in some cases endeavoring to control, new exchange networks.

Such combinations of continuity and change, persistence and adaptability, arose from concrete historical experiences rather than a timeless tradition. The remainder of this article indicates some of the ways that both the deeply rooted imperatives of reciprocity and exchange and the recent legacies of competition and upheaval informed North American history as Europeans began to make their presence felt.

Discussion of the transition from pre- to postcontact times must begin with the sixteenth century, when Indians and Europeans met and interacted in a variety of settings. When not slighting the era altogether, historians have viewed it as one of discovery or exploration, citing the achievements of notable Europeans in either anticipating or failing to anticipate the successful colonial enterprises of the seventeenth century. Recently, however, a number of scholars have been integrating information from European accounts with the findings of archaeologists to produce a much fuller picture of this critical period in North American history.

The Southeast was the scene of the most formidable attempts at colonization during the sixteenth century, primarily by Spain. Yet in spite of several expeditions to the interior and the undertaking of an ambitious colonizing and missionary effort, extending from St. Augustine over much of the Florida peninsula and north to Chesapeake Bay, the Spanish retained no permanent settlements beyond St. Augustine itself at the end of the century. Nevertheless, their explorers and

missionaries opened the way for the spread of smallpox and other epidemic diseases over much of the area south of the Chesapeake and east of the Mississippi.

The most concerted and fruitful efforts of the interdisciplinary scholarship entail the linking of southeastern societies that are known archaeologically with societies described in European documents. For example, Charles Hudson, David Hally, and others have demonstrated the connections between a group of archaeological sites in northern Georgia and the Tennessee Valley and what sixteenth-century Spanish observers referred to as Coosa and its subordinate provinces. A Mississippian archaeological site in northwestern Georgia known as Little Egypt consists of the remains of the town of Coosa; the town was the capital of the province ("chiefdom" to the archaeologists) of the same name, containing several nearby towns, and this province/chiefdom in turn dominated a network of at least five other chiefdoms in a "paramount chiefdom." These conclusions would not have been as definitive if based on either documentary or archaeological evidence alone.<sup>2</sup>

Coosa, as previously noted, attained regional supremacy during the fifteenth century, a phase in the apparently typical process whereby paramount chiefdoms rose and fell in the Mississippian Southeast. But Coosa's decline was far more precipitate than others because Spanish diseases ravaged the province, forcing the survivors to abandon the town and move southward. By the end of the sixteenth century, several new provincial centers emerged in what are now Alabama and western Georgia, but without the mounds and paramount chiefs of their predecessors. As with earlier declines of paramount chiefdoms, a center had declined and, out of the resulting power vacuum, a new formation emerged. What differed in this case were the external source of the decline, its devastating effects, and the inability or unwillingness of the survivors to concentrate power and deference in the hands of paramount chiefs. At the same time, the absence of Spanish or other European colonizers from the late sixteenth century to late seventeenth meant that the natives had a sustained period of time in which to recover and regroup. When English traders encountered the descendants of refugees from Coosa and its neighbors late in the seventeenth century, they labeled them "Creek."

Patricia Galloway has established similar connections between Mississippian societies farther west and the Choctaws of the eighteenth century. She argues that the well-known site of Moundville in Alabama and a second site on the Pearl River in Mississippi were the centers of chiefdoms from which most Choctaws were descended. She argues that, unlike Coosa, these centers were probably declining in power before the onset of disease in the 1540s hastened the process. Like the Creeks, the Choctaws were a multilingual, multiethnic society in which individual

villages were largely autonomous although precedents for greater coalescence were available if conditions, such as the European presence, seemed to require it.<sup>3</sup>

As in the Southeast, Spanish colonizers in the sixteenth-century Southwest launched several ambitious military and missionary efforts, hoping to extend New Spain's domain northward and to discover additional sources of wealth. The best-documented encounters of Spanish with Pueblos – most notably those of Coronado's expedition (1540–1542) – ended in violence and failure for the Spanish who, despite vows to proceed peacefully, violated Pueblo norms of reciprocity by insisting on excessive tribute or outright submission. In addition, the Spanish had acquired notoriety among the Pueblos as purveyors of epidemic diseases, religious missions, and slaving expeditions inflicted on Indians to the south, in what is now northern Mexico.

The Spanish also affected patterns of exchange throughout the Southwest. Indians resisting the spread of Spanish rule to northern Mexico stole horses and other livestock, some of which they traded to neighbors. By the end of the sixteenth century, a few Indians on the periphery of the Southwest were riding horses, anticipating the combination of theft and exchange that would spread horses to native peoples throughout the region and, still later, the Plains and the Southeast. In the meantime, some Navajos and Apaches moved near the Rio Grande Valley, strengthening ties with certain pueblos that were reinforced when inhabitants of those pueblos sought refuge among them in the face or wake of Spanish *entradas*.

Yet another variation on the theme of Indian-European contacts in the sixteenth century was played out in the Northeast, where Iroquoian-speaking villagers on the Mississippian periphery and Archaic hunter-gatherers still further removed from developments in the interior met Europeans of several nationalities. At the outset of the century, Spanish and Portuguese explorers enslaved several dozen Micmacs and other Indians from the Nova Scotia-Gulf of St. Lawrence area. Three French expeditions to the St. Lawrence itself in the 1530s and 1540s followed the Spanish pattern by alienating most Indians encountered and ending in futility. Even as these hostile contacts were taking place, fishermen, whalers, and other Europeans who visited the area regularly had begun trading with natives. As early as the 1520s, Abenakis on the coast of Maine and Micmacs were trading the furs of beavers and other animals for European goods of metal and glass. By the 1540s, specialized fur traders, mostly French, frequented the coast as far south as the Chesapeake; by the 1550s or soon thereafter, French traders rendezvoused regularly with Indians along the shores of upper New England, the Maritimes, and Quebec and at Tadoussac on the St. Lawrence.

What induced Indians to go out of their way to trap beaver and trade the skins for glass beads, mirrors, copper kettles, and other goods? Throughout North America since Paleo-Indian times, exchange in the Northeast was the means by which people maintained and extended their social, cultural, and spiritual horizons as well as acquired items considered supernaturally powerful. Members of some coastal Indian groups later recalled how the first Europeans they saw, with their facial hair and strange clothes and traveling in their strange boats, seemed like supernatural figures. Although soon disabused of such notions, these Indians and many more inland placed special value on the glass beads and other trinkets offered by the newcomers. Recent scholarship on Indians' motives in this earliest stage of the trade indicates that they regarded such objects as the equivalents of the quartz, mica, shell, and other sacred substances that had formed the heart of long-distance exchange in North America for millennia and that they regarded [them] as sources of physical and spiritual wellbeing, on earth and in the afterlife. Indians initially altered and wore many of the utilitarian goods they received, such as iron axe heads and copper pots, rather than use them for their intended purposes. Moreover, even though the new objects might pass through many hands, they more often than not ended up in graves, presumably for their possessors to use in the afterlife. Finally, the archaeological findings make clear that shell and native copper predominated over the new objects in sixteenth-century exchanges, indicating that European trade did not suddenly trigger a massive craving for the objects themselves. While northeastern Indians recognized Europeans as different from themselves, they interacted with them and their materials in ways that were consistent with their own customs and beliefs.

By the late sixteenth century, the effects of European trade began to overlap with the effects of earlier upheavals in the northeastern interior. Sometime between Jacques Cartier's final departure in 1543 and Samuel de Champlain's arrival in 1603, the Iroquoian-speaking inhabitants of Hochelaga and Stadacona (modern Montreal and Quebec City) abandoned their communities. The communities were crushed militarily, and the survivors dispersed among both Iroquois and Hurons. Whether the perpetrators of these dispersals were Iroquois or Huron is a point of controversy, but either way the St. Lawrence communities appear to have been casualties of the rivalry, at least a century old, between the two confederations as each sought to position itself vis à-vis the French. The effect, if not the cause, of the dispersals was the Iroquois practice of attacking antagonists who denied them direct access to trade goods; this is consistent with Iroquois actions during the preceding two centuries and the century that followed.

The sudden availability of many more European goods, the absorption of many refugees from the St. Lawrence, and the heightening of tensions with the Iroquois help to explain the movement of most outlying Huron communities to what is now the Simcoe Country area of Ontario during the 1580s. This geographic concentration strengthened their confederacy and gave it the form it had when allied with New France during the first half of the seventeenth century. Having formerly existed at the outer margins of an arena of exchange centered in Cahokia, the Hurons and Iroquois now faced a new source of goods and power to the east.

The diverse native societies encountered by Europeans as they began to settle North America permanently during the seventeenth century were not static isolates lying outside the ebb and flow of human history. Rather, they were products of a complex set of historical forces, both local and wide-ranging, both deeply rooted and of recent origin. Although their lives and worldviews were shaped by long-standing traditions of reciprocity and spiritual power, the people in these communities were also accustomed – contrary to popular myths about inflexible Indians – to economic and political flux and to absorbing new peoples (both allies and antagonists), objects, and ideas, including those originating in Europe. Such combinations of tradition and innovation continued to shape Indians' relations with Europeans, even as the latter's visits became permanent.

The establishment of lasting European colonies, beginning with New Mexico in 1598, began a phase in the continent's history that eventually resulted in the displacement of Indians to the economic, political, and cultural margins of a new order. But during the interim natives and colonizers entered into numerous relationships in which they exchanged material goods and often supported one another diplomatically or militarily against common enemies. These relations combined native and European modes of exchange. While much of the scholarly literature emphasizes the subordination and dependence of Indians in these circumstances, Indians as much as Europeans dictated the form and content of their early exchanges and alliances. Much of the protocol and ritual surrounding such intercultural contacts was rooted in indigenous kinship obligations and gift exchanges, and Indian consumers exhibited decided preferences for European commodities that satisfied social, spiritual, and aesthetic values. Similarly, Indians' long-range motives and strategies in their alliances with Europeans were frequently rooted in older patterns of alliance and rivalry with regional neighbors. Such continuities can be glimpsed through a brief consideration of the early colonial-era histories of the Five Nations Iroquois in the

Northeast, the Creeks in the Southeast, and the Rio Grande Pueblos in the Southwest.

Post-Mississippian and sixteenth-century patterns of antagonism between the Iroquois and their neighbors to the north and west persisted, albeit under altered circumstances, during the seventeenth century when France established its colony on the St. Lawrence and allied itself with Hurons and other Indians. France aimed to extract maximum profits from the fur trade, and it immediately recognized the Iroquois as the major threat to that goal. In response, the Iroquois turned to the Dutch in New Netherland for guns and other trade goods while raiding New France's Indian allies for the thicker northern pelts that brought higher prices than those in their own country (which they exhausted by midcentury) and for captives to replace those from their own ranks who had died from epidemics or in wars. During the 1640s, the Iroquois replaced raids with full-scale military assaults (the so-called Beaver Wars) on Iroquoian-speaking communities in the lower Great Lakes, absorbing most of the survivors as refugees or captives. All the while, the Iroquois elaborated a vision of their confederation, which had brought harmony within their own ranks, as bringing peace to all peoples of the region. For the remainder of the century, the Five Nations fought a grueling and costly series of wars against the French and their Indian allies in order to gain access to the pelts and French goods circulating in lands to the north and west.

Meanwhile, the Iroquois were also adapting to the growing presence of English colonists along the Atlantic seaboard. After the English supplanted the Dutch in New York in 1664, Iroquois diplomats established relations with the proprietary governor, Sir Edmund Andros, in a treaty known as the Covenant Chain. The Covenant Chain was an elaboration of the Iroquois' earlier treaty arrangements with the Dutch, but, whereas the Iroquois had termed the Dutch relationship a chain of iron, they referred to the one with the English as a chain of silver. The shift in metaphors was appropriate, for what had been strictly an economic connection was now a political one in which the Iroquois acquired power over other New York Indians. After 1677, the Covenant Chain was expanded to include several English colonies, most notably Massachusetts and Maryland, along with those colonies' subject Indians. The upshot of these arrangements was that the Iroquois cooperated with their colonial partners in subduing and removing subject Indians who impeded settler expansion. The Mohawks in particular played a vital role in the New England colonies' suppression of the Indian uprising known as King Philip's War and in moving the Susquehannocks away from the expanding frontier of settlement in the Chesapeake after Bacon's Rebellion.

For the Iroquois, such a policy helped expand their "Tree of Peace" among Indians while providing them with buffers against settler encroachment around their homelands. The major drawback in the arrangement proved to be the weakness of English military assistance against the French. This inadequacy, and the consequent suffering experienced by the Iroquois during two decades of war after 1680, finally drove the Five Nations to make peace with the French and their Indian allies in the Grand Settlement of 1701. Together, the Grand Settlement and Covenant Chain provided the Iroquois with the peace and security, the access to trade goods, and the dominant role among northeastern Indians they had long sought. That these arrangements in the long run served to reinforce rather than deter English encroachment on Iroquois lands and autonomy should not obscure their pre-European roots and their importance in shaping colonial history in the Northeast.

In the southeastern interior, [the archaeologist] Vernon Knight argues, descendants of refugees from Coosa and neighboring communities regrouped in clusters of Creek *talwas* (villages), each dominated by a large talwa and its "great chief." In the late seventeenth century, these latter-day chiefdom/provinces forged alliances with English traders, first from Virginia and then from Carolina, who sought to trade guns and other manufactured goods for deerskins and Indian slaves. In so doing, the Creeks ensured that they would be regarded by the English as clients rather than as commodities. The deerskin trade proved to be a critical factor in South Carolina's early economic development, and the trade in Indian slaves significantly served England's imperial ambitions vis-à-vis Spain in Florida. After 1715, the several Creek alliances acted in concert as a confederacy – the Creek Nation – on certain occasions. As a result, they achieved a measure of success in playing off these powers and maintaining neutrality in their conflicts with one another. While much differentiates Creek political processes in the colonial period from those of the late Mississippian era, there are strong elements of continuity in the transformation of Mississippian chiefdoms into great Creek talwas.

In the Southwest, the institution of Spanish colonial rule on the Rio Grande after 1598 further affected exchange relations between Pueblo Indians and nearby Apaches and Navajos. By imposing heavy demands for tribute in the form of corn, the Spanish prevented Pueblo peoples from trading surplus produce with their nonfarming neighbors. In order to obtain the produce on which they had come to depend, Apaches and Navajos staged deadly raids on some pueblos, leaving the inhabitants dependent on the Spanish for protection. In retaliation, Spanish soldiers captured Apaches and Navajos whom they sold as slaves to

their countrymen to the south. From the beginning, the trading pueblos of Pecos, Picuris, and Taos most resented Spanish control and strongly resisted the proselytizing of Franciscan missionaries. From the late 1660s, drought and disease, intensified Apache and Navajo raids, and the severity of Spanish rule led more and more Indians from all pueblos to question the advantages of Christianity and to renew their ties to their indigenous religious traditions. Spanish persecution of native religious leaders and their backsliding followers precipitated the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, in which the trading Pueblos played a leading role and which was actively supported by some Navajos and Apaches.

When the Spanish reimposed their rule during the 1690s, they tolerated traditional Indian religion rather than trying to extirpate it, and they participated in interregional trade fairs at Taos and other villages. The successful incorporation of Pueblo Indians as loyal subjects proved vital to New Mexico's survival as a colony and, more generally, to Spain's imperial presence in the Southwest during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

As significant as is the divide separating pre- and post-Columbian North American history, it is not the stark gap suggested by the distinction between prehistory and history. For varying periods of time after their arrival in North America, Europeans adapted to the social and political environments they found, including the fluctuating ties of reciprocity and interdependence as well as rivalry, that characterized those environments. They had little choice but to enter in and participate if they wished to sustain their presence. Eventually, one route to success proved to be their ability to insert themselves as regional powers in new networks of exchange and alliance that arose to supplant those of the Mississippians, Anasazis, and others.

To assert such continuities does not minimize the radical transformations entailed in Europeans' colonization of the continent and its indigenous peoples. Arising in Cahokia's wake, new centers at Montreal, Fort Orange/Albany, Charleston, and elsewhere permanently altered the primary patterns of exchange in eastern North America. The riverine system that channeled exchange in the interior of the continent gave way to one in which growing quantities of goods arrived from, and were directed to, coastal peripheries and ultimately Europe. In the Southwest, the Spanish revived Anasazi links with Mesoamerica at some cost to newer ties between the Rio Grande Pueblos and recently arrived, non-farming Athapaskan speakers. More generally, European colonizers brought a complex of demographic and ecological advantages, most notably epidemic diseases and their own immunity to them, that utterly devastated Indian communities; ideologies and beliefs in their cultural

and spiritual superiority to native peoples and their entitlement to natives' lands; and economic, political, and military systems organized for the engrossment of Indian lands and the subordination or suppression of Indian peoples.

Europeans were anything but uniformly successful in realizing their goals, but the combination of demographic and ecological advantages and imperial intentions, along with the Anglo-Iroquois Covenant Chain, enabled land-hungry colonists from New England to the Chesapeake to break entirely free of ties of dependence on Indians before the end of the seventeenth century. Their successes proved to be only the beginning of a new phase of Indian-European relations. By the mid-eighteenth century, the rapid expansion of land-based settlement in the English colonies had sundered older ties of exchange and alliance linking natives and colonizers nearly everywhere east of the Appalachians, driving many Indians west and reducing those who remained to a scattering of politically powerless enclaves in which Indian identities were nurtured in isolation. Meanwhile, the colonizers threatened to extend this new mode of Indian relations across the Appalachians. An old world, rooted in indigenous exchange, was giving way to one in which Native Americans had no certain place.

## Notes

- 1 Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York, 1978), p. 3.
- 2 Charles Hudson et al., "Coosa: A Chiefdom in the Sixteenth-Century Southeastern United States," *American Antiquity*, 50 (1985); David J. Hally, "The Archaeological Reality of de Soto's Coosa," in D. H. Thomas, ed., *Columbian Consequences*, vol. 2: *Archaeological and Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Borderlands East* (Washington, D.C., 1990); Robert L. Blakely, ed., *The King Site: Continuity and Contact in Sixteenth-Century Georgia* (Athens, GA, 1988); Hudson, "A Spanish-Coosa Alliance in Sixteenth-Century Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 72 (1988), 599-626; Hudson, *The Juan Pardo Expeditions: Exploration of the Carolinas and Tennessee, 1566-1568* (Washington, D.C., 1990), 101-9; Hally, "The Chiefdom of Coosa," in Charles Hudson and Carmen Chaves Tesser, eds., *The Forgotten Centuries: Indians and Europeans in the American South, 1525-1704* (Athens, GA, 1994), 227-53.
- 3 Patricia Galloway, "Confederacy as a Solution to Chiefdom Dissolution: Historical Evidence in the Choctaw Case," in Hudson and Tesser, eds., *Forgotten Centuries*, 393-420.

## Documents

H. S. Halbert, a teacher and missionary among the Choctaws in the nineteenth century, collected and later published accounts of Choctaw history and oral traditions. Ordinarily, the work of historians would be considered a secondary source, not a primary document, and indeed Halbert read widely in such primary documents as Spanish explorers' reports on their expeditions through the Southeast. However, Halbert's writings qualify as an original source for several reasons. He conducted oral histories with several Choctaws and recorded valuable firsthand accounts of what nineteenth-century Choctaws knew of Nanih Wayah, a mound in Mississippi which the Choctaws regarded as sacred. Halbert also visited the site of Nanih Wayah and described what the mound looked like in the late nineteenth century.

Since Halbert's main purpose was to study the ancient history of the state of Mississippi, he could also be considered a primary source on how the nineteenth-century American public constructed American history and what role ancient American civilizations were to play in that history. Just a few decades before, American scientists and archaeologists commonly speculated that the thousands of mysterious mounds in Ohio, the Mississippi Valley, and the Southeast were signs of a "civilized," white race having previously occupied North America. In the spirit of Lewis Henry Morgan and Franz Boas, Halbert sought to learn more about Indian cultures and achievements for their own sake. However, also in the spirit of Morgan and Boas, Halbert described Nanih Wayah as an abandoned ruin of a once thriving people, disappearing through the destructive – but also by implication constructive and progressive – actions of the plow.

### *Nanih Waiya, The Sacred Mound of the Choctaws*

H. S. Halbert

As Nanih Waiya is so often referred to in the folklore and traditions of the Choctaws, the writer of this paper has deemed it not amiss to give some account of this noted mound and, in connection therewith, some of the legends with which it is inseparably associated.

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Halbert, H. S. 'Nanih Waiya, The Sacred Mound of the Choctaws.' *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* 2 (1899): 223–34.

Nanah Waiya is situated on the west side of Nanah Waiya Creek, about fifty yards from it, in the southern part of Winston County, and about four hundred yards from the Neshoba County line. The mound is oblong in shape, lying northwest and southeast, and about forty feet in height. Its base covers about an acre. Its summit, which is flat, has an area of one-fourth of an acre. The mound stands on the southeastern edge of a circular rampart, which is about a mile and a half in circumference. In using the word "circular," reference is made to the original form of the rampart, about one-half of which is utterly obliterated by the plow, leaving only a semi-circle. This rampart is not or rather was not, a continuous circle, so to speak, as it has along at intervals, a number of vacant places or gaps, ranging from twenty to fifty yards wide. According to Indian tradition, there were originally eighteen parts or sections of the rampart, with the same number of gaps. Ten of these sections still remain, ranging from fifty to one hundred and fifty yards in length. All the sections near the mound have long since been leveled by the plow, and in other places some of the sections have been much reduced. But on the north, where the rampart traverses a primeval forest it is still five feet high and twenty feet broad at the base. The process of obliteration has been very great since 1877, when the writer first saw Nanah Waiya. Some of the sections that could then be clearly traced in the field on the west have now utterly disappeared. About two hundred and fifty yards north of Nanah Waiya is a small mound, evidently a burial mound, as can be safely stated from the numerous fragments of human bones that have been exhumed from it by the plow and the hoe. The great number of stone relics, mostly broken, scattered for hundreds of yards around Nanah Waiya, shows that it was the site of pre-historic habitations. In addition to this, the bullets and other relics of European manufacture evidence the continuity of occupancy down within the historic period. The magnitude of these ancient works - the mound and the rampart - together with the legendary traditions connected with them, leads one irresistibly to the conviction that this locality was the great center of the Choctaw population during the pre-historic period. It should here be stated that the symmetry of the mound has been somewhat marred by a tunnel which was cut into it in the summer of 1896 by some *treasure-seekers*, who vainly hoped to unearth some wonderful bonanza from out the deep bosom of Nanah Waiya.

The name Nanah Waiya signifies Bending Hill. *Warrior*, the absurd spelling and pronunciation should be repudiated by the map and the history maker. The adjective *Waiya* signifies "bending, leaning over," but it is difficult to see the appropriateness of the term as applied to the mound. According to the conjecture of the writer, the term was originally applied to the circular rampart, which the Choctaws may have

considered a kind of *bending hill*. And in process of time the name could have become so extended as to be applied to the mound and rampart conjointly, and ultimately restricted to the mound alone, as is now the case in popular usage.

According to the classification of the archæologists, Nanih Waiya is a pyramidal mound, which kind of mounds is found almost exclusively in the Gulf States. The chroniclers of De Soto's expedition speak constantly of the mounds, and of these writers, Garcilaso de la Vega tells us exactly how and why they were made. According to his statement, in building a town, the natives first erected a mound two or three pikes in height, the summit of which was made large enough for twelve, fifteen or twenty houses to lodge the cacique and his attendants. At the foot of the mound was laid off the public square, which was proportioned to the size of the town. Around the square the leading men had their houses, whilst the cabins of the common people stood around the other side of the mound. From the "lay" of the land, the writer is satisfied that the public square at Nanih Waiya was on the north, between the mound and the small burial mound. In regard to the rampart, it was, no doubt, surmounted by palisades, as De Soto's writers particularly describe the palisaded walls, which surrounded the Indian towns. As to the gaps in the rampart, the writer is convinced that these gaps were left designedly as places for the erection of wooden forts or towers, as additional protections to the town. The Knight of Elvas describes the town of Pachaha as being "very great, walled, and beset with towers, and many loop-holes were in the towers and the wall." La Vega mentions the towers made at intervals of fifty paces apart in the stockade wall of Maubila, each tower capable of holding eight men. Dupratz describing the circular stockade forts which he had seen among the Southern Indians, expressly states that "at every forty paces a circular tower juts out." Other statements from early writers could be given showing that wooden towers were built along at intervals in the stockade walls that surrounded the ancient towns of the Southern Indians. These statements, no doubt, give us the correct solution to the mystery of the gaps in the earthen rampart at Nanih Waiya.

While there can be no doubt but Nanih Waiya was the residence of the cacique and his attendants, in accordance with the statements of La Vega, other statements induce the belief that the summit of this mound was sometimes used as a place of sun-worship. Sun-worship, it should here be especially noted, was not performed as an isolated ceremony, so to speak, but came in as part of the programme in the transaction of all tribal business, both civil and military. The Choctaws were sun-worshippers, as were all the other branches of the Choctaw-Muscogee family. They regarded the sun as the type or essence of the Great Spirit. And as the Sun,

or rather Sun-God, warms, animates and vivifies everything, he is the Master or Father of Life, or, to use the Choctaw expression, "*Aba Inki*," "the Father above." In like manner, according to their belief, as everything here below came originally from the earth, she is the mother of creation. Sun-worship, it may here be stated, prevailed to some extent, though in a much attenuated form, as late as seventy years ago among the Choctaws, as is evidenced by the actions of the Choctaws of that day during an eclipse of the sun. Even at the present day some faint traces of this sun-worship may be seen in the antics of a Choctaw prophet at a ball play. The chroniclers of De Soto's expedition give us frequent hints as to the prevalence of sun-worship among the Indian tribes of the countries which the Spanish army traversed. Two centuries later, William Bartram, in his description of the Creek rotunda, which was erected upon an artificial mound, gives an elaborate account of the ceremonies in the rotunda connected with partaking of the black drink. He states that the chief first puffed a few whiffs from the sacred pipe, blowing the whiffs ceremoniously upward towards the sun, or, as it was generally supposed, to the Great Spirit, and then puffing the smoke from the pipe towards the four cardinal points. The pipe was then carried to different persons and smoked by them in turn.

Imagination, perhaps, would not err, if going back a few centuries, we could depict scenes similar to this as often enacted upon the flat summit of Nanih Waiya. And, perhaps, the superstitious reverence which the Choctaws have ever manifested towards this mound may be a dim traditionary reminiscence of its once having been a great tribal center of solar worship. The aboriginal mind, in sun-worship, from viewing the sun as the Father of Life, as without the light and warmth of the sun nothing would spring into existence, no doubt instinctively turned to the earth as the Mother of Creation. If there was a father there must be a mother. In the course of time, what more natural that the pre-historic villagers living at the base of Nanih Waiya, with its tremendous pile ever looming up before their eyes, should finally come to regard it as the mother of their race. As far back as history and tradition run, Nanih Waiya has ever thus been regarded by the untutored Choctaws of Mississippi. During the various emigrations from the State, many Choctaws declared that they would never go west and abandon their mother; and that just as long as Nanih Waiya stood, they intended to stay and live in the land of their nativity.

There is another evidence that Nanih Waiya was a great national center during the pre-historic period. The ravages of civilization have still spared some traces of two broad, deeply worn roads or highways connected with the mound, in which now stand large oak trees. The remnant of one of these highways, several hundred yards long, can be seen on the east side of the creek, running toward the southeast. The other is on the west side of

the creek, the traces nearest the mound being at the northeastern part of the rampart, thence running towards the north. Many years ago this latter road was traced by an old citizen of Winston county full twenty miles to the north until it was lost in Noxubee swamp, in the northeastern part of Winston County. These are the sole traces of the many highways, that no doubt, in pre-historic times, centered at Nanih Waiya.

Nanih Waiya is a prominent feature in the migration legend of the Choctaws, of which there are several versions. While the versions all agree, to some extent, in their main features, as the immigration from the west or northwest, the prophet and his sacred pole, and the final settlement at Nanih Waiya, there is still much diversity in the respective narratives in regard to the details and other minutiae. The most circumstantial narrative is that of the Rev. Alfred Wright, published in an issue of the *Missionary Herald* of 1828. The version given in Colonel Claiborne's "*Mississippi*," pages 483, 484, is a very unsatisfactory version. The writer of this paper wrote this version in 1877, and sent it to Colonel Claiborne, who inserted it in his history. It was taken down from the lips of Mr. Jack Henry, an old citizen of Okitibbeha County, he stating that he had received it in early life from an Irishman, who had once lived among the Choctaws and who had heard the legend from an old Choctaw woman. As will be seen, the legend was transmitted through several memories and mouths before being finally recorded in printer's ink. It came not direct from Choctaw lips, and no doubt, was unconsciously colored, or its details imperfectly remembered in its transmission through the memories of the two white men. The version which is given below came direct from the lips of the Rev. Peter Folsom, a Choctaw from the nation west, who was employed in 1882 by the Baptists of Mississippi to labor as a missionary among the Mississippi Choctaws. Mr. Folsom stated that soon after finishing his education in Kentucky, one day in 1833, he visited Nanih Waiya with his father and while at the mound his father related to him the migration legend of his people, which according to Mr. Folsom, runs as follows:

In ancient days the ancestors of the Choctaws and the Chickasaws lived in a far western country, under the rule of two brothers, named Chahta and Chikasa. In process of time, their population becoming very numerous, they found it difficult to procure substance in that land. Their prophets thereupon announced that far to the east was a country of fertile soil and full of game, where they could live in ease and plenty. The entire population resolved to make a journey eastward in search of that happy land. In order more easily to procure subsistence on their route, the people marched in several divisions of a day's journey apart. A great prophet marched at their head, bearing a pole, which, on camping at the close of each day, he planted erect in the earth, in front of the

camp. Every morning the pole was always seen leaning in the direction they were to travel that day. After the lapse of many moons, they arrived one day at Nanih Waiya. The prophet planted his pole at the base of the mound. The next morning the pole was seen standing erect and stationary. This was interpreted as an omen from the Great Spirit that the long sought for land was at last found. It so happened, the very day that the party camped at Nanih Waiya that a party under Chikasa crossed the creek and camped on its east side. That night a great rain fell, and it rained several days. In consequence of this all the low lands were inundated, and Nanih Waiya Creek and other tributaries of Pearl River were rendered impassable.

After the subsidence of the waters, messengers were sent across the creek to bid Chikasa's party return, as the oracular pole had proclaimed that the long sought-for land was found and the mound was the center of the land. Chikasa's party, however, regardless of the weather, had proceeded on their journey, and the rain having washed all traces of their march from off the grass, the messengers were unable to follow them up and so returned to camp. Meanwhile, the other divisions in the rear arrived at Nanih Waiya, and learned that here was the center of their new home, their long pilgrimage was at last finished. Chikasa's party, after their separation from their brethren under Chahta, moved on to the Tombigbee, and eventually became a separate nationality. In this way the Choctaws and the Chickasaws became two separate, though kindred nations.

Such is Mr. Folsom's version of the Choctaw migration legend. This national legend is now utterly forgotten by the modern Choctaws living in Mississippi. All, however, look upon Nanih Waiya as the birthplace and cradle of their race. She is "ishki chito," "the great mother." In the very center of the mound, they say, ages ago, the Great Spirit created the first Choctaws, and through a hole or cave, they crawled forth into the light of day. Some say that only one pair was created, but others say that many pairs were created. Old Hopahkitubbe (Hopakitobi), who died several years ago in Neshoba County, was wont to say that after coming forth from the mound, the freshly-made Choctaws were very wet and moist, and that the Great Spirit stacked them along on the rampart, as on a clothes line, so that the sun could dry them.

Soon after the creation, the Great Spirit divided the Choctaws into two "iksa," the "Kashapa Okla," and the "Okla in Holahta," or "Hattak in Holahta." Stationing one iksa on the north and the other on the west side of the sacred mound, the Great Spirit then gave them the law of marriage which they were forever to keep inviolate. This law was that children were to belong to the iksa of their mother, and that one must always marry into the opposite iksa. By this law a man belonging to the

Kashapa Okla must marry a woman of the Okla in Hohahta. The children of this marriage belong, of course, to the iksa of their mother, and whenever they marry it must be into the opposite iksa. In like manner a man belonging to the Okla in Hohahta must marry a woman of the Kashapa Okla, and the children of this marriage from Kashapa Okla must marry into the Okla in Hohahta. Such was the Choctaw law of marriage, given, they say, by Divine authority at Nanih Waiya just after the creation of their race. The iksa lived promiscuously throughout the nation, but as every one knew to which iksa he belonged, no matrimonial mistake could possibly occur. This iksa division of the Choctaws still exists in Mississippi, but is slowly dying out under the influence of Christianity, education, and other results of contact with the white race.

The Choctaws, after their creation lived for a long time upon the spontaneous productions of the earth until at last maize was discovered, as they say, on the south side of Bogue Chito, a few miles distant from Nanih Waiya. There are several versions of the corn-finding myth, in all of which a crow and a child are main factors. Some of the versions state particularly that the crow came from the south, "Oka mahli imma minti tok." Other versions are silent on this point. The version here given is a translation by the writer of a version which was written down for him in the Choctaw language by Ilaishtubbee (Ilaishtobi), a Six Towns Indian. It is as follows:

A long time ago it thus happened. In the very beginning a crow got a single grain of corn from across the great water, brought it to this country and gave it to an orphan child, who was playing in the yard. The child named it *tauchi*, (corn). He planted it in the yard. When the corn was growing up, the child's elders merely had it swept around. But the child, wishing to have his own way, hoed it hilled it, and laid it by. When this single grain of corn grew up and matured, it made two ears of corn. And in this way the ancestors of the Choctaws discovered corn.

"The great water" referred to in the above myth is the Gulf of Mexico. "Okachito," "great water," is the term invariably applied by the Mississippi Choctaws to the Gulf. If there are any traces of historic truth in the myth, we may infer that it contains a tradition of the introduction of corn into the Choctaw country across the Gulf of Mexico, from South America or from the West Indies. Professor J. W. Harshberger, in his monograph on the nativity and distribution of maize concludes that its earliest home was in Central of America, whence it spread north and south over the continents of America. In his map in which he gives the lines of travel by which maize was distributed, he has two lines in South America. One of these lines extends southward between the Andes and

the Pacific as far down as Chili. The second line, after leaving the Isthmus of Panama, goes eastward along the north coast of South America until it enters Venezuela. From Venezuela, it goes to the West Indies and from the West Indies to Florida. This line of maize distribution harmonizes with the Choctaw tradition embodied in the myth that maize came into the Choctaw country from across "the great water," that is, from across the Gulf of Mexico. We learn from the early Spanish writers that there was intercommunication between the natives of Cuba and those of Florida. This being the case, corn could have been introduced among the pre-historic peoples of the Gulf states, across the Gulf, directly or indirectly from South America. To add completeness to the matter, according to Professor Harshberger's map, maize was introduced among the ancient peoples of the States lying north of the Gulf States by a line of distribution running from northern Mexico. It may be still further added that maize was certainly introduced into the Gulf States and into the Mississippi Valley before the beginning of the mound-building era, for only a sedentary agricultural people were capable of building the mounds.

Returning from this digression, the question may be asked, when was Nanih Waiya built, who were its builders, and how long was it in building? As to the last question, it would be a moderate estimate to say that it would take two Irishmen, equipped with spades and wheelbarrows, full ten years of constant toil to build Nanih Waiya and its rampart. The evidence shows that the earth used in making the mound was carried at least one hundred yards - an additional amount of toil that must be taken into consideration in making an estimate of the time consumed in building Nanih Waiya. Furthermore, it can be safely stated that the two supposed Irishmen could accomplish as much in one hour in the way of dirt-piling as three pre-historic natives with their rude tools of wood and stone, and baskets or skins for carrying the earth, could accomplish in one day. Nanih Waiya then must have been a long time in building. There must have been frequent interruptions of work to allow its builders time to raise crops, or in some manner to procure their supplies of food. The probabilities are, that while the work of building the rampart and the towers was carried on continuously until they were completed, so as to have the people of the place well protected from their foes, the work of building the mound was a gradual one. A small or moderate sized mound may first have been built for the cacique and his attendants. In course of time, perhaps by his successor, the mound may have been made larger and higher, each succeeding cacique adding to its size until it attained its present dimensions. In short, the mound may have been the successive work of two or three generations.

As to the builders of Nanih Waiya, all the evidence shows that they were Choctaws. There is no evidence that any race preceded the Choctaws in the occupancy of Central Mississippi. And it is not at all probable that the Choctaws would have held this mound in such excessive reverence if it had been built by an unknown or alien race.

During the decadence of the mound-building custom, the mounds were gradually made smaller and many of these small mounds reveal relics of European manufacture, thus giving indisputable evidence of their modern age. From these facts it can be safely assumed that the larger the mound, the greater, presumably, is its antiquity. Nanih Waiya then, being the largest mound in Central Mississippi, may possibly date back to about fifteen hundred years ago, as the fifth century is given by the archaeologists as the beginning of the mound-building age, which age lasted about one thousand years. It may be sufficient to say that Nanih Waiya is very old and was built by the Choctaws themselves, or possibly, granting it a very remote antiquity by the primordial stock, from which, by subsequent differentiation, the various branches of the Choctaw-Muscogee family were formed.

In regard to the modern history of the mound, one event may be placed on record. At some time in 1828, at the instance by Colonel Greenwood Leflore, a great national council of the Choctaws convened at Nanih Waiya. The object of this council was the making of new laws so as to place the Choctaws more in harmony with the requirements of modern civilization. On this occasion severe laws were enacted against drunkenness and against the practice of executing women as witches. This assembly is remarkable as being the only known national Indian council held at Nanih Waiya within the historic period. How many Indian councils similar to this the mound may have witnessed in the pre-historic past can never be known.

This imperfect sketch of the Choctaw sacred mound is brought to a close with a hope, that, as long as Mississippi stands, so long may Nanih Waiya stand, steadfast and immovable, the greatest of Mississippi's pre-historic monuments.

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An entirely different account of Nanih Wayah appears in this next document, a short story by Muriel Wright (1889-1975), who was a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and, by profession, a historian. Best known for an important reference work, *A Guide to the Indian Tribes of Oklahoma* (1951), Wright also wrote occasional pieces of short fiction, such as this story which uses Nanih Wayah as its setting. The original document, held in the manuscript collections of the Oklahoma Historical Society, is undated, but may have

been written sometime in the 1950s or 1960s, when Wright served as editor of the Oklahoma Historical Society's scholarly journal, *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*. Although Wright descended from Choctaws who had removed from Mississippi to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, in the early nineteenth century, her choosing to write a story with Nanih Wayah at its center is testament to how twentieth-century Oklahoma Choctaws remembered this sacred mound as the heart and spirit of the Choctaw Nation.

### *Legend of Nanih Wayah*

Muriel Hazel Wright

The panther screamed twice this night. Once down the river from afar, came a discordant that rose to the scream of a frightened woman. Unmoved by the wild cry, the Dreamer of the Chahta listened tensely in the darkness by the river. He knew the panther traveled fast. Heavy silence for many minutes forewarned some strange happening. Suddenly, a second scream tore through the night, this time coming from the mountainside a long way up the river. The Dreamer's heart leaped.

"Ah, again! For certain, it is the Big One. My hunt ends at daylight." He almost sang the words, a courage song carrying an ending note of triumph.

This was the third time in the past fortnight the panther had screamed twice in a night – something unusual in one season. During the two weeks, the Dreamer had plotted his hunting, searching out all trails of the mighty beast through the underbrush and the forest, and around the crags of the mountain, even down to the river's edge.

The Dreamer of the Chahta was held in disregard by his people. "The youth only dreams," they said among themselves. "Will he ever become a great warrior?"

But they never taunted him openly, uncertain in their estimate of him, perhaps. It was not necessary for them to tell him their thoughts, and he asked no questions. Sensitive by nature, an inheritance that marked the members of his clan, he reasoned things out for himself. He learned by

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Wright, Muriel Hazel. "Legend of Nanih Wayah." In *Native American Writing in the Southeast: An Anthology, 1875–1935*. Eds Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr, and James W. Parins. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995: 214–20.

observation. He also acquired a knowledge of the woods and streams and of birds and animals that no other Chahta youth had. In fact, it was his appearance, rather than any lack of character, which kept him from sharing the first love of every Chahta youth – that prowess in the ball play. The Dreamer was frail looking, tall and thin, almost to gauntness; his hands and feet were slender and graceful.

For a time after the panther's second scream, the Dreamer sat listening. Finally, since it was some hours before the darkest part of night, he left the river bank and traveled several miles through the forest, on up the mountain to a crag around which the panther's beaten trail led to the river. Selecting a spot that he knew commanded a view of the mountain-side, he hid by some high rocks just off the trail, knowing the mighty beast would come along early in the morning after slaking its thirst before going to its lair to sleep through the day.

While the youth waited, he visioned a beautiful mantle from the coat of the panther. Once only, he had glimpsed the animal in the sunlight when, disturbed in its lair, it had moved back into the brush out of sight. In that fleeting moment, the tawny color of its back shone like burnished gold; the grayish tinge of its sides, like silver.

In the dusk of the early day, the young hunter was more alert. He kept a close watch for the slightest movement on the mountainside in the growing light of morning. A rustle in the foliage of a tree by the trail below attracted his attention. His eyes remained riveted on the spot. Gradually, a crouched form was outlined on a large limb marking the edge of a glade in the woods. The panther was waiting, too. In the glance that revealed the crouching animal, the hunter's eye caught another movement beyond the glade. A clump of bushes parted and another form crept out into the grass toward the edge of the glade. The form stopped and half arose, revealing itself – a powerful figure! The son of Talking Warrior!

The Dreamer's blood surged hot, but cool reason served him well. He overcame the word upon his lips that would have broken the silence. Hidden by the rocks on the mountain, he quickly shifted to a better position, at the same time placing an arrow in his bow. Having crept on, Talking Warrior's son was now nearing the tree, unaware of the danger ahead. Steadily, the Dreamer braced one end of the bow between two of his toes and drew back the bowstring.

Twang!

With the arrow through its body, the panther clawed the limb beneath. Suddenly, with a frenzied roar, the huge beast sprang toward the Warrior's son, missed his charge and landed on all four feet. Talking Warrior's son, in the instant of warning, had leaped a few steps backward. Ears flat, open mouth snarling and tail lashing in fury, the panther

stood gathering strength for the supreme effort of its life, — all at once, went limp and fell full length upon the ground. The Dreamer's first great kill!

The young hunter came down the trail and stood contemplating the motionless panther. Talking Warrior's son looked from one to the other. Consternation and chagrin mingled in the expression on his face. He had been caught doubly unaware and his resentment doubly flared.

"You bone picker!" he raged. "You steal a prize that rightfully belongs to me — sometime the greatest warrior of the Chahta."

The Dreamer made no reply. He was intent on the beautiful animal stretched at his feet. The other youth divined his thoughts.

"It is well that you admire your kill now," the latter said contemptuously. "Ere the moon passes you will have to adorn the grave of your bone-picker ancestor with the panther's skin to keep the charm. All the good it will do you is lying there."

"Bone picker!" Talking Warrior's son spat out the words. Turning away, he stalked into the forest.

"Bone picker!" The words sank deep in the sensitive soul of the Dreamer. He stooped and felt each one of the panther's feet in turn, big balls of fur with hidden claws. He lifted the head and looked closely at the massive jaws. He was scarcely able to accomplish his work that day. When at last he spread the panther's skin before him, he marveled at its beauty.

But the Dreamer's heart was heavy. Warily, he threw himself on the grass. Yet his thoughts gave him no peace. He recalled the contempt and the cold aloofness with which the other Chahta youths had treated him on more than one occasion. Tomorrow he would visit Prophet Chief, the wise old legend keeper of the Chahta. Prophet Chief would be patient with any question and help solve the problem.

The next morning, he found Prophet Chief sitting in the shade of a red elm, scraping and polishing seasoned wood for a bow.

"Do not fret because the Nahullo (One who causes fear)<sup>1</sup> would call us 'bone pickers,'" said Prophet Chief. "Na Foni Aiowah — the Nahullo does not understand, also many of the Chahta who have forgotten the old ways. The thoughts of the ancient Chahta were good."

"Na Foni Aiowah — bone gatherers. They were acquainted with knowledge. Wisely, they gathered up the sacred bones of the dead after the body lying upon its bier — a high scaffold — had been purified by air and wind. Then they washed the bones clean and buried them in the shadow of Nanih Wayah."

Prophet Chief scraped the seasoned wood for his bow with a sharp piece of flint. After a while he stopped and resumed his story.

“The ancient Chahta said that the earth was first a vast plain or quagmire destitute of hills. One time a Superior Being, a Great Red Man, came down from his home in the sky and began to build up a mound which finally rose as high as a mountain in the center of the wide plain. When the mountain was completed, the Great Red Man called forth the Red People from its midst. After the multitude had come forth, he stamped his feet and these people who were just emerging from the mountain into the light of day perished.

“Turning to the Red People who rested in the sunshine, awaiting his command, the Great Red Man delivered a long speech in which he called the mountain ‘Nanih Wayah.’ During the course of his address, he proclaimed the laws and instructed the people how to live. He also told them they would live forever, but they asked him to repeat this remark, since they had not listened closely to his words. Provoked by their inattentiveness, he at once withdrew his grant of immortality and replied instead, that they should henceforth be subject to death. Then the Red People came down into the plain and dwelt around Nanih Wayah.”

Prophet Chief smoothed one side of the seasoned wood with red and yellow sandstone. Presently, he began another story:

“Chahta and Chickasha were two brothers. One day they set forth with all their people from a land in the west – hvshi aiokarulla (the place where the sun falls into the water).<sup>2</sup> They traveled toward the rising sun, in search of a new country in which to live.

“They came to a muddy, slimy river and camped there. The next stop was on the banks of a bloody red stream. They remained by this river and lived on fish for two years. But the springs were low in that region so they followed down the course of the river.

“They heard a noise like thunder. They searched to find whence the noise came. At first they saw a red smoke, then a mountain which thundered. They heard music coming from the mountain. On top of the mountain, they found a whirling pole from which came the music. How could they stop the pole?

“Finally, Chahta took a motherless child and swung it against the pole. The whirling stopped. The child perished. The great Chahta called the pole ‘fabussa’ and gave it to Isht Ahullo, the wise leader and prophet.

“The Isht Ahullo tied his medicine bag to one end of the pole and planted the other end in the ground, telling the people the ‘fabussa’ was magic and the standard around which they should pitch their camps at evening. Morning after morning, the pole leaned toward the east, so Isht Ahullo called his followers to arise and march forward again and again.

“The journey continued many years over high mountains, great deserts and wide plains and through deep forests. Enemy tribes they

encountered along the way but were overcome by strategy in warfare. Chahta with his men acting as advance guards made a charge. Then the people followed making attacks on the right and on the left, so the enemy was soon in retreat.

"During this time, some of the Isht Ahullos, other than their leader, admonished the people to be strict in observing their ancient customs, especially the sacred duty of caring for the dead. It was thought a sacrilege to leave the remains of those who died along the way to be desecrated by wild beasts in the wilderness. Surely, on account of such treatment at the hands of their children, the grieving spirits of the departed would hover around and bring sorrow to the whole tribe. For that reason, whenever a person died, his bones were carefully preserved, certain ones among the Isht Ahullos having been selected by the wise leader to be Na Foni Aiowah -- bone gatherers. Those who were to fill this office were chosen because they were intelligent, trustworthy and had open countenances. Many of them were fine looking and had graceful hands and feet. The wise Isht Ahullo said their descendants through the years to come would also be like them in observing the sacred duties and remembering the lore to the honor of the nation."

Prophet Chief sat for a time, making smooth the other side of the wood for his bow. Then he continued his story.

"When they had traveled many years, however, the people who now called themselves Chahta after the great Chahta himself, began to murmur because the Isht Ahullos continued to advise such rigid respect for the dead. So many Chahta had died that their bones had become a burden.

"Just as they were approaching the banks of a wide river, the Mississippi, they encountered a tribe whose warriors were large and fierce. The Chahta shot over white arrows, the sign of peace. The enemy painted the arrows red and shot them back, a challenge of war. In the battle that followed, the Chahta were held at bay by the side of the mighty stream.

"In a council of war that night, the wise Isht Ahullo called for suggestions in defeating the enemy. The Na Foni Aiowah consulted together. Then their spokesman suggested before the council that stones be cast into the water to bridge the river; that mice be caught and, at the right moment, turned loose among the enemy warriors to gnaw their bowstrings and render them helpless in battle. This suggestion was carried out. The following day, the Chahta marched forward victorious and crossed the mighty river.

"One morning, after crossing to the east side of the Mississippi, the wise Isht Ahullo, who had been the leader during the migration, pointed to the sacred pole standing straight in the midst of the encampment. Surely, this was a sign the Chahta should end their wandering. Having

arrived in a fertile country where there were running streams, great forests and little prairies, all teeming with game, the people were delighted to make their homes there.

"Soon after the Chahta had arrived in the new country, the Mi<sup>h</sup>ko, or Great Chief, ordered the bones of all those who had died during the long journey to be placed together in one spot and covered with moss and bark. To make the pile more secure, men and women worked for many days carrying earth in baskets to cover it until at last a huge mound had been erected.

"Then a great ceremony was held on top of the mound. The sacred emblem of the sun which had been carried from the Far West by the wise Isht Ahullo was set up and the Mi<sup>h</sup>ko proclaimed the laws to the people, all of whom had gathered for the occasion. During the celebration, the mound was named Nanih Wayah,<sup>3</sup> calling to mind the mountain where the Red People were said first to have seen the light of day. Finally a feast was held at which the Chahta sang these words:

"Behold the wonderful work of our hands and let us be glad. Look upon the great mound; its top is above the trees and its black shadow lies on the ground a bowshot. It is surmounted by the golden emblem of the sun; its glitter dazzles the eyes of the multitude. It inhumes the bones of fathers and relatives; they died on our sojourn in the wilderness. They died in a far off wild country; they rest at Nanih Wayah. Our journey lasted many winters; it ends at Nanih Wayah.'

"Thus, the mound became hallowed ground, a place where the cherished bones of our ancestors had been cared for and the people had renewed the life of their nation.

"So, is it strange, oh Chahta youth, that the devoted warriors of our people through the ages have spoken of Nanih Wayah as 'Inholitopa Ishki' (Beloved Mother)? That, in token of their devotion, they often ascend the mound to place on its summit votive offerings – prizes taken in hunting and war?"

Prophet Chief selected a strong length of sinew and fastened it at one end of the seasoned wood which he had polished all day. He made a loop in the other end of the sinew for a bowstring.

"Omeh! Give ear! Oh, Chahta youth," the old man looked straight at the Dreamer. "I behold the fine light in your eyes. I see your graceful hands and feet. I wonder at your intelligence and your ability to attain knowledge. Yet all these attributes are natural, they are yours by inheritance. No one can take them away. The Na Foni Aiowah, our ancestors, held sacred their duties in memory of the dead, preserved the history and the lore of the nation. Remember well, oh youth! You also keep this trust!"

Prophet Chief's work was finished. How gracefully the seasoned wood had sprung in the bow! What power lay within the bowstring!

The Dreamer had arisen. A new strength seemed to have braced his slender figure. A look of joy was on his face.

“Chahta sia hoke! I am a Chahra!” he said proudly.

The next morning when the sun rose on the summit of Nanih Wayah, there lay the beautiful coat of the panther.

### Notes

- 1 “Nahullo” means “white man” in the Chahta (Choctaw) language [Wright’s note].
- 2 The Chahta (Choctaws) still refer to the west as “hvshi aiokatulla,” “the place where the sun falls into the water” [Wright’s note].
- 3 The remains of Nanih Wayah, the sacred mound of the Chahta, may still be found in Winston County, Mississippi. The name “Nanih Wayah” means “Mountain that brings forth fruit” or “Fruitful Mountain,” also “Productive Mountain” [Wright’s note].

### Further Reading

Galloway, Patricia. *Choctaw Genesis, 1500-1700*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Josephy, Alvin M., Jr, ed. *America in 1492: The World of the Indian Peoples Before the Arrival of Columbus*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

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