

Final Research Paper:

Strategic Leaders, Creek Decentralization, and American Animosity in the Revolutionary Era

Victory Ma

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## 1. Introduction

There is much scholarship still needed to be done in regard to the interaction between American colonists and the Muscogee (or Creek, their exonym)<sup>1</sup> during the “Revolutionary Period” (1760s to 1780s). For many in the United States, the story most associated with Muscogee is typically the Trail of Tears atrocity.<sup>2</sup> However, it is necessary to outline the events decades prior to this matter of ethnic cleansing in order to understand the Muscogee peoples as whole. This is a rather important endeavor, as being able to comprehend settler society and treatment of an indigenous people and the societal structure of the latter during a tumultuous period such as the Revolutionary Era would allow for further developments in frameworks or lenses to better understand contemporary forms of political and diplomatic maneuvering of subjugated people groups.

The following essay will (a) attempt to analyze and critique current literature on the topic at hand in the context of one another. Then, it will (b) take primary sources into consideration to form preliminary verdicts. Finally, it will (c) come to an overarching conclusion in regard to the political structure, settler interaction, and wartime strategy of the indigenous Muscogee peoples during the Revolutionary Era. In essence, the essay will ask and answer: How did Creeks position themselves as America reshuffled itself between empires? How did Muscogee political structure influence how policy was approached by leaders during this time period? In what ways did they respond to encroachment? How did events affect individuals on a smaller level, and how did individual sentiments influence larger outcomes? The question is not if Muscogee was able

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Zane Moore, “Friends, Brothers, and Murderers: Georgia’s Propaganda War during the American Revolution,” (July 2021), iv.

<sup>2</sup> Indian Removal, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2959.html>, Accessed 16 Apr. 2026.

to resist, but how, and how did the nature of their society shape the processes and results of their endeavors during the American Revolutionary War.

## 2. Contemporary Scholarship

It is worth noting the strides Creek studies have made within the past twenty years. This is in large part due to historians such as Steven C. Hahn, who is famous for eliminating a wasp in one of his lectures at St. Olaf College while on crutches. One of Hahn's major assertions can be seen in the chapter "The Invention of the Creek Nation," where he writes, "if we were to write Creek history using only the paper trails left by the Spanish and the French, we might very well conclude that no single nation or confederacy ever existed." It is presented that the Creeks were decentralized, and this idea of a unified nation is a misnomer at best, and a horrendous mischaracterization of the society at worst.<sup>3</sup> Hahn argues that the incorporation of smaller entities into larger ones should not be seen in a way comparative to the European nationstate.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it is stated that external factors such as British territorialism gave rise to Creek invocation of "having a nation." These revelations lay the groundwork for the following literature.

A few years later, Patrick Griffin would publish *American Leviathan*, in 2007. It serves as a progressive narrative to explain the very essence of the colonies as it created its own ideas of sovereignty, land, and race. He addresses key limitations within the work he saw at the time, stating that "the American Revolution's revolutionary [was] not as radical and as far-reaching as the quaint work of earlier scholars had led us to believe."<sup>5</sup> Throughout the text, Griffin rightfully characterizes indigenous peoples as clear as strategic actors within the war. He acknowledges

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<sup>3</sup> Hahn, *The Invention of the Creek Nation*, 244.

<sup>4</sup> Hahn, *The Invention of the Creek Nation*, 259.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier*, 1st ed, (Hill and Wang, 2007), 12.

that raids were not random, but meticulous to serve wartime goals. There is, at the same time, a gap in how he sees the functionality of Muscogee communities. Griffin's work does not address the fact that Creeks were not a cohesive sovereign entity, which doesn't allow proper comprehension of their wartime goals and political strategy.

Years afterward, Kevin Kokomoor released "Burning & Destroying All Before Them." In this, he states that he wanted to look closely "at the Georgia backcountry ... on the various threads of Creek [involvement], and the consequences of their widespread raiding."<sup>6</sup> He particularly notes that, "by focusing in such a precise way, Creeks [played] tremendous roles to play not only in the war as it was fought in the region, but also in the legacy of the war."<sup>7</sup> Kokomoor gives readers a better understanding of the reality on the ground. He describes the meticulous application of pressure from tribes to assert their authority in the south which exposes vulnerability in colonial society that is comparable to that of indigenous vulnerability.<sup>8</sup> He also poignantly notes that the war efforts by the various indigenous peoples left a lasting memory in the minds of southern settlers.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after, Ethan A. Schmidt published his work titled *Native Americans in the American Revolution*. He diagnosed that one cannot understand the essence of the Revolution without grappling with the effect of such onto Native Americans.<sup>10</sup> He asserts that the end of the war saw the ability of many indigenous groups to pit European powers against one another, also ended alongside the war<sup>11</sup> This is crucial for understanding the trajectory of

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<sup>6</sup> Kevin Kokomoor, "'Burning & Destroying All Before Them': Creeks and Seminoles on Georgia's Revolutionary Frontier," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 98, no. 4, (2014), pp. 300–340, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44735557>, 301.

<sup>7</sup> Kokomoor, "Burning & Destroying All Before Them," 301.

<sup>8</sup> Kokomoor, "Burning & Destroying All Before Them," 301.

<sup>9</sup> Kokomoor, "Burning & Destroying All Before Them," 302.

<sup>10</sup> Ethan A. Schmidt, *Native Americans in the American Revolution: How the War Divided, Devastated, and Transformed the Early American Indian World*, Praeger, (2014), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt, *Native Americans in the American Revolution*, 36.

Muscogee society as a whole. What bolstered diplomacy within Native American communities was the idea that they could leverage European rivalries for better autonomy.

Another crucial source was published by Daniel Moore in 2021, titled “Friends, Brothers, and Murderers.” Moore builds on Kokomoor’s framework in southern memory, and asserts that anti-indigenous sentiment wasn’t uniform in its aggression or ideology.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, the propaganda machine of colonial Georgia manufactured an image of the Muscogee as monsters. He reveals that colonists feared Creek fighters and worked endlessly to demonize them politically. He also uses Hahn’s framework, stating that “Muscogee society operated on a township level ... [thus, Creek] actions often flummoxed both the Americans and British during the war.”<sup>13</sup> This leads back to the idea that local autonomy was key for continued perseverance despite heavy blows from the settler movement.

For some final context, one can look to *Creek Internationalism in an Age of Revolution* by James L. Hill, published in 2022. Hill provides insight into how indigenous peoples affected the war and settler lives.<sup>14</sup> Hill continues the dialogue regarding heightened indigenous agency, citing the attempt by Tunape, a Creek leader, to improve his community’s position relative to other towns through trade contracts with the Spanish in Havana.<sup>15</sup> He harkens back to the notion that Creek life was decentralized and powerful, citing Hahn.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Hill dissuades historians in believing that the Creeks were passive victims.<sup>17</sup> All in all, the various literature

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<sup>12</sup> Moore, “Friends, Brothers, and Murderers,” 103.

<sup>13</sup> Moore, “Friends, Brothers, and Murderers,” 4.

<sup>14</sup> James L. Hill, ““Bring Them What They Lack’: Spanish-Creek Exchange and Alliance Making along Florida’s Gulf Coast, 1763–83,” *In Creek Internationalism in an Age of Revolution, 1763–1818*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2jhjxh5.7>, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Hill, “Bring Them What They Lack,” 21.

<sup>16</sup> Hill, “Bring Them What They Lack,” 21.

<sup>17</sup> Hill, “Bring Them What They Lack,” 23.

stands as crucial context for the analyses that are to follow, detailing the aspects of Creek communities. Through all of the contemporary scholarship, one can now properly understand the position the Creeks were in during the war. However, in order to fully comprehend Creek society and actions, one must turn their attention to primary accounts.

### 3. Analysis in Context

In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, America saw a reshuffle of imperial powers and their possessions of land in the new world. While this was happening, colonists quickly realized that they were surrounded by indigenous tribes with a combined population far outnumbering the settlers.<sup>18</sup> The new *de jure* “owners” of much of this land, the American colonists, had to swiftly recognize, comprehend, and deal with neighboring tribes. At the same time, they were in the process of addressing the question of the British Empire. The Creeks were as capable of bearing arms and were often adamant when it came to retaining sovereignty. Thus, it isn’t difficult to see that the era saw the colonies bend the knee at times when necessary. This is exemplified in a damaged letter dated to around the 1760s, where the unknown author emphasizes the Creeks’ natural right to the land and their authority to sell it.<sup>19</sup> Although strange at first that colonists would uphold indigenous rights, one can recognize the level of autonomy Creeks had going into the colonial war. This is further exemplified by Isaac Levy’s petition to the King of England with respect to his rights to some Creek islands off the coast of the colony of Georgia.<sup>20</sup> In the decades leading up to the Revolutionary War, colonists and Creeks shared

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<sup>18</sup> DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> “[Legal claim pertaining to the private purchase of Creek Indian land],” (1750/1770), 1.

<sup>20</sup> “Case on behalf of Isaac Levy Esquire on his application to his Majesty in council with respect to his right to a moiety of the Islands of Usuba [i.e. Ossabaw] and Sappola [i.e. Sapelo] on the confines of Georgia,” (1755/1776), 1.

spaces that were intertwined in ways that are perhaps strange in comparison to other time periods. At least in Levy's scenario, the Creeks chose to uphold certain treaties made by an earlier leader that granted land to another group of settlers. This would lead him to creating another document to be sent by the king, which he highlights the "great expense" that was improving this land in the process of acquisition.<sup>21</sup> In relation to the aforementioned letter, Levy's struggle to plead his case highlights the unique interplay between the British, Americans, Creeks, and even Spanish in the tumultuous years before the Declaration of Independence. Muscogee power was prevalent, and despite demonization and raids made by and to the Americans, many held peaceful ties among one another. This is a testament to the decentralized nature of Muscogee life, as the contemporary sources have pointed out thus far.

This would of course naturally lead to confusion among Euro-American diplomats, being used to the idea of one large polity with a clearly defined head of state. Friendly relations among American and Creek diplomats alike did indeed exist, but so did hostilities. In a letter to Joseph Clay, Elias Lagardere, asserts that he should take a position in the Indian Department, since he believed the incumbent was incompetent in dealing with "insolent Creeks" and defending "defenseless" settlers.<sup>22</sup> There is charged language here, and one should note that the reverberations of the Treaty of Paris of 1763 can be seen in documents such as this. Similarly, a petition made by settlers of the Oconee River referred to Creeks as "savages" who burned and destroyed crops.<sup>23</sup> As stated previously, there was a reshuffling of colonial powers during this time, and individual actors such as Lagardere and the settlers of the Oconee River were poised in

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<sup>21</sup> "[Legal] petition of John Whiteside and Thomas Lebreton [on behalf of] Isaac Levy, [to] the King's most Excellent Majesty in Council," (1750/1770), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Elias Lagardere, "Letter to Joseph Clay," (1765), 1.

<sup>23</sup> "Petition of the frontier inhabitants adjacent [sic] to Andrew [?] Armor[s] / J[oh]n Wallace ... [et al.]," (1730/1842), 1.

quickly taking advantage of the time, hasty in their step and hostile to their neighbors. Moore's "propaganda" framework works well here; Georgians either had collective memory of Creek raids or were exposed to demonization that gave rise to a resentment that fueled expansionist movements. It is important to recognize this kind of animosity being juxtaposed with letters such as the following.

An unknown author wrote to the "Indian Civilization," praising the Creeks for initiating the education of their children.<sup>24</sup> Having seen such visceral attitudes amongst one another, it is at first perplexing that the author asserts that thousands of dollars would be coming from the colonies to "promote" this education. In this, the Creeks are praised and compared to those of the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Cherokees. What is to make of this? The letter seems to originate during the period of friendliness between the two great civilizations. Although negative propaganda was common throughout the 18th century, there was a unique level of diplomacy that some leaders were able to establish. One should wonder how a document like this may have affected or may have been affected by the decisions of anti-American Creek leaders. Did the British, at the point of the creation of this letter, have any leverage at all in the Americas? One could also question what McGillivray's response would be in this act of appeasement by the colonies as he underwent diplomacy with the Spanish. In this dialectic of political maneuvering, there is obvious friction, especially when dealing with multiple international powers.

In a letter from 1779 addressed to a British deputy named David Tait working among the Creeks, William Knox, representing Lord George Germain, relinquished the charges that Governor Patrick Tonyn made against Tait.<sup>25</sup> The British southern strategy was in-progress, and

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<sup>24</sup> "[Letter] of correspondence [promoting the] education of the Creek Indian children," (1740/1842), 1.

<sup>25</sup> "W. Knox to David Tait", (1779), 1.

Tait was previously accused of persuading the Creeks to remain neutral, a serious offense. This document serves to contrast Creek leader Emistisiquo's 1776 appeal to the British Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern District of North America.<sup>26</sup> Here, he positions himself firmly with the British, states that Georgians are liars, and affirms the idea that the colonists were mere border settlers. At the same time, he used traditional diplomatic items (white beads and a white wing) to appeal to the British. One can begin to imagine the complexity and nuance Muscogee leaders had to think about when communicating with multiple civilizations such as those of the Americans and British. Appeasement of one must be done with a level of precaution, and yet at the same time, the Creeks had their own level of agency that allowed them to confidently stand opposed to such entities as the State of Georgia. When taking into account the previously seen American appeasement of Creeks, one begins to understand the unique authority Creeks had as they were caught between empires. Their ability to leverage European powers is apparent in these documents. This is not only exemplified in military and political structures, but civil life as well.

A letter addressed to the "chiefs of the Creek Nation" dated to around the Revolutionary Era provides key insights into how many settlers conversed with their indigenous counterparts during this period. In the text, white settlers residing near the Shawnee River appeared to have wanted peace with the Creek counterparts.<sup>27</sup> There is an air of careful kindness; invocations of brotherhood and friendliness are laid throughout.<sup>28</sup> However, at the same time, the author refers to several instances of acts of aggression by the Creeks. This includes the theft of some horses

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<sup>26</sup> Emistisiquo, "Talk to the Honorable John Stuart, His Majesty's Agent and Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern District of North America," (2 March 1776), 1.

<sup>27</sup> "Lett[e]r to the chiefs of the Creek Nation / the inhabitants residing on the Shawnee River," 1.

<sup>28</sup> "Lett[e]r to the chiefs of the Creek Nation / the inhabitants residing on the Shawnee River," 1.

and the loss of settler lives. The letter also mentions an instance in which the settlers came across a deserted indigenous camp and collected all of its valuables, keeping them until they knew what tribe the items belonged to. One can begin to notice the cautiousness in how settlers conducted themselves as they encroached on native land. Their prerogative was led by self-preservation and prosperity first, and friendly relations with indigenous peoples second. As the letter closes, the settlers contend they moved to the West with the intention of being peaceful with all tribes.<sup>29</sup> In this nauseating friendliness, there is tension. It is unclear whether or not the same Creeks this letter is being sent to are the ones that killed the author's companions. What is known however, is the tendency for the colonists to conflate Creeks into one neat polity.

These short letters and their findings can be extrapolated and understood further with Joseph Ellicott's letter to "head king" of the Cussetas. For context, Ellicott was a surveyor, city planner, and land office agent.<sup>30</sup> He was allegedly sent to survey the boundary line and establish a treaty with the Creek in the 1790s. Ellicott starts the letter by addressing it to "the head king of the Cussetas, the chiefs and warriors of all the towns in the Creek Nation."<sup>31</sup> One can see here that there is already an inclination for Europeans to understand Muscogee life by collapsing and centralizing its power. With the given contemporary context, people like Bird King and Fat King would have had their names taken less literally by their respective peoples. Ellicott, however, presents a gift to their "beloved man, the head King of the Cussetas."<sup>32</sup> Given that he is sent to establish good relations, he seemingly tries to use emotionally charged language to appeal to the Cussetas. In doing so, however, he turns Bird King from more of a union leader or spokesperson

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<sup>29</sup> "Lett[e]r to the chiefs of the Creek Nation / the inhabitants residing on the Shawnee River," 2.

<sup>30</sup> Publications of the Buffalo Historical Society, (United States: Bigelow Brothers, 1922), 28.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph, Ellicott, "A Talk to the head king of the Cussetahs [and to] the chiefs and warriors of all the towns in the Creek Nation," (1730/1842), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ellicott, "A Talk to the head king of the Cussetahs," 2.

to an autocrat of the “great Creek Nation.” This exemplifies settler and European confusion in understanding intra–Muscogee relations; the Creeks were not organized at all into a polity comparable to the State of Georgia.

Later on, on the third and fourth pages of the letter, Ellicott references a letter he receives from another person of Creek origin. He quickly dismisses the sender as a liar, as they described themselves as a “director of [the Creek] Nation and head of [all the Creeks].”<sup>33</sup> In fact, it’s mentioned that the sender asserted himself as being a “greater man than Mr. McGillivray.”<sup>34</sup> What can one make of all this? It’s clear that there is at least an air of suspicion when it comes to settler–Creek relations. That is perhaps natural, given that the Americans were most likely expecting fewer figureheads than imagined, and certainly not one leader for every township. It can also be certain that McGillivray’s name here is used as a tool. The alleged sender tried to prop himself up as having a level of recognition as the Muscogee–Scotsman. At the same time, Ellicott uses the name as a way of appeal, stating, “we know him to be of your own blood and one of your people and [beloved] among you, and he always tells us and you the truth.”<sup>35</sup> This kind of appeasement was made to bolster McGillivray’s position in opposition to another rising Creek leader, William Augustus Bowles.

Historian Kathleen DuVal would agree with Ellicott, as she describes him as having “exaggerated his influence [with both the Spaniards and Creeks]” and made the “outrageous claim” that McGillivray had given him all his influence and authority over the Muscogee peoples.<sup>36</sup> Taking that into account, one may start to wonder whether Bowles was either a

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<sup>33</sup> Ellicott, “A Talk to the head king of the Cussetahs,” 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ellicott, “A Talk to the head king of the Cussetahs,” 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ellicott, “A Talk to the head king of the Cussetahs,” 4.

<sup>36</sup> DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution*, 328.

conman or a conniving politician. Regardless, this interaction shows manipulation by settlers through Ellicott. As the colonies saw McGillivray easier to work with, centralizing Creek power into this one person would allow for easier control.

One fascinating insight into Creek strategy comes in the form of a letter from Alexander McGillivray to John Habersham, chairman of the commissioners for Indian Affairs in Georgia in 1786. Essentially, McGillivray asserts that the Creeks do not owe the State of Georgia anything at this point in time, as they did not breach any treaties.<sup>37</sup> It's implied that the state previously requested property and "satisfactions," to which McGillivray makes it known that violence will occur if the state persists. The language here is emotionally charged, as he writes that it's "better to die like men seeking revenge than at home like dogs."<sup>38</sup> It's been established by historians such as DuVal that McGillivray and the Creeks have become especially wary of the Americans at this point. In fact, she notes that the Creeks began to call them "ecunnaunuxulgee," or "people greedily grasping after the lands of the red people."<sup>39</sup> This, coupled with Moore's revelations of American demonization of the Muscogee, paints a vivid picture of animosity between the two civilizations.<sup>40</sup>

However, it must be stated that McGillivray was particularly tactical in his remarks. He understood the weight he held when it came to international diplomacy, and recognized language was everything. The Revolutionary Era saw the Creek–Scotsman recognizing that Creek governance was no longer just something "to debate among themselves."<sup>41</sup> It was now something they needed to assert to outsiders. And he did just that, as the "Creek Nation" took shape as

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<sup>37</sup> Alexander, McGillivray, "[Letter] Tuckabatches, [Creek Nation to] John Habersham," 1.

<sup>38</sup> McGillivray, "[Letter] Tuckabatches, [Creek Nation to] John Habersham," 2.

<sup>39</sup> DuVal, *Independence Lost*, 252.

<sup>40</sup> Moore, "Friends, Brothers, and Murderers," 103.

<sup>41</sup> DuVal, *Independence Lost*, 254.

McGillivray sought out alliances like the one with the Spanish. In lieu of continued Georgian encroachment, he believed that such an alliance would scare the settlers.<sup>42</sup> He believed that the Americans did not want to find the Spanish nor Creeks armed with Spanish firearms. This importance placed on the Spanish that stands opposed to Georgian actions is supported in a letter dated to 1785 where he places much importance on his visit to Spanish Louisiana.<sup>43</sup> This defiance could be seen in this letter to Habersham, highlighting tensions that characterized the 1780s. He ends the letter by indicating that he plans to call a convention of the Upper and Lower Creeks for the following April. Inherently, it seems as though McGillivray is confident in the sovereignty of his newfound “nation.” Despite his frustrations with the multi-nodal nature of Creek political structure during the war, he makes great strides to centralize power as he sees it as the best form of Muscogee preservation.

#### **4. Conclusion & Final Thoughts**

What should one make of all of this? One thing is for sure, it is that Creek political structure was nuanced during the Revolutionary Period. Having been decentralized ever since precolonial times gave way to a unique interaction when it came to Eurocentric diplomats. Alongside that, hostilities between Americans arose, and alignment with the British started to become a necessity. In that same vein, leaders like Alexander McGillivray quickly recognized that Georgian settlers had to be dealt with decisively. In that, one can comprehend his inclination to present the Creeks as a unified polity. Through the primary sources and contemporary texts, it can be understood that this centralization of power is more or less a concept subjugated to paper and external diplomacy. That is, the invention of the Creek Nation was exactly that, an invention.

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<sup>42</sup> DuVal, *Independence Lost*, 260.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander McGillivray, “Letter[s], Tuckebatches, [Creek Nation] to W[illia]m Clark,” (1785), 1.

When it came to international relations, Creek leaders were meticulous in their strategy. Those like Emistisiquo were quick to highlight Georgian transgressions. With the Spanish, McGillivray saw a key alliance that would allow the Creeks to advance their goals. For those of the likes of William Bowles, manipulation of Creek decentralization allowed the advancement of his own goals. Many things are uncertain when it comes to the history of indigenous tribes due to the lack of documentation. However, it's clear that Creek's political structure played a major role in its interactions with each of the powerful agents of the Revolutionary Era. After everything, one can say that each outcome of the war was preceded by how the Creeks leveraged their power and changed the tides through strategic alignment and diplomatic pressure.

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