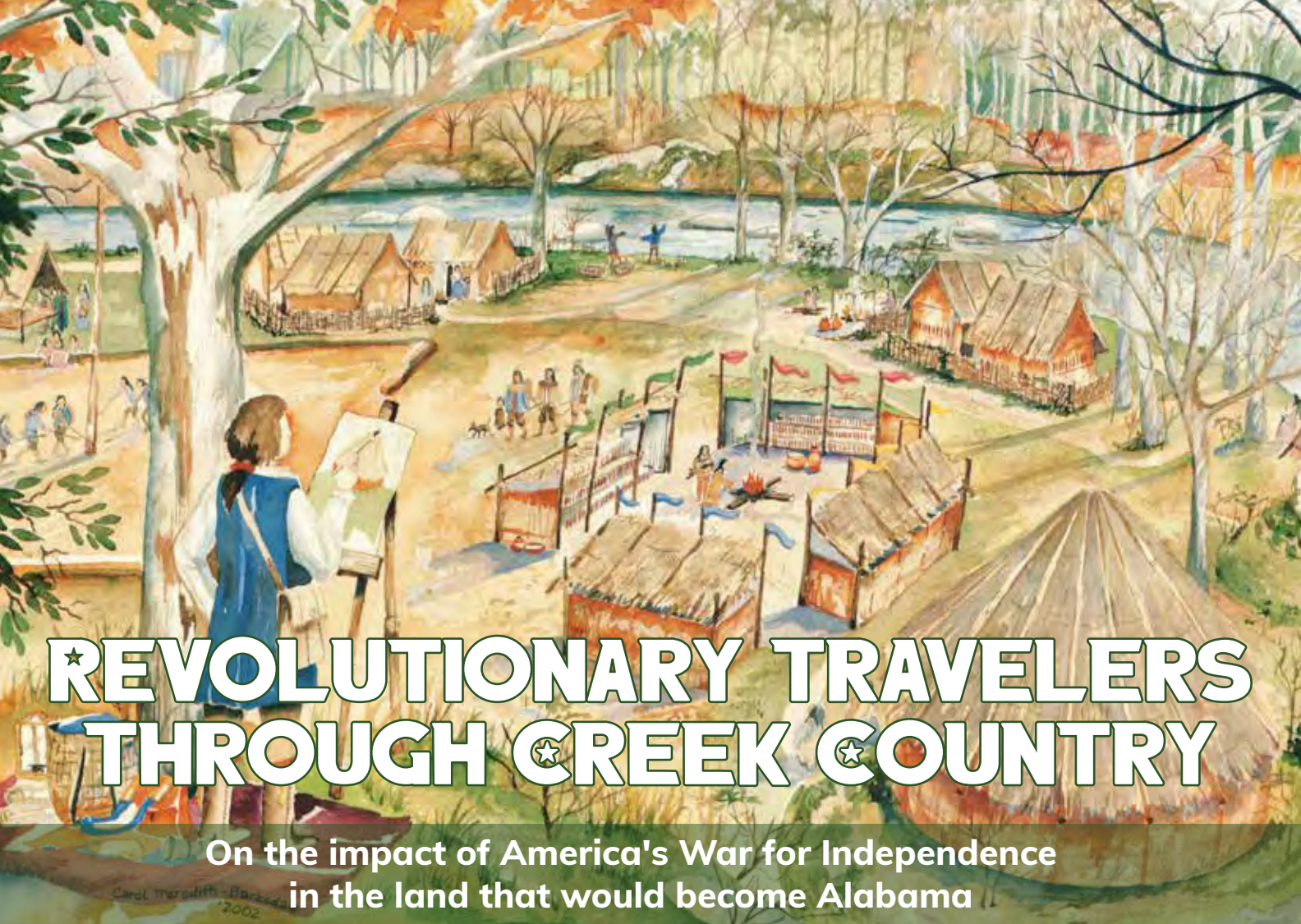




Bartram at Tukabahchi, by Carol Barksdale, of William Bartram sketching a Creek town on the Tallapoosa River, near modern Tallassee.

By Kathryn H. Braund



William Bartram portrait by Charles Willson Peale, circa 1808. Courtesy Independence National Historic Park Collection.

On July 11, 1775, a caravan of sixty packhorses and twenty or so men crossed the Chattahoochee River, arriving at the town of Yuchi, in what is now present-day Russell County, Alabama. Accompanying this group of deerskin traders was Philadelphia naturalist William Bartram, who was traveling across the South in search of interesting and useful plants in the region — “original productions of nature.”

Yuchi, Bartram noted, was “populous and thriving, full of youth and young children.” The sizable town, of perhaps fifteen hundred souls, was one of nearly sixty that made up the Muscogee Creek confederacy. Creek land stretched from the colony of Georgia to the Tombigbee River, where Choctaw territory began. The Creeks claimed virtually all of modern Florida and Alabama, with the exception of a small strip of territory along the gulf coast: Great Britain’s colony of West Florida.

On the eve of the American Revolution, the land from which the state of Alabama would be carved was Creek country, home to an estimated twenty thousand people.

Bartram, who later recounted his adventures across the South in his book, *Travels*, was impressed by Yuchi. Although the citizens spoke a different language than most of the Creek towns, the town shared architectural features that he would see repeatedly as he traveled through Creek country. The houses, “large and neatly built; the walls of the houses are constructed of a wooden frame, then lathed and plaistered inside and out with a reddish well tempered clay or mortar which gives them the appearance of red brick walls.” Topped with cypress shingles, Bartram declared it a “beautiful town,” then moved downriver to Apalachicola, which Bartram, a devout Quaker, related was “the mother town or capital...and sacred to peace.” The peace town reference is poignant, because there was more than tourism on the minds of some newly minted American revolutionaries among the traders in Bartram’s traveling party.

Bartram’s guide was almost certainly Benjamin Stedham, who carried earthshaking news of “troubles” that were spreading like wildfire across Britain’s Atlantic colonies. Stedham was, in fact, carrying a message from George Galphin, newly appointed by rebel governments in South Carolina and Georgia as Indian agent to the Creeks — a message intended to thwart royal authority. Along the Atlantic coast, rebellious crowds had spiked the cannon in Savannah to prevent any commemorative



Bartram's *Travels*, 1791. Courtesy Auburn University Libraries.

firing for George III’s birthday, liberty poles had been planted in both South Carolina and Georgia, and newly formed provincial governments were quickly replacing royal rule. More ominously for the Creek people, the British superintendent of Indian affairs — fearing for his life — had left his sickbed in Charleston for friendly British territory in Saint Augustine just steps ahead of Carolinians bent on his arrest.



Bartram’s hand-colored engraving of *Oenothera grandiflora*, or, more lyrically, evening primrose. Courtesy Sterling Morton Library, The Morton Arboretum.

The Creeks, always hospitable, entertained Bartram as he traveled through their towns along the Tallapoosa and Alabama rivers toward Mobile, then home to less than seven hundred and fifty inhabitants, half of them of mostly African descent, enslaved by the colony’s settlers. Bartram found Mobile “chiefly in ruins, many houses vacant and mouldering to earth; yet there are a few good buildings inhabited by French gentlemen, English, Scotch and Irish, and emigrants from the Northern British colonies.” The most impressive buildings were those of Swanson and McGillivray, merchants heavily involved in the deerskin trade. Bartram also enjoyed the hospitality of Major Robert Farmar and explored the Tensaw Delta. It was on a botanizing expedition from Farmar’s plantation that Bartram discovered one of his most impressive botanical finds, the largeflower evening primrose, native to the region around modern-day Stockton, Alabama.

Bartram made a successful journey to the Mississippi River and back through the Creek towns, leaving in early January 1776. He recorded incredible vignettes of Creek life, describing, among other things, weddings filled with song and dance, solemn ceremonies in a Creek council house, and a visit to the home of a Creek “prince” whose enslaved African Americans brought the visiting botanist “excellent Coffee served up in China Dishes.” Underneath the apparent tranquility immortalized by Bartram, dark and dangerous currents were moving through these prosperous Creek towns.



“For Spain and for the King, Gálvez in America,” by Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau. Painting of Bernardo de Gálvez and his Spanish troops during the 1781 Pensacola-Mobile campaign that defeated British forces.

The Creek’s economic lifeline to the outside world, carried on the packhorses of deerskin traders, was already crumbling. The traders themselves, many of whom had wives and families among the Creeks, were eager to get their deerskins to market to settle debts, which proved a near impossibility due to trade embargoes and export bans and nonimportation agreements imposed by colonial

rebels or the British establishment. As they navigated the new economic reality of the rebellion, these men also calculated the cost of political loyalty to a king or to rebel governments. Many, like Galphin and his two Creek sons, would urge Creek neutrality and risk the ire of rebel colonists who wished to raid Creek country and take more land. Creek leaders faced the same challenge. The question of whether to take the rebels “by the hand” — as alliance was euphemistically called — or stand firm with the British establishment tore the Creek leadership and its towns apart. There was no easy or right answer. And as one of the headmen of the Creek town of Cussita would reflect: “we like to have made a war among ourselves.”

The American Revolution roiled Creek politics, economy, and culture. The old patterns of international trade with Britain — that brought access to the guns, ammunition, and myriad consumer goods that made them wealthy, secure, and fashionable —



Bartram’s descriptions and drawings were largely done in the field. Pen and ink sketch by Bob Russo, courtesy Bartram Trail Conference.

were smashed by the war. Mobile and Pensacola shifted from British to Spanish hegemony with the fall of British West Florida to Bernardo de Gálvez's Spanish arms in 1780-1781. New people — many of them displaced loyalists — would seek a new start in Spanish Florida. Ethnic diversity jumped in Mobile and Creek country with the relocation of enslaved people to the Creek towns, particularly those owned by the Lachlan McGillivray family. Once the second-wealthiest man in the royal colony of Georgia, Lachlan McGillivray left his Creek children behind when, like many of those loyal to the crown, he sailed for Scotland. His son, Alexander, educated in the colonies, returned to his homeland as a representative of the crown in the early years of the war, successfully raising Creek men to fight Galvez's invasion of West Florida and sending Creek warriors on a doomed mission to reach the King's forces in Georgia. At the same time, Alexander and his sisters settled the McGillivray family's slaves on ranches and plantations in Creek country.

In the years that followed, Alexander McGillivray's knowledge, diplomatic skill, economic connections, and political power derived from his Creek identity would see him rise as a leader of the Creek people. Meanwhile, in 1790, William Bartram finally published the account of his momentous journey across the South some fifteen years prior. His expertise and regard for the Creek people would play heavily in the development of America's first Indian policy, the so-called "civilization policy" of George Washington's administration. Based on his extensive travels in the South, he provided the U.S.



*Tuckabatchee, or the
Credentialed King of the Creek Nation.
April July 1790. 55*



*Munnistobee, or Great-Humour
of the Creeks. Creeks.
Jan. 1790. 56*



Lithographs of two Creek signers of the Treaty of New York. Images courtesy of the author. At bottom: Treaty of New York. Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.

government with a position paper bolstering the notion that Indian culture could adapt to American cultural norms. The divergent paths of a pacifist Quaker who supported revolution (Bartram) and a Creek leader who fought ardently for a king (McGillivray) came together in 1790, when America's great revolutionary hero and first president welcomed McGillivray to New York City to negotiate America's first-ever treaty under its new Constitution. The Treaty of New York established an Anglo-Creek alliance and ushered in — at least for a time — the policies of inclusion and cultural change advocated by William Bartram.

Those changes, however — designed to erase native culture and replace it with American norms — failed to achieve the desired ends. Instead, internal social and economic changes brought division and disruption to Creek people and, in no small way, led to civil war among the Creeks in 1813, as Creek leadership sought to balance American demands against their own cultural and sovereign authority. That war, which quickly became an American invasion of Creek country, ended with another treaty that transferred over twenty-one million acres of land to the United States as part of the Mississippi Territory — soon to be the new state of Alabama.

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For more on what this Native land looked like, sounded like, and felt like in 1776, read our bonus content online, featuring scholars Mike Bunn, Bill Finch, Bobby Horton, and more: alabamahumanities.org/mosaic.