

Reference Notes

Montgomery City-County Public Library

Creek Society

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LaRuth Martin & Suzanne Horton, Editors

In the beginning Esaugetuh Emissie raised the dry land from water. He made his home on the land, the stony hill of Nunne Chaha, and from there he created the sun and the moon, and then all living things. When the plants and animals were to his satisfaction he fashioned humans from clay and he gave them life with his own breath, for his name means The Giver of Breath. So goes the creation story of the Muskogean people, a large and complex confederacy who inhabited the land that is now called The River Region as well as most of the rest of what is now Alabama and Georgia and parts of the other states for hundreds of years before there was a city or a county known as Montgomery.

Remains of humans and manmade artifacts in Montgomery County indicate that the area has known human habitation for at least 10,000 years. The first visitors were almost certainly nomads, and it was probably many thousands of years before any visitors established a long term settlement. By October 1540, the year the area known today as Montgomery County was mentioned in the chronicles of the infamous de Soto

expedition and what is now the River Region, and was the home of tens of thousands of inhabitants whose many villages and towns were centuries old.

What we know of post-contact Creek society dates mostly from the 18th century writing. By this time their population had been severely reduced by Old World "guns, germs, and steel" (not in that order) and had changes radically, but when combined with archaeological evidence and Creek oral history we are able to explore a society that, though preliterate, had a social structure, religion, rituals, and traditions as rich and complex as any in Europe.

Creeks lived in fortified towns (called idalwa) that were usually built on high ground, walking distance from rivers. Idalwa ranged from a few families to thousands of people. The city of Montgomery was built in part upon the site of Creek town Econchate near Chunnanugga Chatty, the high bluff where the river boat current docks, and has grown to cover many other Creek towns. Most towns in the River Region were satellites of Tukabatchee,

located near present day Tallassee and one of the four great "mother towns" of the Creeks. Those who lived in the region of the Tallapoosa, Coosa, and Alabama Rivers were referred to in English sources as the Upper Creeks to distinguish them from the Lower Creeks in what is now east Alabama and Georgia.

Towns were comprised of several clans, the single most important source of identity a Creek person had. There were approximately two dozen major clans, including (English translations being used) the Fish, Snake, Skunk, Corn, and Beaver clans, as well as minor and sub-clans. There were often alliances and enmities between individual clans and different roles assigned to each in seasonal festivals, political structure, and other aspects of Creek society. The most powerful chiefs, or micos, were usually from the Wind Clan.

Creek clans were rigidly matrilineal, meaning that a person was a member of their mother's clan from birth to death, regardless of who their father was or who they married.

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Marriage between members of the same clan was strictly forbidden. Because clan membership was such an important source of identity, a woman's closest male relatives played a vital role in the upbringing of her children, more so than their father who was always from a different clan and often more involved in the upbringing of his sister's children than his own.

Creeks were also matrilineal: land and houses were the property of women. Men lived with their mother's family until marriage, at which time they moved in with their wife's

family. Houses and fields were always the property of the women of the clan, as were the fields. Creeks were very skilled agriculturalists who planted, among other crops, corn, beans, and squash, most of which were probably bought from Mexico and Central America exclusively by women, while men were responsible for hunting, protection, and building.

Traditional Creek culture evolved very rapidly, and not always peacefully, following increased contact, trade, and intermarriage with Europeans and

the new American nation. The result was a civil war in the early 19th century, one often seen as a theater of the War of 1812, that was catastrophic for all Creeks, resulting almost overnight in the loss of most of their territory to white settlers and ultimately in the forced removal of all Creeks to west of the Mississippi River.

Article and Pathfinder written by Jonathan Darby, Head Librarian, Governor's Square Branch Library

Pathfinder: Creek Society

The Muskogean/Creek lost most of their ancestral territory following the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. They lost the remainder over the next two decades, when they were forcibly resettled in what is now Oklahoma, where in 1868 they were once again stripped of half of their land. Nevertheless the Creek Nation survives and has more than 80,000 members, with headquarters in Okmulgee, Oklahoma and reservations on the site of their former territory (including where the casinos are located in Wetumpka and Montgomery).

The official website of the current Creek nation is <http://www.muscogeanation-nsn.gov>, which includes links to resources on their history and culture as well as their current issues.

The Montgomery City County Public Library System has many books and other materials available on the subject of the Creek Indians that can be found in our catalog. The online resources below also offer reliable information.

Primary Sources

Bartram's Travels- a classic of North

American natural history and of Southeastern history in the 18th century.

https://archive.org/stream/travelsthroughno00bart/travelsthroughno00bart_djvu.txt

History of the American Indians- written by James Adair, a trader who lived near Wetumpka. He had many theories long out of favor among scholars (including that American Indians are descendants of Israelites), but his firsthand observations of Creek culture provide rich detail. <https://archive.org/details/historyofamerica00adairich>

History of Alabama- James Pickett was not a professional historian but he did record anecdotes and family histories from the 18th and 19th centuries that might otherwise be forgotten.

<http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cmamcrk4/pktfm.html>

Reliable online encyclopedias:

<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/>

[http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Creek_\(people\)#Green_corn_ceremony](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Creek_(people)#Green_corn_ceremony)

<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/ar>

[articles/history-archaeology/creek-indians](https://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/entry/history-archaeology/creek-indians)

For those interested in in-depth scholarly research into the Creek social structure, the Bureau of Ethnology, a division of the Smithsonian, had several publications about the Creeks. Most notable is their 45th report, compiled in 1925 (though there were other publications dealing with Creek culture). https://archive.org/stream/annualreportofbu42smit/annualreportofbu42smit_djvu.txt



Diorama of a Creek village at the Archives and History building