

A Considerable Tract of Country

“However trifling it may appear on the map, it is a considerable tract of country.”

In 1790, the people of the Muscogee-Creek Nation were anticipating the results of their peace embassy to New York, sent there on invitation to meet with President Washington and his cabinet, and end their protracted war with Georgia over the Oconee River basin. Central to peace was a final settlement and demarcation of a boundary between the Creek Nation and the State of Georgia. The Creek delegates knew what compromises would be acceptable to their people, and largely achieved these goals, including the recovery of lands along their southern border with Georgia. Back in the Creek Nation, the provisions, including one establishing the Oconee River as the western limit to Georgia settlement, were well received by assembled leaders. However, when the treaty line was explained, the council found Georgia’s boundary to extend across the Oconee headwaters to the South Fork, or Apalachee River. This was out of the question for many of the leading headmen, and in a dramatic show of protest, they threw their tobacco into the council fire in disgust. Their view prevailed in subsequent assemblies and the standing of at least one Creek leader was irreparably damaged over the issue. As far as the Creek Nation was concerned, Georgia would have nothing west of the North Oconee River.



Hopothle Mico, or the Talassee King of the Creeks, by John Trumbull. Trumbull sketched Mico’s likeness upon the occasion of his visit to George Washington in 1790.

- courtesy New York Public Library

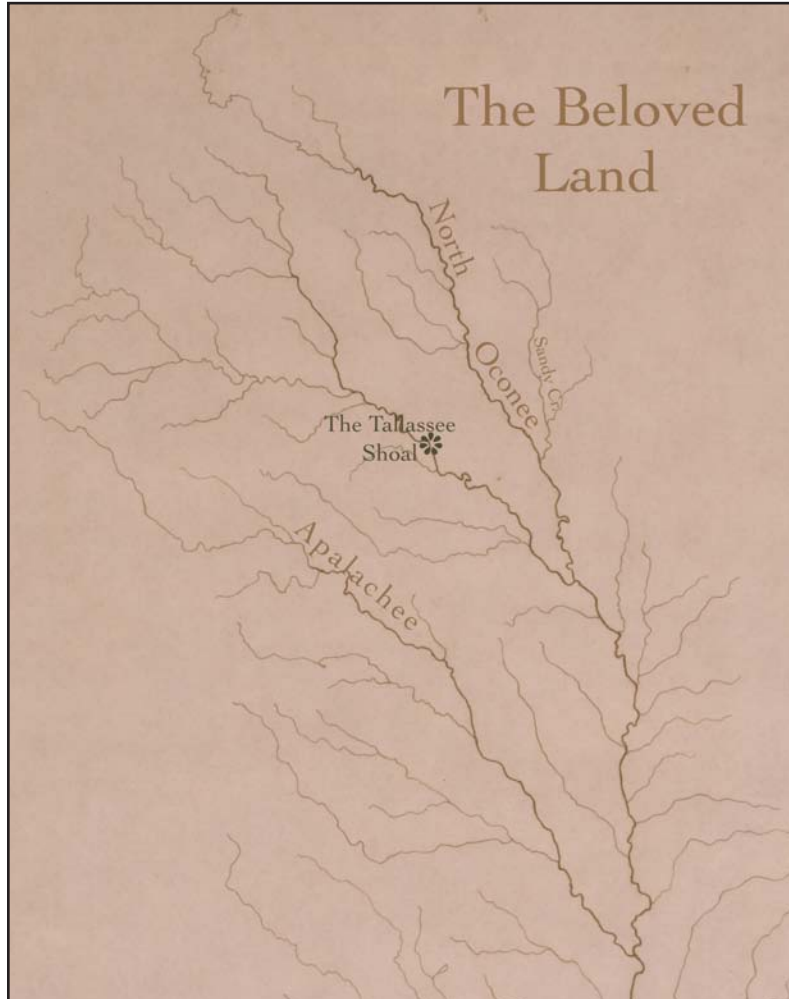
Although trifling when seen on a map, the land in the Forks of Oconee was Atchakee—Sacred, Beloved, Holy Ground. Through the heart of this country, which today incorporates the counties of Clarke, Jackson, Barrow, Oconee and Banks, flows the Middle Oconee River. A major shoal along its course bears the name Tallassee.

This was the name of a large Creek Tribal town located near the center of the Nation. The special interest which the people of Tallassee and Creek leaders like Tallassee Mico held for the Oconee Forks, strongly indicates that the town maintained winter settlements here from which its people fished, hunted, traded. These winter settlements at the shoals may have served Tallassee Mico’s vision of restoring the “Beloved Path”—trade with Georgia, and hunting rights east of North Oconee.

The bond which Tallassee and other Creek towns held for the Forks suggests a far older link. Ruins of ancient fish weirs are visible in the river bed, pottery shards are readily found where the grounds have been disturbed, and notable cairns of select white quartz, all are evidence of this older bond. Bottomlands here are choice agricultural sites and clay deposits are abundant in the river banks.

As early as 1773, before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Georgia leaders had learned of the unyielding devotion which the Creek people held for the Oconee country. It was then that Creek leaders informed Georgia of the Oconee’s “Beloved” status—a status reserved for the exceptionally valuable. The earliest Georgia surveys of the Oconee valley occurred during the Revolution which provoked a violent response by the Creek people, and played a role in bringing them into an otherwise exclusively Anglo civil war.

It was in the interests of peace and the restoration of trade that Tallasee Mico met with Georgians after the Revolution in the fall of 1783. State leaders needed land to meet their obligations to veterans who fought for Georgia's independence. And so it was with caution, that Tallasee Mico promoted a compromise: the state would gain land on the eastern bank of the Oconee, for restoring the "Old Beloved Path," linking Georgia and the Creek nation in new bonds of friendship and trade. In laying the foundation for this peaceful and profitable relationship, he made two important reservations for his support: hunting rights would continue in the ceded lands until actual settlement, and Georgia must accept the "first water" of Oconee as the boundary line. Georgia honored



none of his conditions and breaking established protocol never troubled itself with gaining the Creek Nation's ratification of the proposed treaty. For the Georgians, Tallasee Mico's signature was enough, and immediate surveys began under armed escort. Repeated warnings from Creek councils were not taken seriously, and promotion of new Georgia land for Anglo settlement went forward. Beginning in 1786, the Oconee War broke up Georgia's new settlements and nearly ruined the state's economy.

This was the war which brought Georgia to unanimously adopt the Constitution in anxious expectation of federal intervention. This was the war which the Washington Administration aimed to end with the treaty in New York, only to provoke civil unrest and disobedience among Georgians who saw the Creek treaty as a federal land theft. From the 1790 meeting in New York to the fall of 1792, the treaty slumbered, and in spite of the presence of federal peacekeepers in the valley, crossing the Oconee became a double-dare for Georgians and Creeks alike. As for the boundary, a federal survey stalled at the Oconee Forks while the headwaters remained under Creek dominion until the following winter.

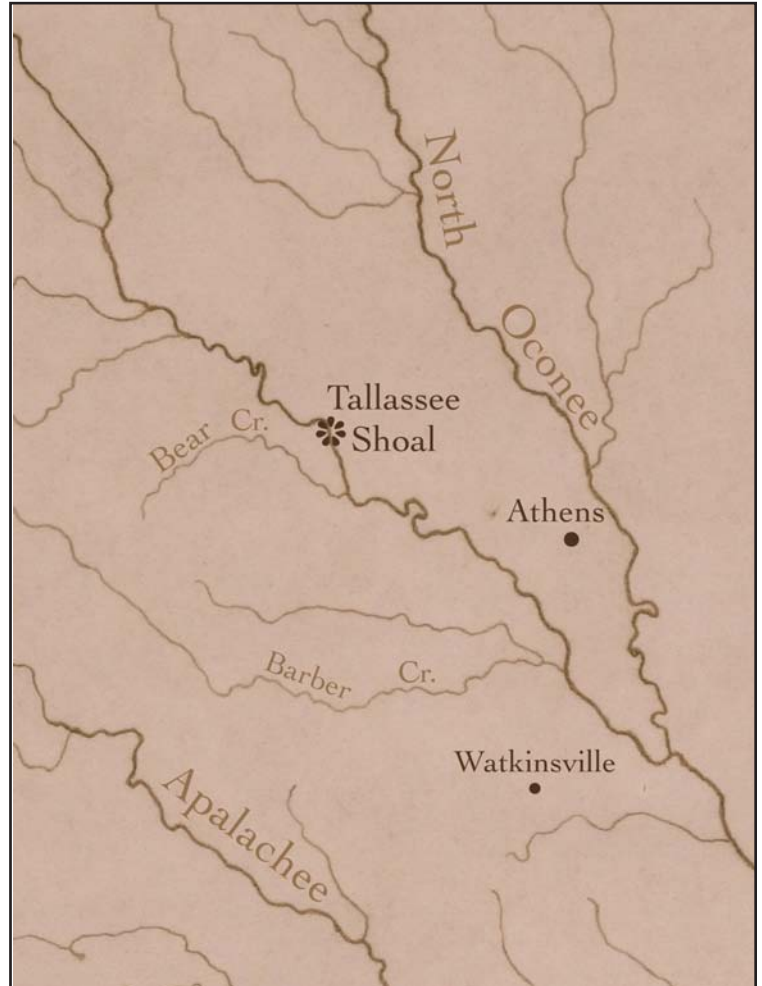
"I hear from the Indians, respecting the inhabitants on the Oconee driving great gangs of cattle over on this side in the fork of Julla Packa (Apalachee), and from that up, forty or fifty miles higher; besides that the white people had built two or three houses on this side. . . I heard, that the Cowetas were just going out to drive off all the stocks and kill some of the inhabitants. . . I have had more complaints laid before me of the like nature. . . that the white people came and encamped out, thirty or forty miles on this side of the river, and hunted, with fire, and all day with rifles, and destroyed the game so bad, that they can hardly find a turkey or a deer to kill, and with great gangs of dogs hunting bear; this the Indians say they cannot put up with. . . (American State Papers, Indian Affairs, Vol. 1, p. 381)

With clear provocation and policy, Georgia militants vandalized the Beloved Forks igniting the wrath of Creek hunters. Tallasee Mico, disillusioned by Georgia's ill treatment, emerged as a champion of the lands. We don't know if he personally joined the Creek cattle drive, but he certainly saw the scalps of Georgians found over the "first water" of his Beloved Forks. The man who fostered friendship with Georgia in its darkest hours of war--honoring his father's wishes to do so--lived the balance of his life its implacable enemy.

More than a decade of diplomacy and warfare defined the struggle for the Forks. Its significance can be found in some surprising places. Spanish governors in both Pensacola and New Orleans, promised Creek leaders that their claim would be defended in ongoing Spanish-American talks. News of Georgia's incursion across the North Oconee reached the Ohio Valley, adversely affecting peace talks between Tribal leaders and United States officials at Niagara. Chief Brant of the Six Nations explained:

“. . . at the rapids of the Miami (River), messengers from the Creek nations arrived there, and brought authentic information of the white people having encroached upon that part of the confederacy. This intelligence at once gave a change to the face of the proceedings, and, probably, was the sole cause of the abrupt termination of the negotiations for peace. . .” (ASP, Indian Affairs, p. 478)

The last military engagement over the Forks occurred in the Spring of 1794, when Georgia militia were routed by Creek warriors near High Shoals on the Apalachee. By then, the balance of power in America was changing. Increased political pressure from the United States, a growing militancy in Georgia, failing Creek allies and an unwise war with the Chickasaws brought Creek leaders to surrender what they had so passionately held. At the Treaty of Colerain in 1796, the Creek delegation aggressively sparred with both U. S. and Georgia commissioners in nearly three weeks of intense diplomacy. Once again, the Creeks prevailed on several notable fronts, but bitterly failed in their bid to retain the Beloved Forks. Witnessing the distress of the Creek representatives, and understanding the significance of the moment, the U. S. commissioners pressed the issue, bluntly asking, *“Is this the assent of the nation?”* The interpreter responded, *“Yes. I am asked to speak the sense of the (Creek) representation, and it is this: The matter in question has been laid before them, since they have been here. It was a strange and a hard matter; a thing which they had not explained to them in New York, and could not explain to the nation. It was with the utmost reluctance that they consented to give the land away; it was like pulling out their hearts, and throwing them away.”*



Steven Scurry
Athens, Ga.
Nowhere Shire
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