

ETOWAH COUNTY HISTORY #420

Gadsden. It seems likely that the party would have had to recross Big Wills Creek, or else proceed directly southward from Attalla along this stream if the second river was Big Canoe Creek.

It is plausible, therefore, to believe that Ranjel's river of the 13th was still Big Wills Creek at a point northwest of Rainbow City. One should remember that the terrain through this area is quite hilly, making it likely that the Spaniards' forward progress was sharply curtailed. Six to eight miles might have been a good distance for a day's march. If this second crossing of Big Wills Creek can be accepted, then it is possible that De Soto marched between Attalla and Gadsden and reached the Coosa in Etowah County near McCartney's Ferry instead of Lock 3. Crossing the river, the army spent the night at Tasqui, then continued its journey down the east bank past modern Talladega. De Soto's march through Etowah County thus was identified with America's earliest period.⁵

Settlements of the Cherokee Indians

The Cherokee Indians were indefatigable residents of Etowah County's aboriginal period. Known as the "mountaineers," they were of Iroquoian stock, stood tall and erect, and emanated magnanimity and independence. Reddish brown in complexion, their coarse black hair hung long and lank from their heads. The maidens were usually quite tall and exhibited grace and dignity from well developed forms. Strongly nationalistic, the Cherokees willingly sacrificed any pleasure in defense of their territory and personal rights.

The ancestral lands of the Cherokees were in the eastern United States, and extended from the interlocking headstreams of the Great Kanawha and Tennessee Rivers down through the Allegheny mountain region into northwest Georgia. The Indians roamed freely from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Cumberland range, an area which now includes portions of the states of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. One can well imagine their consternation when the first irrepressible waves of white settlers began to spill across the mountains into their ancient habitations.

By the time of the American Revolution, the Cherokees had been expelled from their lands in Virginia and the Carolinas. Grudgingly giving ground, the Indians showed their resentment by mercilessly attacking the outlying settlements of the Watauga and Noli-

⁵—In 1567, Juan Pardo and a force of approximately 25 men followed De Soto's route to Tali on the Tennessee River. One soldier was sent forward as far as the town of Coosa in Talladega County. James Mooney, "Historical Sketch of the Cherokee" in *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1897-8), 28-9.

chucky settlers in Tennessee. However, they suffered a major setback on July 20, 1776, when over 700 Cherokees, led by Chief Dragging Canoe, were defeated by 170 defenders of Eaton's Station in a fierce battle beneath the fort's walls.

Dragging Canoe's shocking defeat spurred Southern whites to maximum efforts to break the back of Cherokee power. Thousands of militia and regulars from Virginia and the Carolinas laid waste to tribal villages, and heaped destruction upon the Indians and their crops. Two treaties made their lot more humiliating. The Treaty of DeWitt's Corner, signed on May 20, 1777, forced the Lower Cherokees to surrender their property along the western boundary. By virtue of the Treaty of Long Island on July 20, the Middle and Upper Cherokees ceded their territory east of the Blue Ridge, and a region claimed by settlers on the Watauga, Nolichucky, Upper Holston, and New Rivers.⁶

Led by Dragging Canoe, the resentful Indians retreated down the Tennessee River to build new settlements on Chickamauga Creek and in the valleys beyond. Running Water, Nickajack, Crow Town, Lookout Mountain Town in Tennessee, and Long Island Town in Alabama grew up along the Tennessee River in 1782. Gunter's Village, named for John Gunter, a full-blooded Scottish headman who had been adopted into the tribe, was founded in 1784 on the present site of Guntersville.⁷ Crow Town, one-half mile from the confluence of Crow Creek with the Tennessee River, was settled by a Chickamaugan branch of Cherokees led by Chief Crow. Creek Path, destined to become a strong missionary center, was settled in 1785 by 500 Cherokees. Brown's Village was founded on the west side of Thompson's Creek near the present Red Hill in Marshall County. The villages of Will's Town and Turkey's Town were both founded about 1780 by two chieftains, Red Headed Will and Little Turkey.

Wills Town

Chief Will, a fierce half-breed whose real name was Will Webber, selected his village site near Valley Head in DeKalb County, in the slender 70 mile long valley which today bears his name. Wills Town eventually became the headquarters for the Chickamaugans, the hostile wing of the Cherokee Nation.⁸ The village also flourished

⁶—*Ibid.*, 53-4.

⁷—Gunter had married a Cherokee maiden who bore him a large family. Three sons, John, Samuel, and Edward became well known in later Cherokee history.

⁸—Wills Valley is actually a double valley separating Raccoon Mountain on the northwest from Lookout and Chandler Mountains to the southeast. The two parts include Big Wills Valley, drained by Big Wills Creek and Little Wills Creek.

as a trading center during the Revolutionary period, when Chief Will's deeply rooted resentments toward Americans resulted in his open alignment with British interests. In fact, a British agent, Colonel Alexander Campbell, lived in Wills Town throughout the Revolution to arm and assist the Indians for frontier warfare. Other Cherokee settlements were farther down the valley near Attalla; among them was Duck Springs, near the confluence of Duck Creek with Big Wills Creek.

Turkeytown

Chief Little Turkey and his followers located their village, Turkey's Town, along the northern bank of the Coosa River in an extremely fertile and productive area of the Coosa Valley. Actually, Turkey's Town, or Turkeytown, as it was later called, was more an area instead of a village, since it extended from just south of Centre to below Gadsden where the Coosa River and Big Wills Creek formed the Cherokee boundary line. What constituted the major portion of the settlement is difficult to ascertain. Mrs. Frank Ross Stewart, in her *Cherokee County History, 1836-1956*, placed it on the west bank of the Coosa south of Centre. However, it is also true that a community known as Turkeytown exists today in Etowah County, and that many Indians inhabited Coates Bend, near Turkeytown. Gideon Coates was reputed to be the first white settler to reside in Coates Bend.

Speculation aside, the identification of Turkeytown with Etowah County is inescapable. Its advantageous location on the route from Chautanooga to Pensacola made the village an important site for British and American traders. The old Hightown Path, stretching from Atlanta, Georgia, to the Chickasaw Territory in west Alabama, went through Turkeytown.

Some whites who intermarried with Indians settled in Turkeytown. In 1783, John McDonald, a British agent married to a Cherokee maiden, moved to Turkeytown.⁹ McDonald thoroughly assimilated the Indians' mode of life, and was wholeheartedly accepted into their activities. Two years later Daniel Ross, a Scottish emigrant, opened a general merchandise store in Turkeytown. His marriage to Mollie McDonald, John's daughter, produced a significant union. John Ross, their third son, was Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1838 when the Cherokees were removed to Oklahoma over the "Trail of Tears." There is some speculation that Chief Ross

⁹—John P. Brown, "Eastern Cherokee Chiefs," *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, XCI (March, 1938), 29.

was born in Turkeytown, although his parents eventually made their home in Chattanooga. Three other prominent white residents were David McNair, James Lesley, and John Riley, who erected Gadsden's first residence, which still stands today as the Newberry house on Tuscaloosa Avenue and Third Street.

Frontier Warfare

In 1788, an infamous act perpetrated against the Indians turned the frontier into a battlefield and made Wills Valley and Turkeytown important bases from which to launch assaults against white communities. Unarmed and under a truce flag, Old Tassel, a leading chieftain, and three Cherokee warriors visited Hubbard's Station in East Tennessee near the North Carolina line, to discuss with the settlers possible solutions to frontier disturbances. They were taken to an empty house where, presumably, they were to await the arrival of the white conferees. But instead, white youths whose parents had been killed in Indian raids were permitted to enter the building and tomahawk the defenseless red men to death.

Word of the despicable crime traveled like the wind from large settlements to the smallest Indian villages. In Wills Valley, John Watts, a nephew of Old Tassel, called for reprisals by the hostile Chickamaugans. Tall in stature, bold, sincere, and possessing an unusual sagacity to align Cherokees and Creeks, Watts personified the ideal Indian leader, whom Governor William Blount of Tennessee once described as "unquestionably the leading man of his nation."¹⁰ Watts was joined by Little Turkey, by then a principal chieftain, when the towns east of Lookout Mountain seceded because of Chief Hanging Maw's indecisiveness. Watts, thus reinforced, granted white settlers no respite during the fall and winter of 1788.

The fierceness of this struggle is illustrated by the engagement at Gillespie's Station on the Holston south of the mouth of Little River. There, on October 17, Watts and his incensed warriors made a determined attack upon the defenders of the small fort. Despite heavy resistance, the Indians scaled the walls, dropped inside the fort, and killed every man and many children. Colonel Gillespie's daughter was seized by two Indians who each claimed her as his prisoner. An argument ensued and one, thinking he was about to lose his captive, plunged a knife into her chest.¹¹

10—*American State Papers, Indian Affairs*, Vol. I, 433.

11—Draper Mss, 30-S 351-97 (Microfilm copy in the Division of Manuscripts, Tennessee State Library, Nashville, Tennessee).

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Another bloody Cherokee engagement occurred at Flint Creek in January, 1789, when Watts and his warriors were discovered by John Sevier, the renowned and sometimes controversial Tennessee frontiersman, whose men encircled the unsuspecting encampment. The trapped warriors fought desperately in hand to hand combat. There were 145 Indians killed, while Sevier's loss stood at five dead and 16 wounded. A prize captive was Little Turkey's daughter, whom Sevier personally supervised for three months until her father obtained her release by signing a peace treaty at Coosawatie on April 20, 1789.¹²

As a leader, Chief Little Turkey was a paradoxical personality. On one hand he was a disciplined peacemaker; but on the other he was a warring Indian who sought full recompense for injustices experienced by his people. In this regard he gained both respect and awe from leading American statesmen, as well as his followers.

For several years after the battle at Flint Creek, Little Turkey pursued peaceful relations with Americans. In July, 1791, his son, Aquotagu, represented him in signing the Treaty of Holston, which, of course, meant additional land cessions by the Cherokees. That Little Turkey was esteemed by the United States government is indicated by the visit to Turkeytown in March, 1792, of Major David Craig, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern District. The two men discussed methods by which Cherokees might be kept out of the Indian Confederation being arranged by Hector De Carondelet, Spanish Governor of Louisiana.¹³ Little Turkey, pledging his peaceful intentions, told Craig of traveling to several villages to counsel his people to avoid hostile acts against white settlers.

About this time, however, Little Turkey's aggressive personality reappeared when he consorted with the warring Watts. While Chief Turkey conferred with Craig, Watts visited Pensacola where he was lavishly entertained by William Panton, the unscrupulous Scotch merchant whose hatred for Americans made him a useful tool for Spanish interests. Panton presented Watts with arms, ammunition, and gifts, and vividly recalled Old Tassel's tragic death. When Watts returned home in the spring, he found Turkey presiding over the Cherokee Council at Ustanali, near the Coosa's headwaters. Appropriate gifts sent with Watts by Panton to Little Turkey were graciously received—so graciously, in fact, that the old Chief told the Council to demand restoration of the Cherokees' old boundaries. Writing to McGee, a British agent, Turkey said:

¹²—The daughter's presence at Flint Creek is unexplained. Sevier treated her with extreme kindness, which obviously impressed Little Turkey.

¹³—The proposed confederation was to include Creeks, Shawnees, and Cherokees.

It has been ten years now since the English have left us, and I have never heard anything since that could be depended upon . . . My nation has been a long time in a distracted state, but I hope it will not be so any longer. I hope to receive arms and ammunition as soon as possible that we may prosecute the war with vigor, and sooner put an end to the dispute.¹⁴

In Wills Valley three companies of Chickamaugans were outfitted at Watts' home. In the initial engagements Turkey's warriors fought with great valor, but at the Battle of Etowah, in October, 1792, they sustained heavy losses when Spanish supplies did not arrive. His indecision permanently settled by the defeat, Turkey withdrew to Turkeytown, leaving the glories of war to his Wills Valley brethren. He even suggested that vengeance be meted out to the Indians for their agitation against the Americans, and notified Governor Blount of his own peaceful intentions.¹⁵ Undismayed over the loss of Turkey, Watts continued to fight an intermittent, violent, border warfare until November, 1794, when he accepted peace terms after a mounted army of Tennesseans captured the strategic towns of Running Water and Nickajack.

To stabilize his political position, Little Turkey moved his residence to Ustanali, leaving Turkeytown to a minor chieftain and close friend, Pathkiller. Hanging Maw, the Northern Chief, died in 1795. With the Chickamaugans now defunct, additional political power shifted to Little Turkey, thus making him the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. An astute practitioner of Cherokee politics, Little Turkey was delighted over being referred to by council representatives as the "great and beloved man of the whole nation."¹⁶ It is to his credit that he made lasting contributions to his people. In 1799 he permitted two Moravian leaders, Abraham Steiner and Christian Schweinetz, to open a mission school at Spring Place, Georgia. A school was also operated at Turkeytown for a short time, but there is no record of its exact location.

In his role as peacemaker, Little Turkey, in 1794, accompanied other Cherokee delegates to discuss with President George Washington methods by which some frontier grievances might be resolved. Tension mounted again in 1801, so he dispatched a deputation to

14—John P. Brown, *Old Frontiers* (Kingsport, Tennessee, 1938), 351.

15—*American State Papers*, I, 451. See also Little Turkey to William Blount, March 28, 1794, (Manuscript in William Blount Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Tennessee State Library, Nashville, Tennessee).

16—Henry T. Malone, *Cherokees of the Old South* (University of Georgia Press, 1956), 75.

Washington, D.C., to confer with President Thomas Jefferson. Obviously impressed with Little Turkey's sincerity, Jefferson sent the chief a golden chain and letter which said:

To the beloved Chief of the Cherokee Nation, The Little Turkey . . . I trust you will feel all uneasiness removed from your mind, and that you and your nation will experience that satisfaction, which must result from a conviction of the certainty with which you may continue to rely on the protection and friendship of the United States. These can never be forfeited but by the misconduct of the red people themselves. Your Father the President . . . assures you . . . that . . . he will never abandon his beloved Cherokees, nor their children, so long as they shall act justly and peaceably toward the white people and their red brethren.¹⁷

Little Turkey's authority began waning when Doublehead, a rising young chieftain, was elected Speaker of the National Council. Eloquent and aggressive, he soon became a dominant political figure, and shortly after the turn of the century Chief Little Turkey was little more than a figurehead. The patriarch quietly slipped away to rest with his fathers in 1818 and was probably buried near Ustanali. Years after his death, however, Cherokees still esteemed him as a man of peace and influence among both Indians and whites. As the two races once more grew further apart, Noonday, an aged Indian, remembered Little Turkey as the person most responsible for establishing "durable treaties of peace with the United States."¹⁸

Significance of Turkeytown

Although there is little in print about Turkeytown, this is not difficult to explain, for Indian leadership eventually gravitated to the new capitol at New Echota, Georgia, and to the flourishing mission towns within the Cherokee Nation. But Turkeytown had its moments with history! On August 30, 1813, the notorious massacre at Fort Mims in Baldwin County by the Creek Indians brought Andrew Jackson and his Tennessee militiamen into the Alabama Territory to quash the uprising. With his Alabama-Tennessee volunteers, Jackson cut across Sand Mountain into Wills Valley and camped about one mile from Attalla. There he was met by Cherokee runners who pled with him to aid Chief Pathkiller, who was trapped by the Creeks at Turkeytown. The Indians were easily dispersed, but later fought savagely and met horrible deaths at Tallasee-

17—Reprinted in the *Cherokee Phoenix*, February 12, 1831, 1.

18—*Cherokee Phoenix*, December 3, 1831, 2.

hatchee on November 3. At the memorable Battle of Horseshoe Bend on the Tallapoosa River, March 27, 1814, Jackson, his ranks augmented with Cherokees, crushed the Creeks. One hero on this occasion was the seriously wounded Colonel Richard Brown, a young Cherokee from near Attalla.

Jackson returned to Turkeytown in September, 1816, to ratify a land treaty with the Cherokees, thus opening settlement of the region now included in Lawrence, Morgan, and portions of Blount, Colbert, Franklin, and Winston Counties. The United States, in return, promised \$60,000 in 10 annual payments, plus \$5,000 for improvements abandoned by the Cherokees. Because the treaty almost wiped out their territory north of the Tennessee River, the 19 chiefs refused to sign it until midnight, October 4.¹⁹ Jackson was accompanied to this meeting by his secretary, Lieutenant James Gadsden.

By 1820, it was apparent that the Cherokees faced an insurmountable task in restraining the frontier thrust into their northeast Alabama homeland. During the preceding year Alabama was admitted into the Union, leaving only about one-fourth of the section along the state's eastern border to the Indians. Two counties in northeast Alabama were established in 1818, while the state was still under territorial government.²⁰ Most of the whites who had settled in the region by this time had intermarried with the Cherokees. Many of these settlers were former soldiers of Jackson's, as exemplified by Benjamin Burns, who opened a blacksmith shop in St. Clair County. In 1818, John Ash led a group of settlers from Madison County, Alabama, and founded Ashville.

By the Treaty of Cusseta in March, 1832, the Creeks finally ceded their southern lands to the federal government in return for property west of the Mississippi River. The land rush was so great that by December these newly acquired lands were laid off into Benton and Talladega Counties.²¹

Apparently the declining Indian populace of Turkeytown followed quiet pursuits of village life, and sought few contacts with white settlers. Visiting Turkeytown in 1822, Dr. Samuel Butrick of the Brainerd Mission School somberly noted that the Indians were

19—Some Cherokees charged that Jackson induced a minority group of chieftains to meet during the night while those opposed to the treaty slept.

20—Blount and St. Clair County were created by the Territorial Legislature on February 7, 1818, and November 20, 1818, respectively.

21—Benton County was named after United States Senator Thomas Benton of Missouri. As Southern sensitivities became more pronounced over the slavery issue, the name was changed to Calhoun in 1858 after Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina.

in great spiritual darkness.²² In 1835, the Cherokee population, numbering 254, represented 43 families scattered over the 30 mile area. Practically the entire population was fullblooded. Fifty Cherokees knew their own language, but only 22 could read or speak English. Forty families engaged in farming. There were five slave-owners, James Lesley, Richard Ratliff, Sr., Richard Ratliff, Jr., John Ratliff, and George Campbell. Lesley also owned a mill and operated a ferryboat. Indians with unusual names included Crying Snake, Dirt Seller, Young Wolf, Pumpkin Pile, Money Cryer, Corn Tassel, and Beaver Tail.²³

By the Treaty of New Echota in 1835, the Cherokees agreed to move west of the Mississippi River by 1838. Before the expiration date, however, white settlers, many of them unprincipled frontiersmen, swept into Indian lands like a mighty, unrestrained wave. James Lesley was evicted from his 28 acre property containing a log house, smoke house, fruit trees, and different kinds of vegetables.²⁴ Undaunted, many residents stubbornly remained in Turkeytown until a battalion of soldiers arrived in June, 1838, to place them in stocks and encampments, prior to their western exodus.

²²—Robert Walker, *Torchlights to the Cherokees: The Brainerd Mission* (New York, 1931), 212.

²³—*Cherokee Census Roll of 1835*, compiled from original sources by Grant Foreman (Manuscript in the Indian Division, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma).

²⁴—*Registration of Claims of Cherokee Indians Against the United States the State of Alabama* (Ibid.).