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THE YAMASEE WAR: 1715 - 1717



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THE YAMASEE INDIANS

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The Yamasee settled on the South Carolina coast in 1683 following their flight from the Spanish coastal Georgia Guale missions. The newly arrived Yamasee first settled on the islands around Port Royal Sound including St. Helena, Parris, and Hilton Head Islands. In 1686, the Spaniards attacked and destroyed both the Yamasee towns and Stuart's Town, a nearby settlement of Scots. The Yamasee relocated their settlements closer to Charles Town on the banks of the Ashepoo and Combahee Rivers. They returned to the area around Port Royal Sound in the 1690s. A 1707 Act established the Yamasee lands on the mainland in the upper part of Port Royal.

Within this Yamasee territory, the Yamasee were settled in two distinct clusters. The Upper Yamasee towns, Pocotaligo, Pocosabo, Huspah, Tomatley, and Tulafina, were occupied primarily by Guale who had been part of the Spanish mission system on the Georgia coast. The Lower Yamasee towns included Altamaha, Ocute or Okatee, Ichisi or Chechessee, and the Euhaw. These Lower Towns were formerly residents of interior Georgia (the Spanish province of La Tama) who had sought refuge among the Guale missions following devastating slave raids by the Westo. Many of the Yamasee towns have been excavated by archaeologists.

THE YAMASEE WAR

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Introduction

On Good Friday, April 15, 1715, the chaos of war invaded the lives of the European colonists, enslaved Africans, and Native Americans living in South Carolina. The Yamasee War began that day when a number of trade officials were murdered in the Yamasee town of Pocotaligo. The murders took South Carolinians completely by surprise, as the Yamasee were thought to be one of the colony's closest Indian allies. Indeed, the murdered Englishmen had only been sent to Pocotaligo in order to arrange talks with another Indian group, the Ochese Muskogeans (later Creeks), who were rumored to be planning attacks

against South Carolina traders and settlers. These initial murders were quickly followed by major Yamasee attacks on plantations around Port Royal, near modern day Beaufort, SC. In these attacks, the Yamasee managed to kill over 100 colonists and set the rest of the settlement's population to flight. In the following weeks, news began to filter into Charleston that the English traders in virtually every southeastern Indian village had either been killed or chased off. Adding to the fears of



a pan-Indian assault, news emerged that the Catawba and a small group of Cherokee had made raids on plantations north of Charleston and even managed to capture a South Carolina militia garrison. Facing this apparent "invasion," colonists across South Carolina fled to Charleston, where the effects of overcrowding, fear, and tension, exacerbated by the summer heat, took its toll on the physical and mental health of many residents (Crane 2004; Oatis 2004).

Historians and archaeologists have been studying this conflict for over two centuries, yet most of the public is only vaguely aware of the Yamasee War or its significance outside of South Carolina. Indeed, historian William Ramsey (2008) states that the Yamasee War (1715-1717) "easily ranks with King Philip's War and Pontiac's Rebellion" as a key colonial conflict; however, compared to these other wars, it remains woefully understudied. As we recognize the 300-year anniversary of the conflict, there has been an upsurge in scholarly interest in the Yamasee War. The results of these new projects will doubtless provide new insights for understanding this pivotal moment of the colonial period.

The Battles and Major Events of the War

The Yamassee War included a small number of what might be called major military engagements, and these were confined to the first three months of the war. Afterward, hostilities were limited to Yamasee and Muskogean raids on trading caravans and frontier skirmishes with South Carolina militia that continued sporadically for the next two years. Peace with the last of the hostile groups, the Lower Creeks, officially ended the war in 1717. While rare, the major battles described below were nevertheless significant, for they included hundreds of combatants on each side and were fought on two separate fronts (north and south of Charleston). Furthermore, these battles were like microcosms of the colonial landscape, defining relationships among the period's three major cultural groups – Europeans, Native Americans, and enslaved Africans. Indeed, historical accounts of these battles are clear that almost half of Carolina militia forces was comprised of enslaved Africans.

Pocotaligo and Yamasee Raids on Port Royal: April 15, 1715

At daybreak on this day, a colonial delegation from Charleston was brutally tortured and murdered by Yamasees at the town of Pocotaligo near modern-day Beaufort, SC. The scene is described in chilling detail by Charles Rodd, a Charleston merchant, in a 1715 letter to his employers in London (Rodd 1928). Describing the attack and torture of Indian agent Thomas Nairne writes, "But next morning at dawn their terrible war-whoop was heard and a great multitude was seen whose faces and several other parts of their bodies were painted with red and black streaks, resembling devils come out of Hell... They threw themselves first upon the Agents and on Mr. Wright, seized their houses and effects, fired on everybody without distinction, and put to death, with torture, in the most cruel manner in the world, those who escaped the fire of their weapons... I do not know if Mr. Wright was burnt piece-meal, or not: but it is said that the criminals loaded Mr. Nairne with a great number of pieces of wood, to which they set fire, and burnt him in this manner so that he suffered horrible torture, during several days, before he was allowed to die." Rodd goes on to describe the harrowing escape of families from their plantations around nearby Port Royal as the Yamasees began their war.

had marched the Army to Zantee [sic], however he returned back on the first notice upon his approach the Indians fled over Ponpon Bridge and burnt it having killed 4 or 5 white men. We have not since heard from them."

The "Sadkeche Fight" and Carolina Counteroffensive against Yamasee Towns: late April, 1715

South Carolina's military response to the Yamasee raids was swift. Only a week after the murders at Pocotaligo, Governor Craven of South Carolina personally led militia forces against the Yamasees in their own towns. He sent some of his forces to attack Pocotaligo by water, while he mustered some 250 men to attack overland. Part of this offensive is a battle now called "The Sadkeche Fight." In this engagement, Craven was ambushed in camp while on his march to Pocotaligo somewhere on the Combahee River near Salkehatchie, SC. A weekly broadside called The Boston Newsletter, reported on the battle stating, "The Governour marched within Sixteen miles of [Pocotaligo], and encamped at night in a large Savanna or Plain, by a Wood-side, and was early next morning by break of day saluted with a volley of shot from about Five hundred of the enemy; that lay ambuscaded in the Woods, who notwithstanding of the surprise, soon put his men in order, and engaged them so gallantly three quarters of an hour, that he soon routed the enemy; killed and wounded several of them; among whom some of their chief Commanders fell" (June 6, 1715). Meanwhile, the Carolina militia forces sent by water scored decisive victories against the Yamasee towns near Beaufort, forcing those groups to retreat southward across the Altamaha River in present-day Georgia.

Santee Raids and Captain Chicken's Charge: mid May-early June 1715

To Carolina settlers, the scale and violence of the Yamasee attacks on Port Royal must have been frightening. These fears, however, must have quickly multiplied when news emerged that a second group of raids was taking place at plantations along the Santee River north of Charleston. The fact that these raids were conducted by the Catawba and Cherokee stoked rumors that these violent assaults were part of a pan-Indian revolt aimed at driving Europeans from the region.

The first attack occurred at the plantation of John Herne (Hyrne), near present day Vance, SC. In his 1715 journal, Goose Creek missionary Francis LeJau says the Indians "killed poor Herne Treacherously, after he had given them some Victuals [food], according to Our usual friendly manner." Following this attack, the Indians ambushed a group of Carolina militia sent to the area to investigate. Twenty-seven of the militia were killed in this engagement. The invading force then moved on to a fortified plantation known as Schenkingh's Cowpen - a site now submerged under Lake Marion near Eadytown, SC. Here the group was able to trick the commanding militia officer to let them inside the palisade under the pretense of surrender. Once inside the defenses, the group pulled out their weapons, slayed 22 militiamen, and burnt the garrison. It appears that the raiding Indian force then began to move toward Goose Creek, which had largely been deserted.

The culmination of engagements on the northern front happened on June 13, when militia captain George Chicken led a force out to meet the advancing Indian group. A letter from Charleston merchant Samuel Eveleigh (1715) gives great detail of the battle stating, "Capt. Chicken march'd from the Ponds [near Summerville, SC] with 120 men and understanding that they were got to a Plantation about 4 miles distant marched thither, divided his men into three parties, two of which he ordered to march in part to surround them, and in part to prevent their flight into an adjacent swamp but before the said party could arrive to the post designed them, two Indians belonging to the enemy scouting down to the place where Captain Chicken lay in ambascade [sic] he was obliged for fear of discovery to shoot them down, and immediatly fell upon the body, routed them and as is supposed killed about 40 besides their wounded they carried away." This significant engagement, sometimes known as "The Battle of the Ponds," halted the advance of the piedmont Indians and marked their withdrawal from the war (they sent a peace delegation to Virginia about a month later). This battle thus effectively ended the war on the northern front.

Apalachee Raid on New London (Willtown) and the Burning of St. Paul's Parish: mid July 1715

A few weeks after Captain Chicken's victory, Governor Craven marched with a militia force of about 200 settlers, enslaved Africans, and allied Indians in order to launch an offensive against the piedmont Indians who attacked the northern plantations. Shortly after crossing the Santee River, Craven received word that a large force of 500-700 Apalachee and allied groups had crossed over the Edisto River and attacked the colonial settlement called New London, located on present-day Willtown Bluff, SC. The garrison at New London prevented the force from entering the town, so the raiding force set about attacking plantations across St. Paul's Parish all the way to the Stono River. The Indians managed to retreat across the Edisto River and destroy the bridge before Craven's militia forces arrived. Once again, Samuel Eveleigh (1715) describes the action, "...the Apalatchee and other Southern Indians came down on New London, and destroy'd all the Plantations on the way, besides my Lady Blakes, Falls, Col. Evans and several others, have also burnt Mr. Boon's plantations and the ship he was building. The crops thank God are still pretty good; the Govr. at that instant

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This incursion marked the last major engagement of the Yamasee War. In August, much needed military supplies arrived in Charleston from Virginia and New England. Also, the colonial assembly passed an act that funded a 1200 man militia and the construction of ten substantial forts across the frontier. By August, the Yamasee had also began their withdrawal south to Spanish territory around the St. Augustine.

The Road to War

In order to understand the Yamasee War, one must be aware of the historical context surrounding this conflict – the social, economic, and political landscape. What did this colonial landscape look like to Yamasees and other Indian groups or to Carolina settlers, traders, and officials? Many scholars agree that this colonial landscape was largely shaped by two closely related historical forces -European colonial competition and the trade in Indian slaves. Indeed, these were the engines that drove the Yamasees and other Indian groups, on one side, and



Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University

the South Carolinian settlers, on the other, to their violent clash.

Colonial Competition

In 1663, King Charles II of England granted eight "promoter-politicians" a patent for land to be set up as a proprietary colony called Carolina. A proprietary colony was different from royal colonies like Virginia in that proprietary colonies were first and foremost commercial ventures that served to increase the fortunes of proprietors and colonists alike. The personal histories of some of the wealthiest men in South Carolina during the period suggest that one could amass a large fortune by combining the Indian trade for slaves and deerskins with planting. Indeed, this economic structure, in which the profits from trading were used to capitalize the growth of plantations with both funds and slave labor, was in large part responsible for the rise of the Carolina colony within the burgeoning trans-Atlantic economy (Gallay 2002; Nash 2001).

The economic and strategic ambitions associated with empire building naturally generated strife among the fragile colonial beachheads of England Spain, and France. Whether they desired the position or not, by virtue of geography South Carolina would be the English colonial vanguard against any southeastern invasion from Spanish or French forces. To prepare for this threat, the South Carolina proprietors implemented a proactive defensive strategy that featured the use of allied Indian groups to create a "buffer zone" to protect the colony from the Spanish and French and their Indian allies.

The buffer zone that was to protect South Carolina needed to be strongest to the south in order to check raids by the Spanish and their Indian allies. To secure this area, beginning in the 1680s, colonial officials set about encouraging allied Indian groups to settle along the Savannah River with the construction of a trading post at Savannah Town. Also during this period, the Yamasees, who occupied a territory between St. Helena Island and land along the Ashepoo and Combahee rivers, were courted intensively. Thomas Nairne (1710), the first Indian agent of Carolina, boasted of the success of this strategy saying that "all of the Indians within 700 miles of Charlestown" had been made "[English] subjects...by drawing over to [the colony's] side or destroying." During his torture and eventual death at the outset of the Yamasee War, Nairne would quite painfully learn that his boasting was premature.

It is clear that the South Carolina architects of this strategy never intended for the buffer zone of Indian allies to be a passive deterrent to their European rivals From their earliest overtures to Indian groups, South Carolina officials intended to create an armed militia of Indians that could be persuaded to promote the colony's interests internally and abroad. The Tuscarora War is a good example of this strategy. The war consisted of two military expeditions (in 1712 and 1713) led by South Carolinians along with an assembled force of Yamasee, Apalachee, Cherokee, and Catawba numbering in the hundreds. These expeditions defeated the Tuscarora, which resulted in their forced emigration from North Carolina. The period also witnessed the use of Indian allies, especially Yamasees, on a much larger scale in major colonist-led Indian military forays against European rivals that cumulatively resulted in the deaths and enslavement of thousands Indians. These forays included Colonel James Moore's invasions of Spanish Florida as part of Queen Anne's War, first against St. Augustine in 1702, and later against the Apalachee missions in 1704. These operations, which resulted in the destruction of the Spanish-allied Apalachee Indians, included 370 Yamasee Indians and 1,000 Muskogee-speaking Indians respectively.

Indian Slave Trade

Until relatively recently, research regarding the trade in Indian slaves has been relegated to isolated anecdotes in the history and archaeology of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Southeast. Historians William Ramsey and Alan Gallay have done much to quantify the scale of Indian slavery by consulting the colonial records of South Carolina. Ramsey (2001) sketched the demography of Indian slavery in South Carolina during the period. By the outbreak of the Yamasee War in 1715, he found that approximately 25% of all slaves held by South Carolinians were Indians. Ramsey (2003) pointed to strong market forces in influencing the scale of slave trade during the English Contact Period arguing that the South Carolina economy depended on slave labor not only for working South Carolina's plantations, but also for trade to other plantation colonies.

Gallay's research furthered the argument that most Indian slaves sold in Charleston markets were later traded to other colonies. He asserted that the population estimated by Ramsey was but a small fraction of the total number of slaves taken during this period. Based on transport records following major military campaigns (described above) and trader accounts, Gallay (2002) estimated the total number of Indian slaves that were taken between 1670 and 1715 to be between 24,000 and 51,000 individuals. He believed that a large percentage of the trade in Indian slaves was purposefully left undocumented in order to keep secret "an important commodity that was regulated and taxed by the mother country when obtained from Africa."

The demand for slave labor in colonial plantation economies was thus a major determinant of the early eighteenth-century trading system, but the supply-side of the slavery system must also be considered. Most researchers agree that the taking of slaves by southeastern Indians was a tradition of significant geographic range and time-depth (Martin 1994). While early southeastern slave-taking tradition was an occasional practice whose purpose was to augment the ranks of diminished local populations or to attain war captives, however, slave-taking in the three decades leading to the Yamasee War became a profit-driven "commercial" venture. A single slave might fetch as much as 200 skins for an Indian captor; therefore, taking even a few slaves in one raid could provide a hunter with more skins than he could usually procure in an entire hunting season (Ramsey 2001).

Historical accounts also indicate that English traders often incited Indian groups to conduct slave raids. Dr. Francis Le Jau, a missionary living near Charleston, expressed a distaste for this practice in his journal writing, "It is reported that some of our Inhabitants...excite them [Indians] to make War amongst themselves to get Slaves which they give for our European goods" and "some white men living or trading among them do foment and increase that Bloody Inclination in order to get slaves" (Le Jau 1708, 1713). Le Jau also provided a plausible explanation for Indian participation in slave raiding stating that in some cases it became the only viable option for paying off astronomical debts accumulated with English traders. While extending lines of credit was often necessary given the seasonal nature of deer hunting, in more than a few cases the European traders employed predatory schemes that resulted in Indians amassing exorbitant debts. The most extreme example of this situation was the Yamasee, who by 1711 had accumulated a debt of 100,000 skins – roughly twice the annual average of all deerskin exports from South Carolina (Haan 1981).

Whether to fulfill desire or necessity, the promise of wealth attained through capturing slaves led to the widespread participation of Indian groups in South Carolina's military campaigns in Queen Anne's War early during the eighteenth century. This new type of commercial slavery led to the meteoric rise (and fall) of so-called "militaristic slaving societies," like the Yamasee, whose sole focus (at least from the perspective of colonial records) was "making war" and controlling access to English trade (Bowne 2005; Ethridge 2010). These heavily armed groups, which included most infamously the Yamasee, but also the Westo, Yuchi, Chickasaw, and Savannah (Shawnee), were the major regional players in a European-backed interregional slave trading system that preyed upon Indian towns stretching from the Carolina and Georgia Piedmont, across the Appalachian Mountains, to the lower Mississippi valley.

Was there a "cause" for the war?

Until very recently, the history of the years leading up to the Yamasee War has been presented as a singular story. Originally put forth in the 1920s by the venerable historian Verner W. Crane (2004) and the equally esteemed anthropologist John R. Swanton (1998), this narrative presents a relatively straightforward picture of the Yamasee War as a "far reaching revolt" of numerous southeastern tribes spurred on by indebtedness to and mistreatment at the hands of Carolinian. This classic explanation has been challenged recently with a series of historical and ethnohistorical works. The authors of these works argue that the established explanation for the Yamasee War is overly simplistic. (e.g., Gallay 2002; Martin 1994; Oatis 2004; Ramsey 2001).

In the place of a singular process (i.e., The cause of the war), these authors characterize the Yamasee War as the outcome of a complex mix of strategies and events that were enacted and experienced differently by the various participants. Instead of lumping all Indian groups into the singular role of reactionaries against the English traders, the authors of these works explore the varied strategies pursued by Indian groups as they interacted with other Indian groups, colonial traders, and colonial governments.

To various extents, the authors of recent works agree that while some of the Indian participants were in collusion, the Yamasee War was not a pan-Indian conspiracy carried out with the aid of a master plan. Instead, they hold that each group acted according to their own strategy and toward their own diplomatic goals. Abuse by traders, mounting debts, and the fear of enslavement were important factors in some groups' decisions to join the war against South Carolina, but these three causes were far from universal. These causes apply

most to the Yamasee, but even their decision to attack South Carolina settlements was also likely influenced by the encroachment of Europeans on their treaty-protected lands as well as a breakdown in diplomacy with colonial officials. Indeed, Ramsey (2001) has argued that while abusive behavior by traders was present in accounts from the period leading up to the Yamasee War, the accounts spoke of multiple causes for tension with the Yamasee including violence against women, credit problems, and trade in slaves. He further argued that these tensions were imbedded in the very nature of the trade itself, with the English traders, colonial officials, and Indian groups all struggling to satisfy the huge demand for labor (slaves) and deerskins in the colonial plantation and Atlantic economies.

For Muskogean, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Choctaw groups, there was no possibility of English settler encroachment during this period, and these groups were far too strong to fear an immediate invasion by English forces. With this in mind, Gallay interprets the killing of English traders in these groups' towns as a diplomatic message sent to the Carolina officials – the gist of the message being, "English promises for reform were no longer acceptable. Alliance was no longer appropriate or possible...[The Indians were] announcing to the English the need to negotiate a new relationship (Gallay 2002).

The Aftermath

While major military operations ended within the first two months of the war, Yamasee and Muskogean raids on trading caravans and frontier skirmishes with South Carolina militia continued sporadically for the next two years. As the confusion of the first violent weeks of the war settled down, it was obvious that the social, political, and economic landscape of the Southeast had changed dramatically and that Indian groups and colonial officials would have to renegotiate their diplomatic and trading relationships. For South Carolinians, in a matter of weeks the landscape had transformed from one of security, surrounded by a protective "buffer zone" of Indian allies, to one of utter vulnerability. As for the instigators of the war, only weeks after their first successful raids, the Yamasee had lost a quarter of their number to death or slavery, and they were forced to move their towns south to seek protection from the Spanish. While not creating as perilous a situation as that experienced by the Yamasee, the chaos of war caused a temporary but crucial breach in the fundamental diplomatic and trading relationships among all southeastern Indian groups and South Carolina. In doing so, the war created a moment when everything was "on the table" and negotiable. Consequently, the twenty-five year period following the war (ca. 1715-1740) included significant changes in diplomacy and trade that reflected the attempts of all groups to adjust to this new post-war landscape.

In rebuilding diplomatic relations with Indian groups after the Yamasee War, South Carolina officials sought to avoid another disaster by making diplomatic relations with Indian groups as streamlined as possible. In order to do this, the government attempted to reduce the number of Indian entities with whom the colony negotiated by lumping politically independent Indian towns into composite groups called "nations" and assigning a single individual to speak for the entire group (Oatis 2004). It was likely the convergence of South Carolina's nationalizing strategy with the Indians' natural consolidation due to population loss that resulted in the emergence of geographically bounded ethnic collectivities we now refer to as "Creek," "Cherokee," and "Catawba" (Knight 1994; Marcoux 2010; Merrell 1989).

The Yamasee War also brought about the cessation of the trade in Indian slaves. The precipitous decline likely came about as a result of decreases in both supply and demand. If Peter Wood's (1989) demographic estimates for the previous period (ca. 1685-1715) are to be believed, then the combination of slave raids and disease reduced the southeastern Indian population by half in 1715. When population losses at this scale combined with the accelerating rate of consolidation among surviving populations, the result was that the supply of potential slaves effectively dried up.

In regard to the demand for Indian slaves, the Yamasee War introduced South Carolinians to the real threat of Indian attacks on the colony. The war also brought to light the fact that when conflicts with Indians arose, there would be a large population of Indian slaves among the colonists that could easily turn on their masters. These fears likely influenced South Carolina planters to begin shifting their slave labor pool from Indians to Africans. The shift in preference to African slaves may also have been due to their long tenure as plantation labor in the Caribbean and the planter's belief that African slaves were more resistant to European disease (Martin 1994). Whatever the reason for this shift in demand, the result was a drastic and permanent decrease in the number Indian slaves owned by South Carolina households. In a survey of South Carolina will transcripts, for example, Ramsey (2001) found that household ownership of Indian slaves declined from 26% in 1714 to just 2% by 1730.

The Yamasee resided in South Carolina for only 30 years after fleeing north from the Spanish missions. They were major players in the colonial history of South Carolina, but the Yamasee War led to their return to Spanish Florida. In subsequent years, South Carolina forces repeatedly attacked those Yamasee who settled near St. Augustine, and the Yamasee raided plantations in South Carolina from time to time. Yamasee lands in South Carolina were given to Carolina settlers, and the towns where the Yamasee had once resided fell into disuse and ultimately disappeared. The only indication that the Yamasee ever resided on the lower South Carolina coast is found in the rivers and creeks named after them—Okatie, Chechesee, Pocotaligo, Huspah.

References used in the completion of this article, as well as digital copies of this poster are available online at

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