Learning the Land: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in the Southern Borderlands, 1500-1850

William Cane West

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LEARNING THE LAND: INDIANS, SETTLERS, AND SLAVES IN THE SOUTHERN BORDERLANDS, 1500-1850

by

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I have found that dissertations are inherently exercises in frustration. I believe that resurrecting a portion of the past will always be incomplete and only partially representative. My dissertation is only a first draft in my scholarship and an additional draft in our understanding of the human experience. My frustrations are also personal. While sitting, writing, and revising, I asked my loved ones to accept an empty chair, a rain-checked date, or a distracted partner. I have dealt with the vicissitudes of my mental health and my relationships as much as I have dealt with documents and drafts.

Despite the struggles, a wide community of historians have encouraged me on my journey. Bill Worthen and Swannee Bennett empowered me to research the lives of enslaved men and women in Little Rock. At Sewanee, John Willis, Houston Roberson, Gerald Smith, and others introduced me to the delights of academic curiosity. Allison Marsh, Woody Holton, Tom Lekan, and Mark Smith were supportive faculty at South Carolina. My cohort at South Carolina have added fellowship to the process.

My motivations have always been to create “intellectual roots” for how I see the world and to honor the voices of the men and women often left out of History texts. I hope this dissertation is one small monument to that enduring purpose. As I have tried to remain true to my personal and professional lives, I have two final thanks: To my mom and dad, who have taught me to find history in every place and a map for every adventure. And to my partner, Sarah, for sharing love, patience, and a belief in my work as a scholar and as a human being. Your love has meant so much.
ABSTRACT
Between 1500 and 1850, Native Americans, Europeans, and enslaved African Americans competed for territory within the landscape of the lower Arkansas Valley. The complex transitional environment between delta bottomlands, interior highlands, and Great Plains fostered the co-existence of competing Native and Euro-American claims to regional sovereignty and settlement well into the nineteenth century. The geopolitical divides often hinged on debates over environmental resources and scientific practices. Indigenous polities from the Mississippians to the Quapaws and Osages adapted to environmental changes to establish and maintain their borders in the face of European colonial presence. In the nineteenth century, Cherokees and white planters alike used scientific expeditions, surveys, and maps to validate their respective farming territories and the Cherokees even reversed white settlers’ expansion into coveted farmland. White legislators later promoted the federal protection of the thermal waters at Hot Springs near the border of Indian territory as a beachhead for white settlement and a destination for Lower Mississippi Valley health seekers. Within the contested geography, enslaved African Americans carved out an informal area of relative autonomy by harnessing the environmental changes on the edges of cotton plantations. Indian nations and runaway slaves contributed to the contours of regional inhabitation throughout the early nineteenth century, despite the demographic dominance of the Cotton Kingdom, by adapting to environmental change and turning the practices of early American science into tools of anti-colonialism.
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INTRODUCTION

The mountains of the Ozarks are my self-ascribed Arkansas roots. My maternal ancestors settled on the western edge of the Ozarks within a few miles of Indian territory. They journeyed from South Carolina in the 1830s, the white family and the human slaves that they owned—a wedding gift of grotesque power—to the extreme edge of the United States. These newly-arrived Anglo immigrants traded primarily with the Cherokees who were relocated into Indian Territory. In more recent years, my family hiked on trails past the abandoned chimneys and stone-walled fields of by-gone Ozark families. My own home lies farther east where the floodplain of the Mississippi Delta abuts the Interior Highlands of which the Ozarks are the northern uplift. In the nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of Native, white, and black immigrants would create the Arkansas Valley borderlands amidst the alluvial plains, mountains, and prairies.

In some sense, this dissertation begins at the western boundary where my ancestors built a farm and transposed African slavery to the edge of Indian Territory. It was not always the boundary. In 1819, Arkansas Territory expanded almost to the western edge of Oklahoma. Most histories of the state, however, typically conformed to the more restricted modern state borders. Scholars focused on the spread of white settlement but did not address how the shapes of territorial borders moved and shrunk. I wanted to add the stories of Indian nations who occupied the land that was later separated from the Arkansas territorial boundaries. In graduate school, my attempts to understand more about the larger history of these borders, and to do more than a parochial history of
Arkansas, brought me to two complementary fields: Borderlands history and Southern Environmental history.

My fascination with borderlands historiography built on the encounters between Native Americans and European settlers. In my first semester of graduate school, I was introduced to Richard White’s *Middle Ground*. Actually, our class read a book responding to *Middle Ground* because my professor assumed we all knew that seminal book. I have subsequently read and reread White’s opus, which argues that the political divisions, spaces, and economies of the Ohio Valley cannot be understood without considering both Native and European influences. I was thrilled to find that scholars have examined that framework in the Arkansas Valley. Kathleen DuVal’s *Native Ground* helped articulate not only the importance of Cherokee power, but also the centrality of Mississippian, Quapaw, and Osage interests during the first centuries of European presence.

I was also curious about the forests of the Ozark Mountains. As a child, my father pointed out the old saw dust piles, and I admired my own skills for recognizing old logging roads and deer trails. I devoured some of the famed early descriptions of frontier Arkansas: Thomas Nuttall, a botanist, George Featherstonhaugh, a geologist; and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a naturalist. Their vivid, humorous descriptions of Arkansas society delight many modern-day readers. For me, they revealed snapshots of the Arkansas Valley landscape in which cultures intermingled. William Cronon’s *Changes in the Land* offered a model of borderlands environmental history. He argues that Native Americans and European settlers understood and used the land differently, which had fundamental repercussions for these societies and the environment. Southern environmental historians
have subsequently focused analysis on the agricultural development of the region and how human societies have manipulated environmental processes.¹

There was a third set of influences that directed not so much my topics but my approach. I admired several monographs that challenged how historians selected their leading characters. James Goodman’s *Stories of Scottsboro* tries to answer the question of “what happened” in the case of the Scottsboro Boys from “the perspectives of a wide range of participants and observers.” Readers of this dissertation will see that each chapter focuses on specific perspectives and locations in the Arkansas Valley. I also appreciated James Merrell’s *Into the American Woods*, focusing on the individuals who served as cultural intermediaries. That focus not only on the narrative but the individuals provided a roadmap to new insights. Each chapter of this dissertation highlights the men and women who disseminated environmental and scientific knowledge for geopolitical influence. Finally, in Juliana Barr’s work on native geography—how native societies understand “the spatial contours of their sovereignty”—I found a model for how environmental ideas about the spectrum of resources, landscape knowledge, and social geography solidified into the geography of sovereign territories. The outcome of each

¹ This dissertation assumes the existence of a South such that it can also be contested. Implicit in my analysis is that the South is often associated with the Cotton Kingdom. Indeed, this Cotton South largely dominated the geographical space of the southeastern United States. However, I argue that multiple geographically defined “Souths” existed within this region, notably the Native South and African American Souths—which I highlight through runaway slaves. Definitions of the South as an American region are remarkably diverse. Black-White race relations, former states of the Confederacy, the extent of the monocrop slave plantations, the extent of utisol soils, and the humid subtropical weather have all been used to help define the South as a social and ecological region. I demonstrate how Native, Euroamerican, and African American communities all impacted the settlement of this region, creating numerous social geographies within the physical outlines of the region. Jack Temple Kirby, *Mockingbird Song: Ecological Landscapes of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
chapter narrative is a discernible geographical space that grounded claims of sovereignty or autonomy in the Arkansas Valley.2

The outcome of this research suggests that the Arkansas Valley was a Petri dish for the settlement patterns of the western half of the North American mid-continent, stretching from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. Here, the plantation economy of the antebellum Deep South developed alongside the Native South. White settlers attract most of the historical attention, but their actions were often reactions in a region where every acre of fertile forest was desired by multiple communities. The prototypes of western settlement in the late nineteenth century took form here as Indian Reservations, National Parks, scientific explorations, police jurisdictions, and private property developed within this multicultural southern borderland.3

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This is the story of the persistence of multiple communities of Native Americans and African Americans who maintained autonomous territory in the face Cotton Kingdom advancement. Traditional narratives of antebellum American expansion in the southeast imagine an indomitable westward expansion of cotton agriculture. Yet, migrating Indian nations and runaway slaves in the Arkansas Valley influenced ideas about the environment, about scientific practices, and about state power in ways that have


been largely overlooked. In particular, Indian negotiators debated over access to game resources and agricultural areas while turning scientific expeditions, maps, and surveys into tools for delineating indigenous territory. Enslaved laborers transformed parts of the Arkansas Valley into an extension of the plantation districts and then navigated the increasingly familiar landscape to find places of concealment and resources. In response, white settlers applied surveys, established national parks, developed police jurisdictions to try to wrest control from Native Americans and African Americans. By 1850, settlement patterns followed neither simple environmental contours nor did white farmers occupy all the prime cotton lands. I argue that, as Native and non-Native groups migrated into the Arkansas Valley, each group’s power to expand their areas of control depended in part on their ability to adapt previous land use practices to the region’s varied environments and to mold scientific practices for their own advantage. By contending successfully with environmental changes and early American science, Native Americans and African Americans influenced the contours of multi-cultural settlement despite the much larger population of white settlers.

The development of the Cotton Kingdom is frequently studied from the heart of plantation districts rather than the contested regions where planters’ political, military, and economic power faltered in the face of adaptive Indian nations and confounding landscapes. Indeed, readers are more likely to see the perspective of calculating capitalists and Southern legislators—in whose imagination the Cotton Kingdom was a cohesive “empire”—rather than the perspective of Indian leaders who understood the weaknesses in Southerners’ claims to regional dominion. Scholars have demonstrated beyond a doubt that the Cotton Kingdom enjoyed not only national political support, but
also investment from an international capitalist system that pursued land for the production of cotton at the expense of the lives of millions of enslaved African Americans. Walter Johnson’s *River of Dark Dreams* evokes the imperialist impulses of the Cotton Kingdom, which sought to expand from the Mississippi Valley throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Yet, in the Arkansas Valley, within easy steamboat rides from the Mississippi River, Native Americans occupied desirable cotton lands and runaway slaves avoided domination by slaveowners. Focusing principally on the dreams of Cotton Kingdom expansionists cannot explain the presence of so many communities throughout the antebellum period. Rather, on the periphery of the Cotton Kingdom ideas about the landscape and about science became currencies for power on par with the latest prices for a bale of cotton.4

Not surprisingly, Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and African Americans sought to define the valley’s resources in ways that supported their own territorial interests. Cherokee leaders in the 1820s shifted depictions of their resource use from being hunters to being farmers and later used surveys and cartography to support Cherokee land claims. Cotton Kingdom boosters deployed writers and surveyors to

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delineated the specific ecological boundaries of cotton production and even developed mineral springs into the nation’s first national park as a beachhead for white settlement. Runaway slaves used ethnobotanical foods, slave gardens, and spiritual understandings of the landscape in their efforts for escape from the brutality of enslavement. These varied attempts to define resource use, create alliances, and direct scientific practices to support land claims show the methods used to create borders and landscape control from the colonial to the antebellum periods.

By arguing that debates over the landscape enabled non-white communities to carve out territory, I do not mean to suggest that Native Americans groups in the nineteenth century were as successful in dominating geopolitical contests as they had been in previous centuries. Nor do I argue that Euro-Americans were impotent in establishing settlements; the migration of Native Americans and African Americans to the region was in large part due to American policies. But the Arkansas Valley was a region where the actions and beliefs of non-white groups created indigenous territory and spaces not controlled by white settlers. Native peoples struggled with internal political turmoil, conflicts with rivals, and the complexities of new landscapes, but they established territories and negotiated treaties that recognized their definitions of land use. Enslaved African Americans suffered tremendous power imbalances and were forced to labor in disease-ridden swamps, but their illicit movements forced white slave owners to create reactive police jurisdictions. Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and African Americans all contributed to the settlement of the southern borderlands into the nineteenth century.
Reconstructing the interactions between cultures and nature shows how inhabitants of the Arkansas Valley had to contend not only with each other but the complex processes of floods, droughts, and animal populations. Native Americans, Euro-Americans, and African Americans attempted to understand the ecological productions of the region for leverage in the battles for political power and autonomous space. Indian nations persisted on choice sections of land desired by hundreds of thousands of American settlers. To control the Arkansas River Valley floodplain, thousands of slaveowners forced enslaved laborers to physically transform the landscape. Yet African Americans moved outside of the surveillance of white Arkansans in areas that provided the cover of the forest and the subsistence options of expanding agriculture. As the developed in the antebellum period, the multiplicity of sovereign and autonomous spaces reflects the combination of different communities who harnessed the environmental processes of the region.  

Excavating the multi-cultural reality of the southern borderlands draws on southern environmental historians’ calls for “landscape history.” The agrarian turn in environmental history shifted attention away from the supposed pathless wilderness of...
the American West to understanding of human-nature intermingling. Mart Stewart’s thoughtful discussion of landscapes as the “nexus of interactions between humans and the environment” came to the fore in the plantation south in his own study of tidewater rice culture. As Christopher Morris argues, landscape history “treat[s] all land, from the pine forests to suburban lawns, as fields of manipulated nature and all people, as it were, as cultivators.” Following this logic, southern mountain resources, hunting grounds, and river banks appear as part of a varied southern landscape, and a wider cast of protagonists, from Quapaw bison hunters to exploratory scientists, participated in the story of southern settlement.6

In part because of the variety of southern landscapes and resources, southern environmental historians have been among the most effective at incorporating indigenous

6 Stewart, What Nature Suffers to Groe, 12; Mart A. Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West and South,” Environment and History 11, no. 2 (May 2005): 139–62; Carney, Black Rice; Edelson, Plantation Enterprise in Colonial South Carolina; Christopher Morris, “A More Southern Environmental History,” The Journal of Southern History 75, no. 3 (August 2009): 593; Landscape history among environmental historians draws on the debates over landscape that have long permeated the field of cultural geography. Carl Sauer gave the most concrete direction to the field arguing for the centrality of human culture in creating ways of life with the maxim: “culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, and the cultural landscape the result.” In this definition, culture was visible on the landscape through the material culture of human society. Subsequent generations of so-called “new cultural geography” scholars have slowly incorporated the human perception as a level that recognizes different groups perceiving the same landscape in different ways. Geographical studies of African American slavery have explored both divergent perceptions of slavery geography from enslaved and enslaver as well as the material creation of “black landscapes” like gardens and hidden pathways. Foucault joined in the chorus of spatial analysis by arguing that “space is fundamental in any exercise of power,” lending direct credence to the notion that geographical claims to certain spaces offers texture to seemingly overwhelming power differentials. The history of cartography also builds on the idea of mapped space as a perception of power. Ultimately, environmental history is, at its root, an extension of cultural geography that perhaps diverges in method of situating the social context first. Carl Ortwin Sauer, The Morphology of Landscape (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1925); John Winberry, “The Geographic Concept of Landscape: The History of a Paradigm,” Linda France Stine et al., Carolina’s Historical Landscapes: Archaeological Perspectives (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997); Denis Cosgrove, Stephen Daniels, and Alan R. H. Baker, The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, eds., Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Barbara Heath and Amber Bennett, “‘The Little Spots Allow’d Them’: The Archaeological Study of African-American Yards,” Historical Archaeology 34, no. 2 (2000): 38–55; Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia”; “Space, Knowledge, Power,” Michel Foucault, The Foucault Reader (Pantheon Books, 1984); J. R. McNeill, “Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History,” History and Theory 42, no. 4, (2003): 5–43.
protagonists into broader southern history and geography. Timothy Silver’s classic *New Faces on the Countryside* explored the environmental history of the southern Atlantic states within the context of Native and European encounters. Silver’s historiographical article insists that the South is not a neo Europe but the result of encounters between three distinct cultures and the environment. Several historians have explored indigenous environmental adaptations to European market forces and cross cultural encounters.

James Carson argues that Choctaws adopted horses to exploit trade niches. In the Arkansas Valley, Joseph Key argues that game depletion resulted from the rise and fall of the cross-cultural fur trade. Christopher Morris examined Native and European attempts to control the Mississippi Valley by arguing that there are “two Mississippi Valleys. One is wet, the other dry.” The environmental framework invites consideration of a more culturally complex South because Native control of resources like corn and game provide an alternative trajectory of regional resource extraction and consumption.\(^7\)

While adaptation to environmental change was a central component of the colonial period, in the nineteenth century the practices of early American science emerged as critical mediums of knowledge contests. Historians of the science have demonstrated the relationship between scientific developments and colonial projects, but new interest in cross-cultural knowledge exchange examines the social web in which seemingly objective science grew from localized, subjective sources. Susan Scott Parish

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shows how these colonial projects became trans-Atlantic knowledge exchanges in which Euro-Americans contributed significantly to European-based sciences. Cameron Strang argues that European and United States regimes used this polycentric knowledge in their expansionary projects in the Gulf South. Yet, in the Arkansas Valley, scientific practices were used not only for expansion but as anti-colonial tools. Native Americans and Euro-Americans alike harnessed cartography, scientific expeditions, surveys, and health science in order to validate or establish new territory. By examining regions where indigenous and African American knowledge was not wholly exploited, scholars can better consider how Indigenous forms of knowledge shaped these ostensibly European scientific traditions. The Arkansas Valley therefore offers a promising region in which to explore how Native, enslaved, and Euro-American settlers shaped the social applications of early American science.

The Arkansas Valley provides a view of the nineteenth century southeast from a region long dominated by Indian claims to power. Kathleen DuVal argues persuasively

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that Native Americans governed the region as a *Native Ground* throughout the colonial period. I, in turn, extend the influence of Native Americans through the antebellum period, both with white settlers and enslaved peoples’ movement, and show how critical environmental adaptations were to maintaining non-white sovereign territory. I frame much of the contingencies of power on responses to environmental change and scientific acumen, but the outcome of these contests is best seen in the territories that groups were able to create. Pekka Hääläinen and Samuel Truett have defined borderlands as the “spatial mobility, situational identity, local contingency, and ambiguities of power” that marked the limits of American state control. Yet, it is the reconstruction of and meaning of “indigenous and nonstate space and territoriality” that shows the tangible expression of non-white power. White settlers enjoyed vast numerical and political superiority in the Arkansas Valley after the 1820s, but they neither eradicated Indigenous rivals nor fully restrained African American movement. By centering non-white perspectives and new landscapes that confounded each wave of migrants, older narrative focus on the arrival of the Old South in the Arkansas Valley dissipates into the confluence of many Souths—the Native South, the African American South, and the Cotton Kingdom.9

The persistence of multiple sovereign and autonomous spaces rather than the emergence of an overwhelming American nation state encourages historians to question understanding of how non-white actors have influenced the meaning and contours of the midcontinent. I define this region both socially and environmentally as the *southern*  

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borderlands, the transition region between the American South and the Great Plains.

Between 1500 and 1850, countless encounters took place between Indians, Euro-Americans, and African Americans in the mid-continent wherein groups sought to shape knowledge and geographical control. Native Americans protected sovereign lands for centuries, including negotiating promising boundaries for Indian Territory in the 1820s, and non-Indian portions of the region became the state of Arkansas in the 1830s. The southern borderlands comprise the transition area between the bottomlands of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain, the mountains of the Interior Highlands, and the prairies of the Great Plains. The Arkansas Valley is the central connective corridor between the people and places of this area, while the Red and White Rivers mark the northern and southern boundaries. The interactions among the forests and wildlife of the lowlands, highlands, and prairies, and the human agricultural, husbandry and hunting practices defined the dynamic ecology and geopolitical boundaries of the southern borderlands.10

Native Americans were key communities in the development of Southern settlement, yet scholarship about how Indian nations influenced the geography of the Cotton Kingdom often disappears after the War of 1812. Southern historiography has benefitted from discussions of indigenous history that position indigenous actors in

10 In contrast to historians of the Deep South, borderlands historians have begun to emphasize more of the Native South in the antebellum period, but these studies either end in the 1820s or focus on areas farther east. DuVal, Native Ground; Christina Snyder, Great Crossings: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in the Age of Jackson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Historians have begun to evaluate borderlands around the Old South where slaveholder power emerged by 1850s. As such, these borderland narratives are similar to recent studies of the Old South “frontier,” except with a wider litany of characters, that, nevertheless, end with the American nation-state and plantation districts fully entrenched. Stephen Aron, American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border States (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Andrew J. Torget, Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015). This dissertation demonstrates that Native Americans and African Americans maintained territory in the Arkansas River Valley and that white settlers subsequently implemented forms of land tenure via surveys, national parks, and police jurisdictions that were crafted to specifically address concerns of persistent Native American presence.
Figure 0.1 The Arkansas River is one of the primary tributaries of the Mississippi. It flows through the Interior Highlands, the highest mountain chain between the Appalachian and Rocky Mountains, and connects the bottomlands of the lower Arkansas River with the prairies of the Great Plains. This dissertation also incorporates portions of the White and Red River basins into the Greater Arkansas Valley. Daniel Feher, *Physical Map of the Southeastern US* (freeworldmaps.net), accessed September 25, 2019, https://www.freeworldmaps.net/united-states/southeast/southeastern-us-map.jpg. [Cropped]
Southern narratives that would otherwise remain whitewashed. Native Americans slave holders adapted African slavery in ways that raised questions of racial distinction and kinship ties. Scholars have also argued that the American Revolution and War of 1812 were also Native conflicts that contributed to political change amongst the Cherokees, Creeks, and others. Indian nations also sought to redefine their sovereignty and form new social ties in the face of increased white settlement. I show how a variety of native groups defined their territories according to culturally specific resource use and then sought to protect that land in political negotiations with American officials and other Indian nations. In the Arkansas Valley political geography, centering indigenous lives helps position the arrival of the Cotton Kingdom along a historical continuum of environmental change and geographical conquest.¹¹

Much like studies of Native communities, studies of slave geography and environmental use have offered new insights on how slave communities understood their own spaces and impacted the mental geography of their owners. The geography of slavery from the perspective of enslaved Americans is now a vibrant focus of slave studies. Dell Upton and Rebecca Ginsburg, both geographers, argue that slave masters and enslaved perceived the landscape differently to the extent that there was a distinct

“slave landscape” focused on the outbuildings, forests, and fields rather than the big house. Recent scholarship demonstrates that the built environment of slavery was not uniform but varied in the broader Atlantic World. As scholars continue to highlight the experience of runaway slaves within the American South, Sylviane Diouf agrees with decades of scholarship that most “did not look for freedom in remote locations; [but] instead settled in the borderlands of farms and plantations.” Stephanie Camp’s *Closer to Freedom* examines slave geography from a gendered perspective, arguing that enslaved men and women created divergent geographical knowledge and contrasting options in terms of long-term or short-term flight. This dissertation is among the first to reconstruct the runaway slave geography in the Arkansas Valley in accordance with former slaves’ recollections of geographical borders as well as their attempts to apply older forms of environmental knowledge to the changing resources on the cotton frontier.

Throughout the antebellum period, promoters of the Cotton Kingdom—planters, newspapermen, politicians—sought to impose control over the Arkansas Valley. Historians of the Arkansas region argue that the slave society that was well established east of the Mississippi by the 1820s took several more decades to become the dominant political and economic force in Arkansas. The two or three decade development of a

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plantation economy in the Arkansas Valley exposed the systems of control that the Cotton Kingdom wielded in efforts to wrest power from indigenous competitors. Surveys and steamboats opened up agricultural lands and supply lines. Investment in slaves created the demographic and labor force needed to transform landscapes. Environmental ideas and scientific practices encouraged and validated internal improvements in specific areas. Seen from the edge, the Cotton Kingdom was a geopolitical juggernaut, but also curtailed by its own self-imposed limitations and its competitors’ adaptations.13

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The records of this multi-cultural southern borderland skew overwhelmingly towards the perspective of white settlers and slaveowners. To recover the perspectives of Native Americans and African Americans, I employ ethnographic approaches of reading sources “against the grain.” My sources include maps, travel narratives, scientific reports, personal correspondence, letters between government officials, newspapers, oral histories, autobiographical slave narratives, personal diaries, treaties, and legal statutes. In each of these, I looked for references to environmental understanding as well as geographical orientations such as boundaries, hidden places, or regional affiliations. While many of these documents are common to historians of the period, like runaway slave advertisements to study runaway slaves, I willingly incorporate WPA oral histories to recover the environmental references of runaway and truant slaves. Concerns about the

13 Ira Berlin argues that planters established a slave society in the lower Mississippi Valley by the end of the eighteenth century. Adam Rothman puts the date around 1820, after the federal government had suppressed British, Creek, and Spanish forces in the region. Walter Johnson emphasizes the “boom years of 1831-1835.” In contrast, historians argue that an Arkansas slave society emerged by 1840. Though planters arrived in Arkansas in the 1820s, their economic and political power took decades to foment. Ira Berlin, _Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America_ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Rothman, _Slave Country_; Johnson, _River of Dark Dreams_, 36; S. Charles Bolton, _Territorial Ambition: Land and Society in Arkansas, 1800-1840_ (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993); McNeilly, _Old South Frontier_.

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WPA narratives are certainly valid as it pertains to discussions of treatment or slaveowners’ behavior. However, oral histories of runaway slaves reflect the generational knowledge passed between enslaved people, and remembered by formerly enslaved people, rather than solely relying on the owner-centric perspective of slave advertisements and diaries.14

Reading sources for understanding of Native geography and ethnobotany is difficult, and this dissertation does not pretend to uncover all the complexity. Rather, political sources allow insight into how Native negotiators wielded geographical and environmental understanding. Most statements of indigenous negotiations or cartography come from white translators. My approach was to find indications that Native negotiators had discreetly influenced white commentators to take on seemingly pro-Native positions. The Cherokee map discussed in chapter two is one example, but the Quapaws’ ability to impress the French with the bison-hunting acumen also helped reinforce Quapaw territory in the lower Mississippi Valley French alliance.

A note to language: I use the terms Native American, Indian, and Indigenous interchangeably to encapsulate the wide variety of societies who occupied the southeast before and after European and African immigration while naming specific Indian communities when appropriate. The simplified Indian, Settler, Slave triumvirate also appears in the titles of regional works that examine slavery, settler colonialism, and Native politics. Where possible, I use the term for specific tribal entities to recognize the discrete interests and histories of these societies.15

Ultimately, this is an examination of some of the mid-continent’s denizens who debated farming, built spas, and moved dirt and water for sovereignty and autonomy. At the foundation of each chapter is a discussion of who developed environmental or scientific knowledge, who changed or harnessed that knowledge for political purposes, and how negotiators dispersed that knowledge in order to fashion spatial sovereignty. This dimension of environmental and scientific knowledge is compelling because so many different communities wielded and formulated this knowledge so deftly.

To explore the multi-cultural southern borderlands and the variety of land divisions, I divide the dissertation into three sections with two chapters each. The first section follows Native Ground scholarship but reveals new understandings of Native boundaries in relation to regional landscape and animal populations to show how Indian nations claimed territorial sovereignty amidst environmental change and the increasing presence of European colonialism. Chapter one introduces the regional environment and chronicles broader environmental changes while showing how various Native Americans enforced territorial borders through their control of waterways, natural resources, and trade. Chapter two argues that Cherokees in the Arkansas Valley systematically adopted Anglo environmental language and scientific processes to claim treaty-backed sovereignty in fertile portions of the Arkansas Valley.

Section two situates the expansion of the Cotton Kingdom in the Arkansas Valley in debates about environmental science, internal improvements, and adjacent Indian lands. Chapter three chronicles how travel writers and surveyors served as the vanguard

of the Cotton Kingdom by identifying the limits of cotton production and simplifying the complex topography and climate for cotton cultivation. Chapter four argues that Cotton Kingdom politicians and businessmen transformed the scientific wonder of the Arkansas Hot Springs into the nation’s first public land reserve to be a bastion for internal improvements and a buffer against Indian presence in the region.

Section three explores the less formal geographies created by the movement of enslaved Arkansans and offers new interpretations on runaway slaves’ understanding of the Arkansas environment and how slave-catching developed on the cotton frontier. Chapter five argues that runaway slaves in Arkansas were more familiar with agrarian landscapes and so utilized the areas near settlements where new plant and animal regimes—created by slave labor—could sustain their flight. In this “autonomous space,” freedom seekers moved outside of the surveillance of white Arkansans. Chapter six argues that slaveowners recognized the informal geography of runaway slaves as an extension of the multi-cultural frontier and created a system of controls—from slave catching dogs to warnings of Indian presence to urban patrols—that limited enslaved movement and reflected the cultural and ecological diversity of the region.
CHAPTER 1

A LANDSCAPE IN TRANSITION:

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AND NATIVE POWER

IN THE ARKANSAS RIVER VALLEY

The Lower Arkansas Valley is a landscape of transitions between lowlands, highlands, and plains. At the eastern edge, near the river mouth, millions of acres of Mississippi delta ripple with the marks of ancient floods. In this bottomland hardwood forest, human visitors struggled to perceive the undulating ground. The vagaries of a few feet differentiate frequently-flooded wetland covered with cypress from mostly dry levees of oak trees, cottonwoods, and canebrakes. To the west, the escarpment of the Ouachita and Ozark Mountains uplifts abruptly from the floodplain. The highest peaks of the Interior Highland exceed 2,500 feet. These are the tallest mountains between the Appalachians and the Rockies. In the Ozarks, deep valleys create a terrain of twisting waterways and flat-topped mountains. In the Ouachita, parallel ridges create an accordion-like topography. West of the uplift, the hills turn to rolling prairies of ancient prairie soil. The stands of oak-savannah woodlands gradually thin in a shifting coastline towards the seas of prairie grass.

Even the climate is in transition between the semi-arid environment of the Great Plains and the humid subtropical setting of the southeast. Weather patterns of warm, moist air from the Gulf of Mexico mix with cold, moist air from the Rockies and cold, dry
air from Canada near the Ozark uplift. Frost patterns follow the topographical lines as the lowlands to the southeast of the uplift enjoy five more frost-free weeks than just north and west of the uplift. The uplift also divides the 50+ inches of annual precipitation typical of the American southeast from the 30 to 40 inches of rain in the eastern plains. These weather patterns experience occasional disruption in the form of large-scale, regional and continental drought conditions. Due to these environmental transitions, the Lower Arkansas Valley marks the northwest border of the landscapes shaped and transformed by weather patterns of the American South.16

Amidst the transitions in topography and climate of the Arkansas Valley, communities that moved into the region exploited the ecological diversity of these ecosystems to fortify territorial boundaries against their rivals. Humans have been present on the changing landscape for millennia; managing forests with fire, influencing game through hunting practices, and cultivating its plant-life with seeds. By the sixteenth century, written records offer greater clarity period regarding how competing groups actively manipulated the physical barriers of waterways and influenced the movement of wild animals to enforce territorial boundaries. In fact, historians cannot divorce the simultaneous challenges of environmental change and political upheaval that marked the earliest encounters between Native and European societies. In the long passage of time between 1541 and 1803, Native American communities who showed the ability to adapt to changes in vegetation and animal populations in the Arkansas Valley were often able

to maintain their political influence and determine their territorial boundaries, even in the face of increasing pressure from competing Indian nations and European colonists.17

During the early historical period, Native Americans in the southern borderlands experienced many of the environmental and political changes impacting Southeastern Indians. In the sixteenth century, Mississippian societies of Casqui and Pacaha dealt with ongoing droughts and political turmoil that influenced their responses to Hernando de Soto’s entrada. These rivals used the physical barriers of the watery landscape and ceremonies to attract rain as primary components of their negotiations with the Spaniards. A century later, the Quapaws arrived in the lower Arkansas Valley and adjusted to a much more forested and game-filled landscape with increasing French and British imperial presence. The Quapaws sustained their alliance with French colonists in part by defining Quapaw territory through bison hunting. When the end of the French and Indian War upended power dynamic throughout North America, the Osages residing near the mountains and prairies of the Arkansas Valley established a broad territory that crossed multiple ecosystems. By capturing and raising thousands of horses, the Osages quickly displaced rivals and became the trade conduit between the prairies and the budding

17 The central continent, which included the western portion of the modern day South, was largely a “native ground” throughout the colonial period. As Kathleen DuVal argues, “Indian ways of defining and dividing the region and conducting cross-cultural interactions would prove much more effectual than European ways.” DuVal, Native Ground, 28; Yet, Timothy Silver argues that environmental historians of the colonial period should frame their analysis around, “How did European colonists come to dominate an environment that had long been home to such sophisticated Indian culture?” Silver, “Learning to Live with Nature,” 542. The chapter reverses the focus of environmental historians focused on how European’s imposed their interest and takes the borderlands approach of understanding how Native societies continued to dominate or at least occupy influential political positions in the interior continent well into the nineteenth century. This chapter builds on Kathleen DuVal’s argument by focusing on how these various Indian communities built their power and maintained territory in the face of European colonialism by adapting to environmental changes to gain leverage in political negotiations. Pekka Hämäläinen champions this model in Comanche Empire, showing that much of the ability to claim political and military power stemmed from the environmental changes unleashed through the Columbian Exchange. Pekka Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2; Alfred W. Crosby, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972).
Europeans agricultural settlements along the Mississippi River. Indeed, the variety of ecosystems and environmental changes in this transition region incubated numerous Native polities who established their borders both in the face of social changes and shifts in climate and natural resources.

The indigenous roots of the Arkansas Valley reveal long-established patterns of how Native and non-Native groups shaped territorial sovereignty in the southern borderlands around understanding environmental resources. Chiefdoms and tribes utilized alluvial soils, migrating herds, and grasslands to claim specific territories within the diverse landscape. Indigenous populations navigated the environmental realities of drought, animal migrations, and the influx of disease, livestock, and European populations. Historical records provide snapshots of how peoples like the sixteenth century Mississippian agriculturalists, seventeenth and eighteenth century Quapaw bison hunters and farmers, and the eighteenth century Osage plains raiders imposed territorial borders, pinned their hopes to certain natural resources, and largely dictated the geopolitical reality of the middle continent in the colonial period.

Southern environmental historians have begun to extend the history of the South prior to the arrival of the nineteenth century cotton frontier. The opening chapters of southern environmental histories uniformly dismiss notions of “ecological Indians” living in harmony with nature and, instead, detail the imprint of Native hunting and farming on the landscape. Nonetheless, southern environmental historians of the colonial period typically frame the perspective of the interactions between Native Americans and European colonists around how Europeans came to dominate the landscape, and argue that European practices fundamentally transformed the southern landscape. This chapter,
instead, focuses on Native initiatives and connects the early historical period to the nineteenth century by demonstrating how the generations of human and natural dynamics left a mosaic of disturbed landscapes. As successive groups encountered the Arkansas Valley landscape, they were not pushing a frontier so much as adjusting to a layered land with constantly shifting resources and disturbance regimes. In this chapter, I argue that Native Americans adopted specific ecological practices to help them to navigate—and even prosper amidst—new environmental and political realities. This chronologically expanded understanding of Arkansas Valley environmental change, including the emphasis on the patterns of indigenous territorial demarcation, will help explain the persistence of the multi-ethnic southern borderland into the nineteenth century.18

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The transitional landscapes of the Arkansas Valley have not been a deterministic environmental canvas nor have humans imposed their will on a static landscape. Rather, humans have identified and transformed—and have been transformed by—the physical

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18 Southern environmental historians have willingly addressed long timeframes of several centuries to evaluate environmental change. Indeed, scholars evoke the “humanized landscapes” of the Appalachian Mountains and Yazoo Deltas in which human societies have transformed natural processes for subsistence, leaving the imprint of human intentionality on the forests, waterways, and soils. Nonetheless, the Eurocentric focus of the eighteenth and nineteenth century environmental histories neglects the persistence of Native societies in the region into the nineteenth century and beyond. Indeed, the earlier Native-dominated time periods disappear as these works examine the roots of the modern Southern landscape. Donald Edward Davis, Where There Are Mountains: An Environmental History of the Southern Appalachians (University of Georgia Press, 2003); Saikku, This Delta, This Land; Many historiographies and notable works also ignore the environment of the Native South in order to speak to more mainstream southern historiography of antebellum agriculture. Morris, “A More Southern Environmental History”; Paul Sutter and Christopher J. Manganiello, Environmental History and the American South: A Reader (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009); Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian”; In explaining his study of how Warren County, Mississippi became a “Southern place,” Christopher Morris recounts that a scholar chided him that slavery and King Cotton were “inevitable” and that how it became Southern was “not important.” Morris’ work influenced my own by acknowledging “many Souths.” Morris, Becoming Southern, vii, xv; In contrast, in this chapter I show how successive Arkansas Valley Indian groups constructed their recognized territorial boundaries based on ecological practices, familial connections, and trade. This chapter establishes patterns of environmental change and geopolitical boundaries that contextualize the arrival of the Cotton South as one of a series of land-use systems that have existed in the region.
processes at work in this region. Water—in its guises as rivers, floods, and rain—offers a
guide to the contoured canvas within which human tangled in the southern borderlands.
One ecologist calls the Mississippi Alluvial Plain “a land of rivers, built by rivers, [and]
defined by rivers.” The massive waters of the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers have
deposited new soil from across the continent. Many smaller waterways, including the
White and St. Francis Rivers, cut through the land between the Arkansas and Mississippi,
adding to the torrents of water that cover the alluvial plains during floods. Over
millennia, older river channels became bayous and ox-bow lakes, leaving scars of ancient
waterways crisscrossing the broad Mississippi alluvial plain.19

Vegetation zones have evolved in the alluvial plains as artifacts of centuries of
flooding. To expel the excess energy of water and soil, these rivers rise over their typical
channel, spread laterally, and deposit fresh soil along the edges of the high water. Over
time, floodwaters have built staircases of gradually elevated areas, or “bottoms,” each
with their own plant communities. In the lower “first bottoms,” closest to the main
channel, flood waters often scour heavy vegetation. On the higher “second bottoms,”
water-tolerant plants, such as cypress, cattails and willows take root with less frequent
flooding. Above the bottoms, the silt from the highest of flood waters builds a third
terrace. These elevated, fertile soils that outline the main channel are the natural levees
that rarely wash out from floods. Levees on major rivers can be hundreds or thousands of
feet wide, identified by sycamore, oak and river cane. The bottomland hardwood forest
that grow on these elevated soils is the dominant vegetation of the floodplain region.

Agricultural societies have been attracted to these raised grounds, and cleared them over the centuries, fundamentally transforming the forests for human sustenance.20

Elevated terraces are notable intrusions in the bottomlands of the Arkansas delta, such as the Grand Prairie on the western edge of the alluvial plain. Unlike the deep, recently deposited alluvial soil, the prairie formed from an ice-age Arkansas River stands fifty feet above the surrounding lowlands. Two feet below the surface, a clay subsoil is impervious to water, restricting the spread of trees. The prairie morphed in the past ten thousand years by expanding during periods of drought, being managed by human fires, and grazed by animal herds. Historical travelers were awed by the five hundred thousand acre island of tallgrass prairie. However, the Grand Prairie of the alluvial plain exemplifies the patchwork of environmental settings that sustained indigenous power.21

The Gulf Coastal Plain to the south of the Arkansas River is an older lowland region than the delta. Rather than being refreshed by Mississippi River floods, the sand and gravel rich soils are the remains of an ancient shallow shelf of the Gulf of Mexico. Loblolly-shortleaf pine forests flourish along the rolling terrain. In contrast to the bottomland hardwood forest, agricultural communities have not sustained widespread fields or gardens except in the alluvial bottoms near area streams.22

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West of the lowlands, streams scour valleys in the uplift of the Interior Highlands. The Ozark Mountains, comprising the northern section of the Highlands, are actually tall plateaus dissected by spring-fed rivers. Generally between 1,100 and 1,500 feet high, the vertical relief plateaus support a wide array of ecological niches. In the northwest, the Springfield plateau has the least elevation variance and the most fertile soils in the Highlands. Locations with thin surface soils also support sporadic prairies that have supported agriculture and livestock in recent centuries. Closer to the Arkansas River, the Boston Mountains are the highest subsection of the Ozark uplift, with summits over 2,500 feet. The spiderweb of streams in these uplands makes the region a maze of hilltops and drainages that have long sustained wild and domesticated animal populations as well as small-scale agricultural production in the flood zones around mountain streams.23

The Ouachita Mountains in the southern section of the Highlands direct more uniform, east-west flowing river valleys. Unlike the Ozarks, the Ouachita Mountains are a violently folded landscape where the slow collision between the North American and South American plate left horizontal scars in the form of miles-long ridge lines. The resulting faults and fractured bedrock also created the geology of the Hot Springs. The valleys between the eroded ridge tops form long, fertile basins that are sometimes wide enough to support large-scale agriculture. In addition, Indigenous societies also mined rock quarries for chert and novaculite—a chert-like rock that served for toolmaking—and maintained salt-springs on many of the area waterways.24

23 Foti, 5; Sabo III and et. al., “Human Adaptation in the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains,” 4.

West of the highlands, a transition in rainfall patterns marks the Osage Plains—the eastern edge of the Great Plains. The soils here are the deposits of shallow seas, similar to the Gulf Coastal Plain, and sediment from the Rocky Mountains. The Osage Plains comprise a shifting boundary of tallgrass prairie and widely spaced oaks. The grass savannas separate the treeless plains and the deciduous forests to the east. Consistent dry periods and the gently rolling terrain make the region susceptible to wildfires which maintain and spread prairie grasses. These vibrant prairies served as the feeding grounds for ranging bison, elk, and deer. Indigenous societies in the Arkansas Valley often maximized their resources by combining the game production of the prairies with the agricultural potential of river bottoms as well as the mountain ecologies of the highlands to the east.25

While human cultures have impacted and utilized the landscape since the end of the last Ice Age, historical documents from the last five centuries hint at how groups understood and manipulated these landscapes for territorial sovereignty and regional power. In the historic period, drought, disease, animal migration, and European animal introductions all punctuated older environmental patterns and created new realities for powerful groups to harness. Indigenous societies actively responded to the vagaries of these regions by cultivating agricultural belts, channeling waterways, and managing grazing grounds for large animals including bison and deer. These environmental changes offered both risk and reward for Native American powers in relation to Native and European rivals.

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In the summer of 1541, the chieftain Casqui waited for the approaching army, surrounded by an entourage of warriors, priests, and servants. He had received news two days before that men on deer-like creatures had emerged from the woods and attacked one of his southeastern villages. He was accustomed to periodic violence as two powerful rivals controlled area in close proximity to him. Casqui was perhaps surprised to hear about the direction of the army. A large, deep wetland bounded his eastern territories. Indeed, when the strangers emerged from the swamplands, many were covered up to their waists in mud and appeared exhausted. Casqui offered to house this strange traveling army of Hernando de Soto near his principal town, which Spanish chroniclers also called Casqui.

Casqui hoped de Soto could assist in the ongoing struggle with the nearby province of Pacaha, with which he was in a generations-old conflict. Due to the conflict, Casqui’s people protected their villages with palisades. A deep, water-filled ditch surrounded the principal town, which provided water access and also served as a water barrier, much like the wetlands surrounding his territory. In the days that followed the Spaniards’ arrival, Casqui allowed de Soto to raise a tall tree with a cross-beam on a principal mound as the stranger promised it would bring rain. Casqui, in turn, demonstrated his own power over nature by overcoming the wetlands that bounded his territory to enable de Soto’s cumbersome army to move toward Pacaha. Casqui ordered his subjects to quickly construct a 600-foot-long bridge across the morass. During this week of hosting de Soto’s entrada, Casqui revealed the centrality of reconfiguring waterways to define his power and territory in the sixteenth century Mississippi Valley. 26

Mississippian chieftains like Casqui oversaw the manipulation of water to create and defend their chiefdoms. In the middle Mississippi Valley, the topography was largely flat, but subtle rises and fertile soils supported one of the most densely populated and territorially complex regions of the middle continent. Increasingly larger populations of levee-based agriculturalists helped define the Mississippian period. Beginning in the fourteenth century, formerly independent chiefdoms began to consolidate into powerful civil-ceremonial centers under the control of powerful hereditary chieftains. Farmers tilled natural river levees into productive corn fields. By the time of the Spanish entrada, these communities were suffering from ever more extended droughts. Rival polities persisted in close proximity, and their conflicts were sensitive to the fluctuations in rainfall and floods. Unfortunately, the arrival of Hernando de Soto’s entrada in the sixteenth century only recorded the later stages of Mississippian political dominance and the environmental strategies that undergirded political boundaries. Despite de Soto’s clumsy understanding of Native territories, these Native polities’ ability to influence de Soto’s movements through the landscape and negotiate using environmental resources demonstrated the strategies behind Mississippian territorial boundaries and political power in the bottomlands of the Middle Mississippi.27


27 I use the “Middle Mississippi” term to conform with archaeological approaches to the Mississippian period. The Middle Mississippi Valley comprised a principal region of Mississippian culture between the convergence of the Mississippi with the Missouri and Arkansas Rivers. This Indigenous-centric approach shows how environmental changes of the Mississippi Valley waterways, that extended into the historical period, had already begun prior to Spanish arrival. Bruce D. Smith, “Middle Mississippi Exploitation of Animal Populations: A Predictive Model,” American Antiquity 39, no. 2 (1974): 274–91; Morris, The Big Muddy.
Mississippians impressed the Spanish chroniclers with their dense populations and the geographical proximity of rivals west of the Mississippi River. Societies located principal towns along significant waterways like the Mississippi, St. Francis, Arkansas, and White Rivers. Some principal towns, such as Pacaha, one of the leading powers in the region, but had easy access to prominent waterways. Maize, which agriculturalists had cultivated on a mass scale since the tenth century, fueled the largest populations that the Spanish encountered in their three year journey. As many as fifteen hundred people might occupy towns as large as twelve football fields. With excess stores of corn, beans, fish, and meat, these centers could support de Soto’s army for weeks at a time. Yet, palisaded towns suggested that the well-provisioned populations and closely-situated geography fomented rivalries with few barriers besides natural waterways.28

In choosing to reside in the lowlands of the Mississippi Valley, Mississippian societies espoused the material and cultural superiority of floodplain agriculture. Inhabitants placed their towns on the choicest soils and cultivated beans, maize, and squash. Spanish observers admired the fertile levees near “rich river margins, on which the Indians made extensive fields.” Animals, wild grains, and fruits flourished in the margins of these communities, which provided additional food. Yet agricultural products likely remained the most important food source. Archaeologists note the spines of interred female Mississippians indicate stresses from agricultural labor, revealing the reliance on gendered labor to produce much of the necessary food production.29

28 Hudson, *Knights of Spain*, 291–95; Bourne, “Conquest of Florida as Told by a Knight of Elvas,” 123; Morse and Morse, *Archaeology of the Central Mississippi Valley*, 311.

Figure 1.1 During the sixteenth century, Pacaha and Casqui were two leading provinces in one of the most densely populated regions of the southeast. This map, one of the earliest to recreate de Soto’s entrada, shows the close proximity of rivals and rivers. Pieter van der Aa. 1695. *Map of Ferdinand de Soto’s American Conquests, drawn from his memoirs.* State Library of Florida, Florida Map Collection. Accessed October 17, 2019. https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/323248. [Cropped]

The de Soto chronicles enable historians to understand how some Mississippian chieftains actively used their awareness of environmental processes and the alluvial landscape in their approach to political power. In contrast to the fertile soils of the delta levees, Mississippian chieftains spoke derisively of the regions to the north as “being very cold [and] thinly populated.” Furthermore, the chieftains said, bison roamed so extensively that the inhabitants could not protect their corn fields and were forced to live upon the meat. Though the Mississippian communities also hunted seasonally and gathered wild foods, the informants of the Spanish entrada demonstrate that

Mississippians preferred agriculture for its presumed cultural superiority along with the food itself.30

In addition to prizing agricultural fields, the chieftains recorded in the de Soto chronicles often identified their territory relative to geographical contours. For societies along the Mississippi and Arkansas, the rivers demarcated power. When de Soto’s army first attempted to cross the Mississippi, the warriors of a Casqui rival, Aquijo, crossed the river in a flotilla of hundreds of canoes each day for a month and fired arrows onto the waiting Spaniards. Only the sudden disappearance of Aquijo’s canoe warriors allowed the Spanish barges to cross. Power flowed from manipulating natural processes and protecting ready-made barriers.31

Mississippian chieftains associated the ability to defend or cross rivers with military and spiritual power. A year after entering the Arkansas region, de Soto’s depleted army returned to the shores of the Mississippi. Chief Quigualtam, in present-day Mississippi, challenged de Soto to prove the Spaniard’s claim to be Son of the Sun: “cause [the Sun] to dry up the great river, and I will believe you.” Canoes and religious power thus formed a spectrum of tools that chieftains could initiate to demonstrate power to foes and retain power amongst their own people.32

As chieftains decided how to identify and defend their territory, de Soto’s most notable encounter west of the Mississippi reveals how the Mississippian chieftain Casqui wielding the technological and environmental ideas of the Casqui people. Each of the

30 Ibid.
32 Hudson, Knights of Spain, 346–47; Bourne, “Conquest of Florida as Told by a Knight of Elvas,” 154.
chroniclers left extensive details on the conflict between Casqui and his longtime rival Pacaha and de Soto’s attempts to bring these chieftains under Spanish influence. Separated by only a few miles of wetlands, Pacaha and Casqui had engaged in generations of conflict. De Soto had initially approached the less-strong Casqui to conquer Pacaha. The conquistador subsequently allied himself with Pacaha to attack Casqui. Following discussions with Casqui, de Soto finally negotiated a truce between the two powers. Chroniclers’ thorough records were likely due to extolling the political successes of de Soto. The writers highlighted the raising of a cross on a mound at Casqui and the two caciques debating seating next to de Soto at a post-truce feast in Pacaha. In fact, Casqui used de Soto to increase his position against the stronger Pacaha. Casqui negotiations with de Soto revealed the centrality of environmental and religious considerations that supported his territorial sovereignty in the complex Mississippian world.

Like other Mississippian chieftains who defended waterways, Casqui used the streams and backwater swamps of the alluvial plain to define his territory. The principal Casqui town was likely located at the modern day site of Parkin Archaeological State Park. It occupied a strategic position near the confluence of the St. Francis and Tyronza Rivers. Due to poor soils, Casquians likely transported provisions to the civic-ceremonial center. Subsidiary villages, several of which could be seen from another village, stretched northwards up to fourteen miles from the principal town along the St. Francis and Tyronza. Thousands likely lived in the compact Casqui province. The cacique told de Soto that the province of Pacaha was distant one day’s travel. The border between the two rivals was likely the Blackfish Bayou, roughly eight miles from the Parkin site, while
the principal town of Pacaha was twelve miles east of the bayou. The land between them was a web of natural levees, bayous, backswamps, and oxbow lakes.33

Casqui’s control of the entrada’s movements reflected how Mississippian societies employed advanced technology to expand and contract territorial access. In preparation for de Soto’s initial march on Pacaha, Casqui impressed the Spaniards by sending engineers to construct a bridge across the “swamp” that divided the two rivals. “Broad and very cleverly built,” the causeway of large timbers with adjoining hand rails stretched from tree to tree across two hundred yards of deep morass. The Casquians were well versed in rapidly deploying bridge technology. Upon de Soto’s betrayal, Casqui had the bridge disassembled, blocking off access to the Casqui province. Only upon renegotiating peace did Casqui have the bridge re-assembled, allowing de Soto’s entrada to return through the territory. The advanced state of bridge technology to overcome the flooded landscape displayed the manner of geographical control utilized in the tightly-contested region.34

Casqui’s eco-political considerations extended to the religious symbolism of environmental control. De Soto’s expedition coincided with a multi-year drought and seasonal food shortages. Casqui understood his people’s existential crises as stemming from external military threats as well as from hunger caused by the drying climate.


34 Oveido y Valdes, “De Soto’s Expedition Based on the Diary of Rodrigo Ranjel,” 139; Bourne, “Conquest of Florida as Told by a Knight of Elvas,” 121, 129 Aquixo also built a bridge when de Soto first approached Casqui.
Casqui’s tenuous leadership depended on finding a solution to both. Casqui called upon the Spaniard to beseech the Catholic deity to “call upon for rain of which their fields were in great need, as their children were dying of hunger.” As the chroniclers noted, de Soto gladly instructed his shipwrights to fell a large tree and construct a cross to be placed on the highest mound in a formal procession. About fifteen thousand Casquians may have watched the multi-cultural ceremony. Though Mississippians had begun to diversify their food consumption in previous centuries, the symbolism of maize as a food and ritual material perhaps pushed Casqui to seek divine favor in the form of rejuvenating rain. The next morning, in a fortuitous event, the rains finally came. Casqui’s threatened position compelled him to invoke the foreign religious symbol that Casqui’ people now accorded environmental power.35

To highlight the importance of environmental favor, Casqui invoked this apparent benediction when he confronted the double-crossing de Soto. The Spaniard had joined Pacaha to attack Casqui, yet Casqui questioned the new alliance with Pacaha, stating that “[God] has heard us and gave us water in great abundance and refreshed our corn fields.” Though de Soto initially hesitated, the conquistador relented to the argument. Casqui’s new political power drew strength from the decision to ally with the rain-bearing deity, and de Soto benefitted from demonstrating a religious conquest during his entraña. Spanish chroniclers focused on the truce meal days later when Casqui and Pacaha argued over who would sit to the right of de Soto. Casqui’s victory was much more immediate. In a period of increasing drought, Casqui’s eco-political victory created a temporary

military peace with a much stronger rival and likely re-affirmed his power amongst his own people.\textsuperscript{36}

Though there are no written records after de Soto’s departure, Casqui’s divine favor likely did not last long. Amidst changing food production and political violence in the sixteenth century, lack of rain continued to plague these societies and exacerbate ongoing conflict. Tree-ring data indicates that the de Soto entrada arrived during a drought period that would only worsen over the next five decades into “the most severe prolonged drought over much of North America for at least the last 500 years.” Casqui’s negotiation hints at part of the reason why the Mississippian societies largely broke apart over the next century. Casqui’s emphasis on rain as a sign of political favor hints that the rains following the raising of de Soto’s cross boosted political fortunes for rulers like Casqui and Pacaha. However, by the 1550s chieftains would have struggled to maintain their political legitimacy under the weight of increasingly unfavorable environmental conditions.\textsuperscript{37}

Centralized Mississippian societies likely weakened from a combination of drought, disease, and political instability. While agricultural societies supplemented corn with alternative foods, the devastation of crops for such concentrated, corn-dependent populations likely weakened the general health. In addition, diseases carried by the entraña, including the one that killed de Soto along the banks of the Mississippi River, likely spread among the compact settlements west of the Mississippi. As communities

\textsuperscript{36} Oveido y Valdes, “De Soto’s Expedition Based on the Diary of Rodrigo Ranjel,” 141–43; Hudson, \textit{Knights of Spain}, 292.

\textsuperscript{37} De Soto arrived at the end of a roughly three year drought period. Above average rainfall in the lower Mississippi Valley persisted for no more than a decade after the de Soto expedition left. The 1550s marked the beginning of by nearly thirty consecutive years of drought conditions. David W. Stahle et al., “Tree-Ring Data Document 16th Century Megadrought over North America,” \textit{Eos, Transactions American Geophysical Union} 81, no. 12 (n.d.): 121.
dispersed throughout the landscape, the once heavily populated Arkansas Valley landscape went largely unmanaged. Shifting vegetation and animal species set the frame for the next recorded period of indigenous political activities.38

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“When we abandoned our former lands, we set out without knowing whither we were going. Our motive for leaving the country we occupied was the scarcity of game. We were too numerous at that time; we had as many as 1600 warriors. On arriving at the mouth of the Ohio River (JVy-Tonka), our chiefs determined on separating the nation, in order to procure the means of subsistence with greater facility.

After our separation, our party followed the course of the Ny-Tonka (Mississippi). The first red skins whom we met with were settled some way below the Ny-Whoutteh-junka [the St. Francis, literally the little Muddy River] ... they were called Tonnika. We attacked and put them to flight. Some time afterwards we entered this river, which we called Nyjitteh [the Arkansas, literally Red River] ... We soon discovered that there were other red skins (Indians) in the country. Parties were sent out to look for them. They were found encamped in the Great Prairie ... We attacked them; they made a valiant resistance, but we beat them and drove them away. This nation called itself Intouka; the whites at that period gave them the name of Illinois. Then we were left entire masters of this

38 Historians and anthropologists have established that disease and drought played a major role in the decline of Mississippian societies in the century after de Soto. Based on the actions of Casqui, chieftains were perhaps already suffering diminished political power even prior to de Soto’s arrival correlated with the inability to avoid devastating drought among other factors. Scarry and Reitz, “Changes in Foodways at the Parkin Site, Arkansas”; David W. Stahle et al., “Tree-Ring Reconstructed Megadroughts over North America since a.d. 1300,” Climatic Change 83, no. 1–2 (April 24, 2007): 133–49; Ann F. Ramenofsky and Patricia Galloway, “Disease and the Soto Entrada,” Patricia Galloway, ed., The Hernando de Soto Expedition: History, Historiography, and “Discovery” in the Southeast (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 266–67; Burnett and Murray argue that drought began a decline in populations that then accelerated with European diseases, “Death, Drought, and de Soto,” Young and Hoffman, Expedition of Hernando de Soto West of the Mississippi, 1541-1543, 227–36.
country. The Osages alone have made war on us; but we have always beaten and driven them beyond the Canadian River.”

Quapaw oral history suggests that the nation arrived from the Ohio Valley generations after the de Soto entrada and encountered a region fundamentally transformed following the Mississippian period. The population of the Arkansas Valley had plummeted from perhaps hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands with few groups comparable to the thousands inhabiting Mississippian chiefdoms. The expansive corn fields grew into dense stands of river cane, with only localized corn production. Prairie soils turned from supporting agriculture to grasslands filled with bison. Hunting grounds and unsettled areas extended over much wider territory. The arrival of French explorers and settlers in the 1670s further impacted trade, disease, and power in the middle Mississippi Valley. The Quapaws negotiated beneficial trade and military posts that captured French attention even as the majority of French interests focused along the Gulf of Mexico. Despite being a largely sedentary, agricultural people for whom maize was the “principal food,” they joined the growing game economy to partake in the geo-political contests of the middle Mississippi Valley. The Quapaws responded to the demographic and environmental changes in part by protecting and promoting bison production along the Arkansas and St. Francis Rivers to sustain their alliance with the French.


The human population dispersal of the post-Mississippian period set into motion a massive revegetation of the greater Mississippi Valley and an increase in animal populations. The disturbed soil of old agricultural fields bred dense thickets of river cane up to thirty feet tall. The canebrakes flourished without yearly cleaning from Mississippian farmers and a return to a more intermittent fire regime. The increase in edible plant cover, and fewer hunters, attracted bison, deer, bear, and wolf populations to expand more thoroughly throughout the Arkansas, St. Francis, and Mississippi River plains. The increase in game populations shaped the history of the Arkansas Valley for the two centuries after the Mississippian era.41

Middle Mississippi Valley residents oriented trade networks to shifting animal populations. Competing groups began to utilize specific game populations. Deerskins became the leading export commodity of the region. Southeastern Indians maneuvered to increase their weaponry to dominate deerskin trade, which fomented increased slave raids for captive-rifle exchange. However, Indian traders tested a variety of animal trade goods with French customers. As a party of La Salle’s Frenchmen moved through the Ouachita River Valley in the 1680s, Caddo hunters and traders presented them with beaver, deer, otter, and bear pelts while exaggerating their abundance, particularly of beaver. Conversely, the Quapaws who met with Marquette in 1673 admitted that “they know nothing of the beaver. Their wealth consists in the skins of wild cattle [bison].” As cross-cultural peltry exchange expanded in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century,

hunting grounds took on greater importance in the Indian and European contest for territorial sovereignty.42

By the seventeenth century, bison became an important game source along the Middle Mississippi. Historians hypothesize that bison populations on the plains rebounded after the fourteenth century—at the end of a drought period—and slowly migrated eastward. Arkansas Valley indigenous communities were hunting bison by the sixteenth century, a generation prior to the Spanish entrada. The bison populations that de Soto’s chroniclers noted in the colder mountains and eastern plains, spread east to the shores of the Mississippi and beyond by the seventeenth century. Bison were prevalent in the Arkansas and St. Francis River Valleys, with populations diminishing towards the gulf. 43

Amidst the changes in cultural groups and animal migrations, the Quapaws actively delineated their territorial boundaries by managing bison populations in the low-


lying landscape of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain. The most impactful practices incorporated yearly fires in the fall to promote new grasses and clear prairies for hunting. Quapaw hunters also likely over-hunted in some areas to shift game populations away from rivals. In 1723, a French troop travelling north from the Yazoo River reported “no hope” of finding bison. He learned from his Yazoo guides that the Quapaws were intentionally hunting areas south of the Arkansas River, perhaps to drive away bison populations. Quapaw overhunting concentrated bison west and north along the Arkansas and St. Francis, up to present-day Little Rock. The Quapaw territory bounded on the east with the Mississippi River, on the West with the uplift of the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains, and to the south with rivals like the Tunica and Natchez. Quapaw control of the Arkansas and St. Francis River access also enabled them to control French interaction with bison populations.44

The Quapaws exploited their practices as a bison-hunting society to craft trade and political advantage with the French. In the earliest French reports from the Middle Mississippi Valley, Quapaw chiefs directed French alliance to support bison hunting. Quapaw chiefs in the 1670s complained that they “dare not go and hunt wild cattle, on account of their enemies.” For the Quapaws, the French alliance aided in expanding their hunting grounds specifically for bison as well as procuring more rifles for hunting.45 Quapaw adaptation to the bison hunt proved critical in protecting their political sovereignty in the Middle Mississippi. The Quapaws suffered substantially from diseases


throughout the eighteenth century, even as their political alliance with the French grew stronger. Notably, an epidemic in 1698 lowered their population from around six thousand to under one thousand. In the 1720s, a French soldier reportedly brought further devastation by unwittingly spreading smallpox in a village, “which carried off the greater part of them.”

Bison hunting enabled a wide swath of Quapaw society to influence French activity in the Mississippi Valley by the 1720s. The French presence in the lower Mississippi increased with the settlement of New Orleans near the mouth of the Mississippi in 1718. Quapaw men reinforced their bison prowess in performances that captured the imagination of French observers. The Quapaws invited the French to witness feats of male hunting prowess and techniques. These competitions involved “catch[ing] the beeves by the different methods,” and allowed young Quapaw men to prove their skills as hunters through entertainment. 46 Quapaw hunters hired themselves out as guides to French hunters traveling to the Arkansas and St. Francis regions. New Orleans developed a taste for bison tongue and meat, which the Quapaws were happy to satisfy. These guided excursions three hundred miles north of New Orleans also provided salt, bison tallow (or fat), and bear oil. Rather than a fur trade, the Quapaws promoted a regional consumption cycle of bison that involved New Orleans with the Quapaws at the center. 47

46 Louis Armand de Lom d’Arce Lahontan, New Voyages to North America, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites, vol. 1 (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1905), 204; The most common practice was to kill the most dominant bison in the herd Smith and De La Harpe, “Exploration of the Arkansas River by Benard De La Harpe,” 358; Du Pratz also complained that the practice of killing female bison might lead to population decline. Pratz, The History of Louisiana, 122; For a further discussion of bison hunting, see Arnold, The Rumble of a Distant Drum, 36–41.

Quapaw chiefs, hunters, and female villagers collectively molded French understanding of hunting grounds and political geography. Prior to a French hunting expedition up the Arkansas, Quapaw women “wept and have sought to intimidate” travelers to the Osage territory. The performative aspect of adult women interacting directly with the Frenchmen in public did not occur in the choreography of formal calumet dances but demonstrated Quapaw female expression around hunting excursions. As the French hunters approached the little rock, they asked their Quapaw guides about the huge plumes of smoke that filled the sky to the west. Though possibly intentional fires set by hunters, the Quapaw guides insisted that it was an Osage war sign, to reiterate Osage violence. The next day, the Frenchmen encountered four Quapaw hunters who had waited several days near “the Rock,” the western extent of Quapaw territory, to trade with the Frenchmen. Perhaps these were the arsonists, but that role was not recorded. In fact, their only geographical assistance was to direct the French south towards the Ouachita basin, back towards Quapaw hunting grounds. The Quapaws’ attempts to influence French hunting patterns occurred in a variety of encounters with chiefs, hunters, and even Quapaw women that collectively reinforced Quapaw territoriality.48

Quapaw’s ability to change French politics through French stomachs is evident from increased French interest in bison. The Arkansas Post existed sporadically as the French trade depot beginning in 1687 among the Quapaw villages near the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi River. In the 1720s, as guided bison hunts increased, the French attempted sustained military presence at the Post. French travelers associated the Post with bison with one memoir noting that, at the Arkansas Post, “the hunt for buffalos

useful to the colony is made.” Bison became so prevalent that in Le Page du Pratz’s *The History of Louisiana*, bison were the first animal listed for the colony. Their meat was the “chief food” for French colonists and bison skins were the “best blankets.” Dozens of Frenchmen yearly plied the grazing grounds of the White, Arkansas and St. Francis rivers. The French interest in trade and military alliance with the Quapaws was not built on the primary product of the region, deer, but in large part on the Quapaws’ management of the region’s bison population.49

In fact, the French considered moving their military bases specifically in response to the Quapaws’ bison hunting grounds. The French maintained the economic and military connection with the Quapaws by moving their fort nearer to the Quapaws in 1749. The Quapaw bison hunt remained politically powerful in part because the Quapaws were one of the few peoples with both access to extensive bison populations and who were also willing to process and transport the heavy, cumbersome items. In 1752, the commandant of Arkansas Post proposed moving the military installation to “the St. Francis River where cattle [i.e. bison] are abundant, and where there is more subsistence.” While deer skins were the largest bulk product of the colony due to their smaller size and ease for transport, one of the colonies richest merchants, Francois Menard, contracted for ten thousand pounds of bison skins to be shipped to Havana in 1775. Quapaw alliance with the French persisted due in part to the bison consumption, which the Quapaws used to support their position in the Mississippi Valley.50


The Quapaws and the French recognized the enduring symbolism of bison through ceremonial goods. In the archives of the Musée de l’Homme in France, a large robe produced from a bison skin depicts an alliance between the French and the three villages of the Quapaw people. The Quapaws notably painted skins with designs of animals and the calumet ceremonies, which were “very highly prized among the other nations.” One French traveler marveled at the bison hides that the Quapaws had the “industry to dress and paint.” Given the significance of bison hunting in the Quapaw-French alliance, the bison material was not merely a painting surface but very likely a symbolic feature in and of itself. A painted bison skin would have been used as a decorative bed cover, but the robe likely held additional significance as a military and political statement. Quapaw masculinity, female craftsmanship, and alliances utilized the activities and materials of the bison hunt and contributed to Quapaw methods of directing French policies in the Middle Mississippi.51

The market for bison diminished during the late eighteenth century from a combination of lack of market interest, possible declines in the bison population, and the greater economic incentives for deer. In 1776, thirty-six thousand deer skins were exported from Natchitoches near the Red River but only 120 buffalo hides. The century’s most significant drought around 1760 likely stressed populations during ongoing bison hunts, perhaps reducing the bison range in traditional Quapaw territory. At the Arkansas Post, the Quapaws remained friendly with the French but suffered from increased

incursions of Chickasaw and Choctaw hunters, who sought to harvest deer and other peltry in traditional Quapaw territory. Quapaw power waned alongside the diminishing bison population; however, the Quapaws maintained their position at the mouth of the Arkansas through new political and familial alliances. The Quapaws became the gatekeepers of hunting territory south of the Arkansas River rather than leading hunters and traders themselves.

As Quapaw bison populations diminished, a new regional Native power emerged by dominating the horse trade between the plains and the Mississippi River. The Osages were rivals of the Quapaws and, by the mid eighteenth century, were using French guns, horse raiding, and the complimentary environments of the plains and highlands to expand their own territory throughout the Arkansas Valley. Osage communities came to dominate the fur trade, largely ignoring the cumbersome bison trade and focusing instead on stealing horses and selling deerskins. The political destabilization created by the end of the Seven Years War combined with regional game shortages made the Arkansas Valley a highly coveted hunting region. The Osages procured the horse power spreading from Spanish settlements to the southwest to supply the animal energy needed in the emerging hunting and farming populations along the Mississippi. In exchange for market

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52 Historical ecologists have yet to study the demise of the 18th century southeastern bison herd. Reports from the late 18th and early 19th centuries do not mention the prodigious bison herds that had been so common in the decades prior. Stahle et al., “Tree-Ring Reconstructed Megadroughts over North America since a.d. 1300,” 8; Arnold, The Rumble of a Distant Drum, 36.

goods and guns, the Osages became a hunting and raiding power that used the horse trade to expand along the Missouri, Arkansas, and Red River Valleys.54

In 1763, the French transfer of the Louisiana colony to the Spanish opened new geopolitical possibilities in the Middle Mississippi Valley. Various Native and European powers vied for territorial sovereignty and control of the regional fur trade. The Spanish maintained a small garrison at Arkansas Post and later along the Ouachita River, but the handful of soldiers held limited effectiveness. Spanish directives intentionally avoided conflict, and Spanish officials relied on border control from their Native alliances, like the Caddos and Quapaws. Unfortunately for the Spanish, the Quapaws were unenthusiastic allies following the changeover from the French. The Caddos along the Red River were also “enfeebled by continual war and disease,” and struggled under incessant raids from the Osages. The potential failure of Caddo resistance portended a power vacuum. Seeing opportunity, Chickasaw and Choctaw hunters began to cross the Mississippi River into the St. Francis, Arkansas, and Ouachita Valleys. British traders bypassed the Spanish troops at Arkansas Post and established a trade depot on the boundary of Osage territory along the Arkansas at Cadron Creek. Nations on the plains and from east of the Mississippi hoped to claim the resources of the greater Arkansas Valley.55

54 Rollings, The Osage, 3–7, 38; Recent decades have seen greater emphasis on prairie tribes not simply as impediments to Euromerican expansion but as powerful actors who in some cases expanded their power due to the political and environmental changes of the colonial period. Hämäläinen, The Comanche Empire Both Osage Hegemony and Comanche Empire share the argument that plains tribes asserted themselves in the processes of colonization often thought to be dominated by European powers. DuVal, Native Ground, 109.

55 Gilbert C. Din, “The First Spanish Instructions for Arkansas Post November 15, 1769,” The Arkansas Historical Quarterly 53, no. 3 (1994): 315; Athanase de Mézières, Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780.; ed. Herbert Eugene Bolton (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark company, 1914); Rollings, The Osage, 132; The Chickasaw periodically pushed west of the Mississippi in
Regional environmental changes energized much of the shifting geopolitics. Depleting animal populations east of the Mississippi pushed hunters to the Arkansas region. Hunters and traders coveted deer in an increasingly competitive animal market. The Ouachita Valley, previously dominated by the Caddo, became a multi-national hunting ground. Tens of thousands of deerskins a year were shipped out of the Ouachita district. The Arkansas Valley, including the highlands and eastern plains dominated by the Osages, was so lucrative that coalitions of Delaware, Chickasaw, and Choctaw warriors advanced on the borders of the Osage territory in order to “hunt on the waters of the Arkansas.”

Spanish officials tried in vain to implement game management to curtail overhunting. Native communities pursued material wealth through commercial hunting; officials estimated at least eight hundred Europeans engaged in hunting around the lower Mississippi Valley by 1784. Bear oil, deer skins, bison tongues, and beaver pelts all enjoyed a market at New Orleans. However, by the 1780s, officials warned that overhunting had “scattered the beasts.” In response, the Spanish commander of the Ouachita district sought to “set bounds on the hunt” by prohibiting “hunting on horseback or with dogs” in the region. Despite the exhortations, the Spanish attempt to control the early 18th century, even reportedly pushing out competitors from the fertile Ouachita basin. Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, 303; British merchants first built the El Cadron as a blockhouse in 1777 near the beginning of the Ozark uplift. Key, “Masters of This Country,” 132–34; Arnold, *The Rumble of a Distant Drum*, 56.

political economy of European colonists and Native groups through trade posts and hunting regulations was largely ignored by traders who dealt directly with Indian tribes.\textsuperscript{57} 

The Spanish were relatively powerless against the increased commercial fur production in part because of the proliferation of horses in the Middle Mississippi Valley. In Native American communities, men and women alike benefitted from selling horses to hunters and to fuel the rising European agriculture east of the Mississippi. In exchange for horses and hides, Indian traders could expect kettles, beads, muskets, and ammunition, fueling further horse-based hunting. Plains Indian traders sold horses at markets in St. Louis, Natchez, Natchitoches, and New Orleans. From these entrepots, buyers supplied the horsepower for burgeoning farms along the Mississippi. Native women claimed a particular role in the horse economy. As an extension of their agricultural practices, Quapaw women raised and, presumably, trained horses who they then sold to Indian and Euro-American buyers across the Mississippi. As hunting and farming increased, the horse trade connected the greater Arkansas Valley to older Spanish presence south of the Red River and brought Plains Indian power to the shores of the Mississippi River. \textsuperscript{58} 

The Osages were poised to be an expansionist power as the economic changes wrought by the horse and fur economy merged with the end of the French and Indian

\textsuperscript{57} Hunters outnumbered the local European resident population of 227. Dickinson, “Don Juan Filhiol at Écore à Fabri,” 137–47; George C. Din, “The Indian Trade in Spanish Arkansas Jeannie M. Whayne, Cultural Encounters In the Early South: Indians and Europeans in Arkansas (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1995), 112–20.

War. As early as 1714, Frenchmen in Mobile purchased horses from Osage traders. However, prior to the 1760s, a strong French presence, and pressure from the Comanches had limited Osage expansion. Increased raiding and hunting in the late eighteenth century propelled Osage communities to de-emphasize prairie agriculture and expand hunting practices for greater peltry resources, territorial control, and trade goods like horses. Osage warriors were known to capture up to five hundred horses in a single raid. The Osages ranged from the plains to Ozark Mountains to the outskirts of St. Louis. In the 1770s, the Osages expanded their power southwards. A renegade band of Osage took up residence along the Arkansas River around 1774. The Osages frequently disrupted the horse trade among other tribes in order to dominate the market. These expansions created greater buffer regions to insulate their prime hunting territory between the Arkansas and Missouri Rivers.  

The Osages enjoyed their most notable expansion by expelling the Caddo from hunting territory to the south, along the Arkansas and Red Rivers. The Caddo, and other tribes connected with Spanish trade, were barred from the ammunition trade that French-connected Osage enjoyed. As a result, the Osages wielded a decided advantage in weaponry. In 1774, rumors circulated that a splinter group of Osage had descended from the Osage River and established their village on the Arkansas River. From this advanced position, Osage warriors exerted greater pressure on Caddo territory in the Ouachita mountains and along the Red River. Throughout the 1770s, Osage raiders stole hundreds

of horses, attacked villages, and forced Caddo families to abandon the Red River area. In
1777, the Caddo were also struck by a smallpox epidemic that wreaked havoc throughout
the continent, further weakening their remaining resistance. With the expulsion of the
Caddo to the south side of the Red River, the Osages firmly dominated trade and travel
along the plains-highlands transition zone between the Missouri and Red Rivers.60

Osage expansion into the interior highlands included attempts to establish
influence over Quapaw territory. To the southeast, the Osages maintained periodic truces
with their Quapaw rivals near the mouth of the Arkansas River. Osage traders
occasionally travelled down to Arkansas Post to trade with the French and Quapaws.
Conversely, the Quapaws supported joint expeditions with tribes from east of the
Mississippi to pressure Osage Territory. Even when tensions rose, the Quapaws tended to
only defend their hunting grounds against Osage incursions. Aside from infrequent
attacks between hunting parties, the two nations maintained a relative stalemate with a
boundary at the highlands beginning near the Rock.61

Unlike the Quapaw, who defended territory primarily in the lowlands, Osage
expansion encompassed two different ecosystems that fueled their hunting superiority.
By controlling the plains as well as the mountains, the Osage claimed sovereignty over an
area that offered deer, elk, and bison herds along with a prairie that could support their
horse herds. Indeed, the Osage named several fall months relative to the activity of deer

60 Mézières, *Louisiana-Texas Frontier*, 110; The French Chouteau trade family likely influenced this split,
but internal politics was likely the primary catalyst for internal divisions. Rollings, *The Osage*, 143–66;
Elizabeth Fenn reveals the continental spread of small pox in 1777. Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The

61 Mézières, *Louisiana-Texas Frontier*, 122; John Treat to Secretary of War, November 15, 1805,
*Territorial Papers* 13:276; DuVal, *Native Ground*, 151; Rollings, *The Osage*, 142; Quapaw also developed
alliances with eastern tribes to continue dictating much of the political geography of the lowlands. Key,
“Indians and Ecological Conflict in Territorial Arkansas,” 133.
including September “Moon when the deer hide,” and October “Moon when the deer rut.” Protection of the Ozarks enabled access to critical natural resources and created a topographic boundary that delineated their hunting grounds. The Spanish attempted to concentrate Osage trade at newly established St. Louis to better control the new power, but the Osages continued trading with hunters in the highlands and even down at Arkansas Post. By the 1790s, the Osages controlled the diverse region between the Missouri and Red Rivers from the eastern slopes of the Ozarks to the shortgrass prairies of the plains.62

The Osages drew much of their expansive power from horse raiding and exploitation of the plains environment. Osages proved willing to exhaust their horses in raids and hunting expeditions. Horses revolutionized Osage aggressiveness with bison hunting as reports stated that “Osage destroy many horses in the hunting season.” The Osages, however, had a seemingly constant supply of horses as persistent raiding of other tribes and Euro-American communities replenished the herds. During a succession of raids against the Caddos, Osage warriors stole over seven hundred and fifty horses in a single month.63 A decade later, a series of horse raids forced an entire Caddo community to flee the Red River region. The Osages then resold those stolen horses as gifts or trade materials. The labor to sustain the herds was not difficult during years of plentiful rainfall

62 Rollings, The Osage, 77, 185; Pratz, The History of Louisiana, 324; DuVal, Native Ground, 121; Key, “Masters of This Country,” 136–37.

either as Osage families used the eastern prairies as horse pastures to support the thousands of horses in their herds.64

In the expanding territory, violent raids became critical tools for protecting new borders. Osage men jealously guarded the rivers as access points to the plains tribes or plains hunting grounds. In 1777, a series of attacks left seven French hunters on the Arkansas River dead and another group of hunters without “ammunition, weapons, clothing, and personal belongings.” The quick-strike ability proved valuable as Osage raids stretched beyond their controlled territory, whether into the outskirts of St. Louis, or even westward to the area of Santa Fe along the Rio Grande. The threat of raids and sudden attacks served as the most constant enforcement of the Osages’ expanding boundaries.65

Despite the encroachment of more competition from the east, Osage power in the midcontinent persisted through the beginning of the nineteenth century. A “scarcity of game on the eastern side of the Mississippi” continued to push powerful eastern tribes like the Choctaw and Chickasaw into the Arkansas Region. Skin production in the Arkansas Valley was burgeoning as the government fur factory at Arkansas Post produced over 23,000 deerskins between 1807 and 1808. At the turn of the century, rival

64 George Peter to Governor Wilkinson, September 8, 1805, *Territorial Papers* 13:231; Hämäläinen, “The Politics of Grass,” 191; For most of the late 18th century, sufficient rainfall would have supported Osage horse herds. Stahle et al., “Tree-Ring Reconstructed Megadroughts over North America since a.d. 1300”; While rivals saw the Osage as an aggressive, isolationist society, the motivation for Osage attacks is arguably better understood as a protection of economic interests based around natural resources. Key, “Indians and Ecological Conflict in Territorial Arkansas,” 136.

commercial hunters included growing numbers of Cherokees who continued to put pressure on game populations. By the early 1800s, these Cherokees spearheaded multicultural alliances that sought access to hunting grounds up the Arkansas. The Osages continued to dominate the Red River Valley but largely abandoned attempts to control the Ouachita Basin. The influx of rivals also gradually decreased Osage presence in the Arkansas Post trade.66

The Osages’ expansionist capabilities waned by the early nineteenth century due to disease and internal divisions. In addition to splinter villages on the Arkansas, Osage communities suffered from disease outbreaks at the turn of the century. By 1808, wanting a closer American alliance to push back on rival Indians, Osage leaders signed the treaty of Fort Clark, ceding their lands in the Ozarks. While the Osages remained a formidable presence betwixt plains and mountains, they became more defensive of ever-shrinking hunting grounds, losing much of the strength of their horse-based expansion.67

Osage adaptation to the environmental and political changes of the eighteenth century continued a pattern established over nearly three centuries of Indian-European contact in the Arkansas Valley. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, indigenous powers navigated changing environmental resources and the politics of European power to maintain and expand sovereign spaces in the Arkansas Valley.


Mississippian agriculturalists managed floodplains for food production as well as to mark territorial boundaries. The Quapaws created a taste for bison products among the French to influence French alliances in the Middle Mississippi Valley. The Osages drew horse power from the environmental transition zone and rival nations to dictate geopolitical positioning on the eve of the nineteenth century. These groups had imprinted their own borders onto the lower Arkansas Valley that influenced the alliances and movement of Spanish entradas and the military outposts, hunting districts, and alliances of later French and Spanish colonial ventures. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Cherokees would once again insert changing ecological practices into the politics of the Arkansas Valley. The Cherokees responded to the return of an agriculture-centric economy by appropriating Euro-American science and cartography and highlighting their agricultural prowess. The Cherokees’ ability to claim Osage territory and withstand the encroachment of white rivals imprinted Cherokee territoriality on settlement patterns of the Arkansas Valley for decades to come.
CHAPTER 2

CONTESTED CARTOGRAPHY:

ARKANSAS CHEROKEES’ APPROPRIATION

OF AMERICAN SCIENCE

In 1824, the U.S. Indian agent in Arkansas wrote a surprising report concerning the Cherokees’ contested land claims in the Arkansas River Valley. The council of Arkansas Cherokee chiefs had insisted that the agent’s report include their Cherokee-made map, a “sketch of the country,” showing the full extent of Cherokee territorial claims to the region between the Arkansas and White Rivers. The disputed lands would later encompass the mountains of northwest Arkansas and the prairies of eastern Indian Territory. In the map, the Cherokees’ western boundary extended well west of the mountainous area acknowledged by federal officials and stretched up to the falls of the Verdigris River, comprising a large tract of highly desirable prairies and river bottoms known informally as “Lovely’s Purchase.”

Though the Cherokees were concerned about white encroachment from the east, the agent informed the Secretary of War that the disputed western boundary of Cherokee claims was “the greatest... source of discontent...among the nation.” Half of the Cherokee towns on the map lay west of the most recent American survey boundary, which was also drawn on the map. The Cherokee mapmaker made sure to depict that, per the
United States government survey, Cherokees were restricted to “a large portion of mountainous and unarable lands.” For an agricultural society like the Cherokees’, these restrictions were tantamount to an attack on their future prosperity. Put simply, the map, commissioned by Arkansas Cherokee chiefs, visually consolidated multiple Cherokee negotiating strategies incorporating both appeals to Cherokee agricultural land use and oversight of the American survey system to dispute settlement patterns in the Arkansas River Valley.68

The Arkansas Cherokee map was only one of numerous communications with federal officials wherein Cherokee leaders attempted to control ecological language and adapt scientific practices to shape the contours of political geography and cultural settlement in the Arkansas River Valley during the early national period. The core territory that Arkansas Cherokees presented to American officials reflected Cherokees’ adaptive response to the convulsions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Southeast. Thousands of migrant Cherokees sought to continue more traditional practices in the fertile soils and game-rich area between the Arkansas and White Rivers and west to the Verdigris. Cherokees first claimed this region through a variety of gendered land use practices, revolving around female agriculture and male hunting. Between 1812 and 1828, during geopolitical negotiations, Arkansas Cherokee headmen re-defined the Cherokee nation’s identity from an immigrating group of hunters to a highly agricultural society, even though Arkansas Cherokees largely continued traditional land use. As the Arkansas Cherokees encountered competition over land from other white

and Native American groups, however, Cherokee leaders could no longer protect Cherokee territory solely by appealing to Cherokee farming practices and, instead, developed science-oriented strategies that incorporated land surveys and cartographic representations to protect Cherokee sovereignty in the Arkansas River Valley.69

Following the Louisiana Purchase, sovereignty in the Middle Mississippi Valley rested in part on the power to control the language of resource consumption and production. Thomas Jefferson hoped to resettle Southeastern Indians west of the Mississippi while promoting a “civilization” policy in which Indians adopted white ways of farming through gendered labor and private land ownership. Like other southeastern Indians, moderate Arkansas Cherokee leaders turned to agrarian rhetoric to accommodate the American policy. While scholars have noted the prominence of Cherokee agrarian rhetoric, the transition from hunting to agrarian focus demonstrates the political astuteness with which Arkansas Cherokees wielded such language. Until 1817, Cherokee leaders called the Arkansas Valley a hunting region. After that period, a new generation of leaders began to identify it as an agricultural landscape. These simplistic descriptions ignored the continuity of most Arkansas Cherokees’ gender-separated productivity but demonstrated the political adaptability of Cherokee leaders in their efforts to gain treaty claims to newly acquired territory.70

69 References to “ecological identity” and “ecological rhetoric” highlight how Cherokee leaders invoked particular subsistence practices as the defining activities of the western Cherokees, despite a wide spectrum of farming, stock raising, gathering, and hunting.

70 Jefferson hoped Indian societies would “employ [male] labor in cultivation” and “enable your women to spin and weave.” “President’s Talk to Chiefs of Cherokee Nation, January 10, 1806, Letters Sent by the Secretary of War Relating to Indian Affairs, 1801-1824, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Records Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration Microfilm Publication, M-15, Reel 2, 147-148”; DuVal argues that Cherokees broadened concepts of racial identity by enlisting the rhetoric of “civilization” and “savagery” to differentiate themselves from the Osage. Kathleen DuVal, “Debating Identity, Sovereignty, and Civilization: The Arkansas Valley after the Louisiana Purchase,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no.
The Cherokees’ appropriation of American scientific practices turned a key form of American colonialism into a tool to defend Cherokee sovereignty in the southern borderlands. Historians of science in the early American republic often examine the utilization of early nineteenth century scientific applications largely as a weapon of American expansion. However, the Arkansas Cherokees wielded American science with comfortable dexterity, influencing expedition reports, dictating survey procedures, and adopting American cartographic elements. Cherokee leaders transformed the focus on precision and objectivity into a means to turn back or even dictate the borders of settlement in the Arkansas Valley. When seen from an indigenous perspective, Cherokee men of science determined much of their own sovereign spaces, even as demographic disparities and racist rhetoric seemed to favor exclusively Anglo settlement.  


The Cherokees in Arkansas have been a tremendous resource for scholarship on Southeastern Indian migrations prior to Indian Removal. Scholars have studied the western Cherokees’ immigration in regards to conflicts and political alliances with other Native groups, their use of agrarian rhetoric to counter white settlers’ racial arguments, and their response to environmental change. What remains less understood is how the Arkansas Cherokees conceptualized their borders through resources, subsistence practices, and scientific projections that offer an example of “the spatial dimension of Indian assertions of power” in the southeast. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the Western Cherokees initially constructed an expansive territory using a revival of traditionalism, female-centered farming, and aggressive hunting practices. I argue that Cherokees subsequently gained recognition of this territory from the United States by employing a variety of political maneuvers to secure treaty rights and delineate their territory in the face of increasing white settlement. Cherokee leaders shifted rhetorical descriptions of themselves from hunters and to farmers to secure treaty rights. Cherokees’ appropriation of American scientific systems in the 1820s enabled the Arkansas Cherokees to curtail and even reverse white settlement in the Lovely’s Purchase area. Cherokees’ claims to the land appropriated fields of science as anti-colonial tools, which led to the removal of white settlers from fertile farmland and set the contours of cultural settlement in the Arkansas Valley.72

"pure science,” my description of Cherokee science follows the argument by historians of science to reveal the broad exchange of scientific ideas through print culture and other less academic sources of scientific knowledge exchange. Conevery Bolton Valencius, et. al., "Science in Early America: Print Culture and the Sciences of Territoriality," Journal of the Early Republic 36 (Spring 2016), 76.

Between the 1790s and 1820s, hundreds of Cherokee families crossed west of the Mississippi River to establish new homes and towns. Following political schisms over how to adapt to Euro-American influences, a wave of Cherokee settlers arrived in 1810 seeking the prolific hunting grounds. Cherokee immigrants were using Jefferson’s vision of a trans-Mississippi Indian territory to gain concessions in the region. Two years later, devastating earthquakes prompted a traditionalist revival, during which the Cherokees removed themselves to the lower Arkansas Valley. Cherokee families created a gendered landscape of female agrarianism along the Arkansas River while Cherokee men expanded territorial control to the western prairie hunting grounds. The challenge for Cherokee leaders was to simultaneously direct the internal tribulations of this diasporic Indian community while navigating diplomacy with the eastern Cherokees, rival Indian nations, and the American government. Cherokee leaders established new lands by recruiting Native allies and by gaining federal favor as the preferred hunters of the lower Arkansas Valley. In less than a decade, the immigrant Cherokees would claim government supported territory throughout the Arkansas Valley. 73


73 Cherokee migration to Arkansas occurred during a period of political, cultural, and demographic upheaval in Cherokee society, variously referred to as a “diaspora” and a “civil war.” Gregory D. Smithers,
In February of 1810, depleted game and political defeat prompted the Cherokee chief Tolluntuskee and several hundred men, women, and children to journey from the Appalachian foothills to west of the Mississippi River. The year prior, a Cherokee delegation to Washington, D.C. had lamented the many frustrated young hunters and increasing white encroachment. They desired “to move across the Mississippi” where they might “retain their attachments to the hunter’s life…having little game on their present lands.” Lower Town chiefs, including Tolluntuskee, also suffered a stunning fall from national power following accusations of selling Cherokee hunting grounds for personal advantage. Some of the accused were even executed. Several of these chiefs led immigrant Cherokees to join an outpost of Cherokees who already lived along the St. Francis River. For Cherokee leaders, removal west addressed a major social concern surrounding diminished hunting as well as personal desire to retain power amongst their remaining followers.74

Life along the St. Francis as well as the White River offered a glimmer of hope for the new migrants who quickly established a mixed agricultural, husbandry, and hunting subsistence. Tolluntuskee’s group brought along several thousand livestock, along with dozens of spinning wheels, looms, and plows that proved well-suited to the alluvial soils that had supported Mississippians centuries before. Among Cherokee men,

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the improved hunting opportunities helped fulfill masculine ceremonial and familial roles. Men who had long demonstrated their prowess through war and hunting exploits, found economic success among American fur traders. In the spring of 1811, a young Cherokee chief informed an American agent that “we have good corn fields…plenty of Cattle & hogs…Buffaloe [sic] and Deer.”

However, in the winter of 1811 and 1812, a series of earthquakes shook the dislocated Cherokees into addressing debates over traditionalism and acculturation. The earthquakes uprooted the fertile bottoms of the St. Francis, leaving mile-long fault scarps and acres of “sunken lands” that rendered much of the region inundated, impassable, and unfit for cultivation. In Cherokee cosmology, earthquakes signified social trouble, and, many blamed the impact of Anglo-American lifeways. Prophets spread warnings of the Great Spirit being “angry” over Cherokee adoption of white customs—including beds, mills, clothes, books, and cats. Prophets also attributed the disappearance of game to the Great Spirit withdrawing his protection. Many Cherokees shared the sense that the intrusion of white people and the disruption of traditional practices, had caused the earth to tremble. A brief but potent flurry of traditionalism took hold among many Western Cherokees.


76 In studies of cultural responses to the New Madrid earthquakes, Valencius argues “the earthquakes powerfully amplified existing spiritual and cultural movements.” Hancock compares Cherokees' cosmological perspective with Moravians' evangelical interpretation. This chapter argues that Cherokees not only called for a revival of old traditions but sought a land in which those traditions could be made new. Valencius, Lost History, 1–3; Jonathan Hancock, “Shaken Spirits: Cherokees, Moravian Missionaries, and the New Madrid Earthquakes,” Journal of the Early Republic 33, no. 4 (2013): 643–73; James Ross and J. M. (James Madison) 1811-1891 Pendleton, Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross (Philadelphia, Printed by
Following the condemnation of acculturation, many Cherokees called for cultural purification. Much of the purification reflected the more traditional gender roles professed by the Western Cherokees. Women tore apart “fine muslin dresses,” and men sacrificed deer during ceremonies of penance. Religious ceremonies “of ancient origin” like the Green Corn dance took on greater significance. In June of 1812, a prophet named Skaquaw beseeched an assembled crowd to “move away from St. Francis before the next sign manifests itself: go towards the sun set, and travel until you are stopped by a big river which runs towards sun rise; there stop, plant corn, and hunt in peace.” Three months following Skaquaw’s proclamation, travelers reported that “all the Cherokees abandoned their farms.” The message was clear: spiritual renewal required farther migration west to the Arkansas River.\(^7\)

The Arkansas Cherokee communities quickly established a gendered geography that became the basis of later political deliberations. Beginning at Point Remove on the Arkansas River, roughly eight large settlements lined the tributary streams coming from the north, while Cherokee families also scattered between towns and fertile lands south of the river. Cherokee women concentrated their agricultural fields in the lands along the Arkansas River and its tributaries. Male hunters pushed west, north, and south on excursions, moving into Osage and Quapaw hunting land and expanding seasonal Cherokee presence. Though Arkansas Cherokee territoriality concentrated along the

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Arkansas River, their geographical claims now stretched from their older settlements along the St. Francis all the way west to the Verdigris River.78

Cherokee women’s agricultural labor accounted for much of the ecological changes along the Arkansas Valley floodplain. Cherokee women transformed the landscape near homes and towns by clearing thousands of acres for cultivation in family plots and introducing domestic livestock. Setting fire to clear thick stands of river cane and tilling the alluvial soil for fields, Cherokee women produced corn, sweet potatoes, beans, pumpkins, and small amounts of cotton for household use. Some families also managed orchards of peaches and gathered wild plants like ginseng. To supplement crops and hunting, Cherokee women tended thousands of domestic animals—pigs, cows, and horses—that ranged in the surrounding woods and canebrakes. Well into the 1820s, Cherokee women demonstrated the agricultural potential of the valley. Cherokee women’s labor, including cotton and livestock, transformed the Arkansas valley into a familiar agrarian homeland.79

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78 Cherokees’ movement into the Arkansas Valley offers a real-time view of Indigenous territoriality, which Barr defines as the “set of practices...ideas [and] attitudes...that gave meaning to diverse territorial claims.” Barr, “Geographies of Power,” 10; Address of Cherokees, April 27, 1813 Frederick Bates and Thomas Maitland Marshall, The Life and Papers of Frederick Bates, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1926), 239–41; Alfred Finney Letter, October 14, 1824, Chronicles of Oklahoma: Dwight Mission, vol. 12, 1, 1934.

Meanwhile, Cherokee men’s hunting labor expanded the boundaries of Arkansas Cherokee lands, particularly to the detriment of the Osages. Cherokee men, long attracted to the game west of the Mississippi, used their hunting excursions to create sometimes violent seasonal expansion and contraction of Cherokee territory, both westward and northward from the Cherokee towns. Groups of men traveled as many as 300 miles west from their settlements to buffalo prairies, clashing with the Osages in numerous skirmishes. Cherokee hunters also travelled north into the Ozark Mountains for spring hunts, during which they accumulated deer hides and bear tallow.80

The Cherokees’ expansion into Osage territory left the area of the Arkansas Valley between the Verdigris River and the Poteau River in dispute. In 1816, the Indian agent William Lovely coordinated a transaction between the Osages and the Cherokees to reduce the conflicts over hunting grounds. He purchased land from the Osage that stretched from the Verdigris River to the eastern line of the Osage territory, near modern day Fort Smith. The so-called “Lovely’s Purchase” would be a buffer zone between the two tribes. Though both the Cherokees and the Osages agreed to the land purchase, the creation of the buffer territory acknowledged Cherokees’ growing interests in the region.81

Cherokee war chiefs quickly began to claim possession of the buffer territory through military right of conquest. The Arkansas Cherokee chiefs Tolluntuskee and Takatoka led a multi-ethnic coalition of tribes in the fall of 1817 that attacked several


81 Governor Clark to Secretary of War, October 1818, Territorial Papers 15: 454–55.
eastern Osage towns when most of the Osage warriors were away. Nearly eighty Osages, mostly women and children, were killed at the Battle of Claremore Mound. Tolluntuskee admitted that part of his motivation for the attack was to gain claim to Osage territory. The war chief declared before President Monroe that “If I had been unfortunate in war, our claim for a [western] outlet would not have been as good against them. I hope…the Osage, in satisfaction for our claims on them, give up [their] country. We do not wish to be cramped by them.” These expanded hunting areas extended Cherokee claims and centered Cherokee male hunters and warriors as the primary figures in Cherokee expansion in the region.82

The Arkansas Cherokees also convinced the United States military to act as an extension of Cherokee defenses on the border between the Cherokees and Osages. Initially, American officials had been alarmed by the news of conflict between white settlers and the Cherokees and recommended federal troops be sent to prevent continued violence. After legislation temporarily clarified the boundaries between Cherokee and white settlers, William Lovely instead suggested that these troops be redirected to the region between the Cherokees and Osages because it would “have a tendency to keep the Osages at bye.” Cherokee leaders sent a letter of grievances that eventually made it to the desk of the President. In response, territorial officials applied for “a military post on the Arkansas…[to] be so located as to be useful to the Indian intercourse.” This military post at Belle Point, later known as Fort Smith, would become the fulcrum of American trade

82 Competition over the fur trade created both an ecological shift through decreased game by the mid 1820s as well as violence over market shares among competing Indian nations. Key, “Indians and Ecological Conflict in Territorial Arkansas”; Finney Letter Chronicles of Oklahoma: Dwight Mission, 12:44–45; Stanley Hoig, The Cherokees and Their Chiefs: In the Wake of Empire (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 110–12; Cherokee Indians to Governor Clark, July 11, 1817 Territorial Papers 15:304; Tolluntuskee Speech, February 21, 1818, “Cherokee Agency in Tennessee.”
and military assistance on the Arkansas River for several years and helped to protect the Cherokee’s western border.83

Cherokee leaders solidified their American alliance by highlighting their hunting acumen. One American official, perhaps echoing Cherokee rhetoric, opined that nearly five hundred “may be considered as good hunters & good warriors.” With Cherokee allies, a fur trade “factory might be placed with great prospect of advantage to the government.” Within the mountains and prairies of the Arkansas Valley, Cherokees could reap profit from the “almost immense quantity of the finest furs and peltry” and trade of fifteen thousand furs in in the lucrative market at New Orleans. These new Cherokee immigrants were defining the region by its hunting prospects and were positioning themselves as its prime economic agents.84

The Cherokees continued to promote their hunting interests with the federal government to reinforce expansion, despite hunting being a distorted simplification of Cherokee land use. In 1817, President Monroe and the Cherokee chiefs codified Arkansas Cherokees’ self-promotion as hunters in the signing of the Turkeytown Treaty. The treaty reiterated the 1808 meeting with Thomas Jefferson in which Cherokee “deputies …ma[d]e known their desire to continue the hunter life...across the Mississippi River.” The new Cherokee treaty land stretched between the Arkansas and White Rivers, including river frontage and mountains that the United States government had previously


84 Josiah Meigs to Secretary of War, February 17, 1816. Territorial Papers 15: 121.
Figure 2.1 The Arkansas River Valley contained a unique congruence of western waterways, bottomland forests, mountain uplifts, and prairies. By 1817, Cherokees had expanded their territory throughout the Arkansas Valley and claimed control through a combination of formal treaty and the unofficial sale of “Lovely’s Purchase” as a buffer region. Through much of the 1820s, the Cherokees and white settlers vied for control of “Lovely’s Purchase” through surveys and cartography. Derek Everett. The Arkansas Frontier. In Derek Everett. “On the Extreme Frontier: Crafting the Western Arkansas Boundary,” The Arkansas Historical Quarterly 67, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 2.

recognized as Osage land. The Arkansas Cherokees consistently utilized the language of hunting and game scarcity to gain an invitation from the United States government to move west, to advocate for a fur factory, and to validate the 1817 land cession treaty.85

Despite the significant turmoil that marked their arrival in the Arkansas Valley, the Cherokees quickly expanded their territory through hunting and farming activities.

Cherokee leaders negotiated for control of the land between the White and Verdigris Rivers with the agreements of the 1816 Lovely’s Purchase and the 1817 treaty. Cherokees established themselves as formidable hunters beneficial to the United States government. Diplomatic emphasis on hunting supported traditional community life and expansion efforts. Though their presence antagonized rival Osage and white settlements, the Cherokees quickly became a treaty-protected nation hunting the Arkansas Valley. Nonetheless, Cherokee leaders in Arkansas soon began a public transformation of their identity from hunters in the prairies and mountains to settled farmers on the river.86

The ink was only days old on the Turkeytown Treaty when Arkansas Cherokee leaders began to shift their rhetoric towards an agrarian identity. The Cherokee chiefs gradually abandoned the strategy of portraying themselves as the best hunters and instead sought to argue that they were ideal farmers in the Arkansas Valley. In the summer of 1817, Cherokee chiefs wrote directly to the Governor of the Missouri Territory claiming that “to raise our crops for the support of our families has been our wish.” A new generation of Western Cherokee leadership arrived in 1818 who would further emphasize agrarian language to defend their territorial claims in the Arkansas Valley.

Cherokee leaders selectively emphasized a spectrum of subsistence activities when requesting American aid. In February 1818, President James Monroe wrote to Arkansas Cherokees that the United States would permit the Cherokees to have “good mill seats, plenty of game, and not to be surrounded by the white people.” Rather than deny their hunting practices, Cherokee negotiators advocated for access to game in the

mountains and prairies along with streams capable of supporting grist mills.87

However, Cherokee leaders employed explicitly agrarian language when seeking to distinguish themselves from their Osage rivals. Cherokee chiefs re-cast their immigration to the well-hunted region of the Arkansas Valley as removal to a “new and unexplored wilderness.” Such reference to the Arkansas “wilderness” suggested that Cherokee headmen were situating themselves within the American narrative of westward-moving civilization. The Cherokees recast the Osages as a “band of savages” who “inhumanely murdered, butchered, and plundered” Cherokee settlements. Associating uncivilized Osage warriors with the undeveloped landscape of Arkansas hinted that Cherokees’ agrarian rhetoric was part of a larger ecological and cultural identity that Cherokees now began to carefully craft for political negotiations.88

Cherokee leaders were able to claim the transformation in Cherokee practices in part because Cherokee women had performed and developed farming practices dating back centuries. Arkansas Cherokee diplomats simply emphasized agrarian ideology while removing gendered language because traditional male hunting practices continued unabated. Across the Southeast, Indians displayed their acceptance of the American “civilization” policies that sought to instill male-centric Euro-American agriculture. These Native communities hoped that claims of the adoption of male-centric agriculture would prevent their forced removal westward.89

87 The President to the Arkansas Cherokees, February 1818, *Territorial Papers* 20: 333.
Cherokee adoption of agrarian language followed the migration of more accommodationist leaders after the 1817 treaty. Tolluntuskee, the erstwhile proponent of Cherokee hunting life, converted to agrarian rhetoric and requested a missionary school amongst the Arkansas Cherokee. The arrival of his half-brother John Jolly gave further rise to the centrality of agricultural language amongst the Arkansas Cherokees. Jolly assured federal representatives that “you have learned us to be herdsmen and cultivators, and to spin and weave.” Dressing in Euro-American clothing, the wealthy chief established a plantation-style household on the banks of the Arkansas and sponsored the establishment of Dwight Mission. It was Jolly who first signed the Cherokee letter invoking an Arkansas “wilderness.” Jolly gained support amongst mixed-race Cherokees while placating American officials with promises that “our women will raise…cotton” and that Cherokees would “settle more compactly” in agricultural towns. In 1824, the Cherokee council elected him principal chief of a new, more centralized government, cementing the new Cherokee diplomacy based on agrarian identity.90

The new generation of moderate Arkansas Cherokee leaders used agrarian rhetoric to turn American Indian policy to Cherokees’ expansionist advantage. Jolly knew that farmland was critical to enticing additional eastern Cherokees to immigrate to the Arkansas Valley, and the United States hoped more eastern Cherokees would voluntarily move west. Officials were ordered to make agreements “favorable to the Cherokees…and


the other southern nations to emigrate to the west.” The prospect of agrarian immigration worked to the Arkansas Cherokees’ advantage, as the Osage leaders ceded more lands west of the Cherokees in an 1818 treaty. The Cherokees could facilitate the United States’ twin policy goals of voluntary Indian Removal and agricultural transformation.91

Cherokees’ shift in agrarian language mirrored developments in other Southeastern Indians’ response to American civilization policy. Numerous societies had a tradition of female-centric agriculture that they emphasized to blunt American civilization policies intruding on native sovereignty. When American officials told the Quapaws along the Arkansas River to “become more accustomed to cultivating the soil,” the Quapaws replied that they “already do it to that extent as enables a supply to many of the Inhabitants here both of Corn [sic] and Horses.” Farther east, however, mixed-race Creeks did adopt reforms for a male-centric agricultural society, widening rifts with poorer Creeks and laying the groundwork for civil war in the 1810s. Among Southeastern Indians and American officials, the impact of the civilization policies often included hypocrisy and internal tumult. The Arkansas Cherokee case was distinct in that diplomats sought to protect their newly claimed homeland as civilized agriculturalists in contrast to Osage hunters and even white subsistence farmers. The agrarian shift continued a pattern of rhetorical diplomacy that simplified the activity of Cherokees for political effect.92

In contrast, the Osages, who challenged Cherokees’ western land claims, sought American support by highlighting their relative lack of agrarian sophistication. As the Cherokees encroached on the mountains and plains, Arkansas Osage leaders appealed to

91 Calhoun to Clark, May 8, 1818, Letters Sent by the Secretary of War; Markman, “Arkansas Cherokees,” 72, 89–91.

the civilization policy, stating that they only intended to cede the buffalo prairies to white settlers who might then “instruct [the Osage] in husbandry.” Osage leaders hoped to gain sympathy, acknowledging, “we cannot farm like the Cherokees… [nor have we] learned how to raise Hogs and Cattle like the Cherokees.” However, the Osages were divided by internal battles, as well. The Osage chief Clermont often directed agrarian diplomacy to differentiate his group from the Osages near the Missouri River as much as from the Cherokees. Divided internally and applying agrarian rhetoric in a way that reinforced Cherokees’ development, the Osages could not effectively counter the Cherokee diplomacy.93

Potential internal fault lines existed among the Arkansas Cherokees, too, as the agricultural rhetoric contrasted with continuing traditionalist practices. Cherokee women continued to request mill seats into the 1820s as they expanded their production of wheat and cotton. Meanwhile, trapping and hunting among Cherokee men remained widespread. By 1821, Cherokees produced thousands of deer skins a year, and the Arkansas fur factory at Belle Point (Fort Smith) was among the western frontier’s leading suppliers of bear oil, deer skins, and raccoon skins. Cherokee men and women also evoked these traditional labor practices in their wedding ceremonies in which “the groom presents his venison, and the bride her corn.”94

The venerable Cherokee war leader Takatoka lampooned the new wave of accommodationist Cherokees as the “breeches and pantaloons party,” equating American dress with the rejection of traditional Cherokee life. The Cherokees, however, had a clear

93 Miller to Secretary of War, March 24, 1820 Territorial Papers 19:153; Speech to an Osage Council, September 15, 1821, Territorial Papers 19:320; Rollings, The Osage, 155.

94 Edward DuVal to Secretary of War, April 24, 1828, Territorial Papers 20:655; Washburn and Moore, Reminiscences of the Indians, 207.
rivalry with the Osages, and the inclusion of moderate and conservative voices in the
Cherokee national government likely assuaged many tensions.95

In the months following the Turkeytown Treaty acknowledging Arkansas
Cherokees’ hunting practices, Cherokees shifted towards an ecological diplomacy
grounded in mixed agriculture and a decidedly agrarian identity. New Cherokee leaders
prompted a rhetorical shift towards a more agrarian identity to contrast themselves as
superior to the hunting economies of their Osage rivals, even though most Arkansas
Cherokees continued traditional practices. Unlike other southeastern Indians who simply
sought to retain their lands, the Cherokee diplomacy was meant to reaffirm newly
acquired land cessions to support and entice continued migration of a largely agricultural
eastern Cherokee society. However, the arrival of land-hungry Anglo settlers brought
urgency to Cherokee chiefs to maintain this new agrarian identity through the centralized
voice of the Cherokee council.

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Increasing numbers of white settlers threatened to undermine the Cherokees’
position as the Arkansas Valley’s preferred agriculturalists. In reaction, Arkansas
Cherokee leaders began to use a consistent ecological language that centered on
agricultural practices, and the chiefs implemented their rhetorical shift by utilizing a
consensus approach in council negotiations. Evidence of the council’s strategy appeared
not only in written messages from the councils but in the reports from Indian agents and

95 Edward Duval to Secretary of War, April 24, 1828, *Territorial Papers* 20:654; Washburn and Moore,
*Reminiscences of the Indians*, 207, 177.; Edward Duval to Secretary of War, April 6, 1825, *Territorial
Papers* 20:25–26; For regional studies of the fur trade, see Key, “Indians and Ecological Conflict in
territorial Arkansas,” 129; Wayne Morris, “Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805–1822,”
The *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 28–48; Russell M. Magnaghi, “Sulphur Fork
other government officials. American ignorance of the western territories might have allowed the Cherokees to espouse their agrarian shift without critique, but scientific expeditions into the region threatened to undermine the integrity of Cherokee agrarian rhetoric. Cherokee leaders often hosted the scientific expeditions and reinforced the council’s agrarian rhetoric during informal encounters.96

In the years surrounding Arkansas’ creation as a territory, Anglo-American settlers extolled the fertility of and sought claims to the western fringe of the Arkansas Valley. The territorial governor complained that the Cherokees’ occupation of the “Garden Spot of our territory” blocked ten thousand new settlers every year. White settlers offered themselves as a proactive civilizing force on the landscape, promising to change “the now useless forests on our western limits…into cultivated fields.” White settlers hoped that Lovely’s Purchase would soon become the next locale for white settlement. By the end of the decade, white settlers found greater advantage for their land claims by highlighting Cherokee hunting practices and celebrating white farming.97

As the numbers of Anglo American settlers increased, Cherokee councils repeatedly affirmed the collective voice of the Cherokee chiefs to combat white settlement interests and strengthen negotiating leverage with federal officials. In the previous decades, Cherokees had suffered in deliberations with the United States because of factions of chiefs that negotiated with federal officials without the sanction of the full Cherokee nation. Furthermore, councils involved gatherings of hundreds of Cherokees

96 Cherokee power was relatively dispersed among different village chiefs until the 1824 creation of a new Cherokee government. Markman, “Arkansas Cherokees,” 111; McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence in the New Republic, 59; Mapp, Elusive West, 49.

97 Acting Governor Crittenden to Secretary of War, September 28, 1823 Territorial Papers 19: 548; Memorial to the President by the Territorial Assembly, Territorial Papers 20: 127.
and non-Cherokee observers. As part of the new course of Arkansas Cherokee unity, sixteen Cherokee chiefs identified themselves in an 1819 letter as the collective “Arkansas Cherokee Chiefs” and jealously guarded their authority as spokesmen for “we the Cherokees of the Arkansas.” Indian agent Edward Duval was careful to note that he was reporting on a council convened at “the request of the chiefs and headmen of the Cherokee nation.” Thus, Cherokee chiefs positioned the council, and by extension themselves, as acting with consensus approval and without indication of in-fighting.98

In this hierarchical and increasingly centralized negotiating model, the language of Cherokee agrarian identity solidified. Using the consensus voice, the council carefully crafted depictions of the Arkansas Valley landscape that mirrored Euro-American agricultural priorities. In a letter addressed to the Secretary of War and signed by seven Arkansas chiefs led by John Jolly, the “Chiefs of the Arkansas Cherokee” continued to describe a “barren country fit for nothing” with few resources for farming practices. American writers described that same region as “mountainous and barren, and unfit for cultivation,” similar to the Cherokee declaration. Cherokee chiefs had not only found a consistent voice, but mirrored the language of American explorers and used their agrarian diplomacy to compete with white claims for developing a civilized agrarian region.99

During the turn of the decade, however, the arrival of those prominent scientific expeditions threatened the validity of Cherokees’ rhetoric about their increasing and superior agrarian practices. Stephen Long—an explorer leading a scientific expedition of

98 Arkansas Cherokee Chiefs to the President, August 3, 1819, Territorial Papers 19:91.; Edward Duval to Secretary of War, March 1, 1824, Territorial Papers 19:613. McLoughlin, Cherokee Renascence, 111.

the Great Plains—and Thomas Nuttall—a noted botanist sponsored by the American Philosophical Society—visited the Arkansas River Valley in separately 1819 and 1820, requiring Cherokee leaders to reinforce their rhetorical strategy outside of tribal councils. Indeed, Long and Nuttall interacted with numerous Cherokees who undermined claims of a new Arkansas Cherokee male agrarianism. A detachment of Stephen Long’s expedition approaching the Arkansas region from the plains encountered several parties of Cherokees who “frequently visit this vicinity on hunting excursions.” To compound the issue, the Anglo expeditions were more likely to contact male-centered hunting groups than to encounter Cherokee women performing traditional farming roles. Male Cherokee hunters also served as guides to the Long expedition. As Cherokee men earned two dollars a day directing the expedition to “traverse [the] rugged and mountainous region[s]” around the Arkansas Valley, the carefully crafted messages of chiefs about male agriculturalists were nowhere to be seen.100

Facing the threat of a weakened agrarian rhetoric, Cherokee chiefs made a concerted effort to position themselves as the primary informants of the expeditions and to control written communications regarding Cherokee agrarian identity. The Anglo explorers mentioned Cherokee hunters only in passing but specifically identified principal chiefs. John Jolly appeared in Nuttall’s work as “a Franklin amongst his countrymen” who “dressed as a white man” and was “scarcely…distinguished from an American.” Nuttall noted his preference for bi-lingual “civilized Cherokee, with whom alone I could conveniently hold converse [sic].” In contrast, Cherokee hunters only communicated “by means of signs.” By welcoming the scientific expeditions into their

100 James, Account of an Expedition, 3: 121, 148.
Prosperous Cherokee chiefs hosted American explorers like Nuttall and Long at in their plantation-style, riverside farms. These encounters reinforced Cherokees’ agrarian claims to land use. This map shows several “Cherokee Fields” and farms near Dardanelle that likely contributed to Nuttall’s statement that “both banks of the river were lined with the houses and farms of the Cherokees” enjoying a “happy approach towards civilization.” Map of Dardanelle and Vicinity, 1827. Map #194. Arkansas State Archives. [Cropped]

homes, Cherokee chiefs exploited these informal encounters that provided an explicit agricultural contrast to their more traditional hunter brethren.101

Several leading Cherokee figures relied on their slaveowner status to facilitate the bilingual conversation. Walter Webber, one of John Jolly’s closest allies and a frequent council signatory, dressed “in the costume of the whites” but “would converse only in the Cherokee language.” Instead, Webber insisted that his black slave act as interpreter. Nonetheless, Nuttall noted Webber’s “several negro slaves, a large, well cleared and well fenced farm” that reinforced the agricultural promise of Cherokee settlers. Webber

101 Thomas Nuttall, A Journal of Travels Into the Arkansas Territory: During the Year 1819 (Philadelphia: Thomas H. Palmer, 1821), 129.
was not alone in this strategy. Tom Graves, a chief unable or unwilling to speak English, alternated between sign language and the assistance of “a black girl, one of his slaves, who interpreted the Cherokee language.” Whether Webber or Graves intended to emphasize their ownership of slaves, Long’s subsequent report mentioned these individual chiefs while also highlighting Cherokee slave ownership, thereby reinforcing male Cherokees’ Euro-American agrarian roles.102

To counter evidence of the Cherokees’ continuing traditional hunting practices and to affirm occupation of fertile agricultural lands, Cherokee chiefs had to control the agrarian message in formal negotiations while also navigating the potentially detrimental visits of American scientific expeditions. The Cherokees influenced the travelling scientists’ accounts as part of larger political battles being waged over resources and land use. The two-pronged nature of navigating formal and informal encounters with American officials and scientists required a highly adaptable approach from Cherokee chiefs, both in the use of translators and in understanding the power of written testimony. The agrarian language and practices of prominent Cherokee chiefs convinced observers that Arkansas Cherokees could be a “civilized…example” to “interior Indians,” namely the Osages. However, the increasing population of white farmers threatened to overwhelm these Cherokee claims as white settlers argued against all Indian land claims in Arkansas.103

102 Nuttall, 130. Morse, A Report to the Secretary of War, 74; James, Account of an Expedition 3: 128; Tiya Miles argues that the racial and labor hierarchies of American slave systems were also present in Cherokee society. The presence of Cherokee plantations would have suggested Euro-agriculture among wealthy Cherokee citizens. Tiya Miles, Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom (University of California Press, 2006), xx, 34; Theda Perdue, Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

103 Morse, A Report to the Secretary of War, 75. DuVal, “Debating Identity,” 54.
While the Cherokees were successful in asserting an agrarian identity to distinguish themselves from their Osage competitors, the emphasis on Cherokee agricultural practices faltered in the face of increasing white settlement. Cherokee leaders turned to a superior knowledge of the settlements and possible alliances in the Arkansas Valley region to assert their power in land negotiations. Without a clear advantage in rhetoric to stymie white settlement, Cherokee chiefs expanded their negotiating strategy from a focus on the rhetoric of agrarian practices to manipulation of the science of the American survey system. Their scientific strategy kept the western boundary unsettled for several years.104

In 1823, American officials took the first formal scientific steps to open lands in Lovely’s Purchase to extensive white settlement. Cherokee leaders requested survey teams be sent along the Arkansas River to mark the eastern boundary of the Cherokee treaty land as well as to determine its western limit. However, Secretary of War John C. Calhoun gave oversight to Arkansas Territorial governor James Miller—an active opponent of Cherokee settlement into Lovely’s Purchase—who directed the survey “to the manifest disadvantage of the Cherokees.” Cherokee chiefs adapted to what they considered improper survey practices by shifting their critiques to the heart of American science: precision. Never dismissing the survey system, Cherokee chiefs instead undermined the results by questioning the survey methods and exact acreage and refusing to approve initial survey findings.105


105 For surveys as instruments of cross-cultural contests, see Cameron B. Strang, “The Mason-Dixon and Proclamation Lines: Land Surveying and Native Americans in Pennsylvania’s Borderlands,” *The
The Cherokee council’s scientific strategy used the strength of the survey system—its precision methods—to challenge both the method and the results of the 1823 survey. According to treaty agreements, Cherokees were guaranteed 3,285,710 acres between the Arkansas and White Rivers. Recognizing the potential for malfeasance, Cherokee leaders sought to “appoint a commissioner” to accompany surveys along their western border. Having accomplished this oversight provision, the Cherokees turned to more explicit critiques. Several months later, the chiefs simply dismissed the “three million…some odd acres of land” while arguing that “we have not a sufficiency of land allowed us.” Requesting more land, they hoped, would require officials to add acreage in Arkansas for land ceded in Alabama and cause delays by requiring a new survey.106

In Arkansas, Cherokee leaders questioned the methods and starting point the survey teams had chosen to conduct their survey. Prior to the finalized survey, Cherokee commissioners likely alerted the Secretary of War that Governor Miller was suspect in his survey administration, having under-allocated acreage while “misapprehending” the western line. The surveyors had started at the eastern Cherokee boundary line rather than the western boundary, limiting Cherokees’ ability to include some of the fertile riverside plains on their western border. More egregiously, the survey included more land along the rugged White River to the north and less land on the densely populated and fertile Arkansas valley. Jolly asked that the Cherokees receive a “fair construction…[as] we are entitled to as much front on one river as the other.” The Cherokees refused to approve the

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106 Secretary of War to Governor Miller, March 4, 1823, *Territorial Papers* 19:498; Chiefs of the Arkansas to Secretary of War, June 24, 1823, *ibid*, 25.
1823 survey. Convinced, the Secretary of War ordered to “have the line run over again.”

The debate over the specificity of the survey system proved much more successful for Cherokee chiefs than the use of strictly agrarian rhetoric. Cherokee leaders did not abandon agrarian rhetoric for the survey; rather they reinforced their ecological ideas through the survey disputes, saying the original line threw “most all of the Cherokees from their farms and houses to the rugged and dreary mountains…depriving us of the best soil for agriculture.” Federal officials hired a new survey team in 1824. The 1824 survey added nearly one million acres to Cherokee lands and increased the frontage along the Arkansas from 36 to 116 miles and reduced the White River frontage from 208 to 134. As the Cherokees likely rejoiced, white settlers lamented that “these boundaries will include…that beautiful and fertile tract of country known by the name of Lovely’s Purchase, together with…some of the finest bottoms.” Indeed, after Cherokee and American officials finalized the 1824 survey, white settlement in Lovely’s Purchase remained suspended for nearly three more years.

Arkansas Cherokee Chiefs had effectively turned the survey system against its own purpose. Ostensibly, surveys were geared to “ascertain the quality of the country” for sale and settlement by whites. The Cherokees used survey precision to gain leverage in the settlement debate of Lovely’s Purchase, prompt an indefinite reprieve, and even

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107 Matthew Arbuckle to Secretary of War, January 3, 1824, *Territorial Papers* 19:587; Cherokee Delegation to President, March 3, 1824 “Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs” M. 234 Roll 77; John Jolly to Secretary of War, November 6, 1823, *TP* 19: 563; Chiefs of the Arkansas to Secretary of War, June 24, 1823, *Territorial Papers* 19: 25; Secretary of War to Acting Governor Crittenden, March 19, 1824, *Territorial Papers* 19: 621.

increase their land allotment. Moreover, this would not be the last time Cherokee Chiefs inserted themselves into the systems of American science to limit American settlement. Perhaps the Cherokee leadership’s most novel strategy was to incorporate the breadth of their rhetorical, geographical, and scientific arguments into the tools of American cartography.

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Amid the debate over survey lines, Cherokee “chiefs and headmen” requested a council with agent Edward DuVal to convene near the Illinois Bayou. Their primary objective was to deliver a map to DuVal. With the “sketch of the country,” the council hoped to “illustrate more clearly…their opinions and wishes in relation to the lands ceded to them.” DuVal was apparently so impressed that he included details of the maps’ cartographic style and content in his report. The map visually consolidated the council’s various ecological, geographical, and scientific arguments of the previous several years. The Cherokee map represented a new form of Cherokee map that was simultaneously Native in origin and conscientiously Euro-American in audience. The Cherokees inserted themselves into the growing cartographic representations of the Arkansas River Valley to buoy their influence over regional settlement.109

Native tribes in the southeast used maps throughout the colonial period to influence European spatial knowledge. Native mapmakers did depict waterways and broad geographical orientation. However, surviving maps of the southeastern Indians

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109 Historians of cartography have increasingly demonstrated the role of Native Americans in contesting cartographic renderings of North America. Bruckner argues that the variety of Indigenous maps, are often obscured both for their variety of material and their focus on cultural organization more than social precision. Brückner, Early American Cartographies; See also, Pekka Hamalainen, “Shapes of Power,” in Barr and Countryman, Contested Spaces of Early America; Schulten, Mapping the Nation; DuVal, Native Ground, 28; Barr, “Geographies of Power.”
demonstrate that social relationships were also critical elements of maps. Circles drawn around various Indian nations differed in size to depict political importance of particular tribes to the European observers of Indian maps. In Arkansas, the maker of the Quapaw buffalo robe represented the French and Quapaw military alliance while also drawing connecting lines between the French and Quapaw settlements. The Cherokee mapmaker likewise included the social orientation of those earlier maps but differed in that he or she also incorporated specific Anglo-American mapping elements to counter American claims to the Arkansas Valley.110

United States politicians supported mapmaking as key to claims of American control. By the early nineteenth century, expeditions produced maps of western lands that prized exact longitude and latitudes along with notations of Indian tribes and natural resources. One of the Long expedition’s most enduring artifacts was a map published in 1822. Long’s mixture of survey lines, geographical coordinates, and Indian sovereignty offered a profound interweaving of measurement and humanity in the Arkansas Valley. On Long’s map, the Cherokees were largely associated with the mountainous region of Arkansas. Long also noted the principal Cherokee settlements that demonstrated their

110 Historians have become more attuned to the ways in which “Native American cartographies were instrumental to European representations of, and conceptualizations of, American landscapes.” Historians have unearthed the breadth of Native mapmaking by recognizing the “alternative cartographies” that were not simply about geospatial precision. Gavin Hollis, “The Wrong Side of the Map?: The Cartographic Encounters of John Lederer,” in Brückner, Early American Cartographies, 146; Harley argued that Indian maps were “alternative geographies” that were “incorporated into the fabric of European maps.” J. Brian Harley, “Rereading the Maps of the Columbian Encounter,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 82, no. 3 (1992): 522; Martin Bruckner, “Introduction: The Plurality of Early American Cartography,” in Brückner, Early American Cartographies, 1–32; Patricia Galloway, “Debriefing Explorers: Amerindian Information in the Delisles’ Mapping of the Southeast,” in Lewis, Cartographic Encounters; Waselkov argues that Indian mapmakers frequently used circles to represent social and political power. He uses examples like a Catawba map that placed the Catawba at the center of the colonial southeast. A Chickasaw mapmaker depicted the Mississippi Valley with forty-three tribes with varying circle sizes. Waselkov, “Indian Maps of the Colonial Southeast,” in Wood, Waselkov, and Hatley, Powhatan’s Mantle, 445–47; The Quapaw robe is arguably the oldest extant Native map in the southeast. Arnold, “Eighteenth-Century Arkansas Illustrated.”

dominant presence on the Arkansas River. Long’s map was later sent to the War Department to visually demonstrate the “limits of the Lovely’s Purchase” and clarify “efforts to…remove the Indians further west.” The use of Long’s maps for political maneuvering reveals the ongoing cartographic developments in which the Cherokees made their own map.111

The Cherokee cartographer, who name has not survived, created a map more focused on the relative distribution of territory than precise scientific lines. Duval noted “it was not given as a correct delineation of… rivers or topography of the country.” Rather, the most important visualization was to demonstrate “the upper settlement of the

Cherokees & the relative position of their lands according to the recent survey.” Using spatial imprecision to his advantage, the mapmaker drew the “great disproportionment” between the amount of land given to the Cherokees on the White River rather than on the Arkansas. The mapmakers drew the unequal survey results to show that the 1823 survey restricted the Cherokees to “a large proportion of mountainous country and unarable lands.” For council members delivering the map, the contours of mountain uplift gave cartographic expression to the agrarian rhetoric that the Cherokees used to prove their own civilized status.112

The Cherokee map fundamentally differed from the Long map in its depiction of the Western Cherokee settlements. Encapsulating the 1816 and 1817 agreements, Cherokee lands extended to the falls of the Verdigris River, effectively the western edge of the disputed Lovely’s Purchase area. Stringing out Cherokee settlements far up the river, the mapmaker drew the “injurious” survey line such that more than half of the Cherokee population was “cut off, or left without & above the line.” Such a survey line would have to have been drawn from the council house at Dardanelle to be accurate, and there is no evidence of that action from the survey teams. Nonetheless, the mapmaker clearly inserted this distorted survey line to seek “ample and complete justice” from the government. Proper justice, according to council, was “80 to 100 miles of front on the Arkansas.” The Cherokee cartographer had entered into a war of maps with Long over the western extent of Cherokee territory.113

The Cherokee map combined century-old Cherokee cartographic traditions while enlisting new cartographic strategies. Cherokees had long utilized maps in their

112 Edward Duval to Secretary of War, March 1, 1824, Territorial Papers 19: 613.
113 Ibid.
collaborations with Europeans, and even helped draft geographical maps for white settlers. In 1760, Thomas Kitchin created a map—which depicted the Cherokee Nation with settlements along relatively positioned watercourses—“engraved from an Indian draught.” The Arkansas Cherokee map emulated the Kitchin draft: the cartographer focused on riverways and topography as much as the location of cultural settlements. Relative to known Cherokee maps, though, the Arkansas map uniquely manipulated representations of American survey boundaries, melding a dynamic Indian cartography with the fixed geospatial boundaries of more Euro-American mapmaking.114

Much like the Cherokees’ appropriation of the survey system, the Cherokee map proved a successful hybrid of American scientific tools. Borrowing elements of recent American cartographic depictions, particularly Stephen Long’s map, the Cherokees depicted the environmental and demographic conditions of the Arkansas Valley to challenge the 1823 survey system. Given DuVal’s apparent amazement at the map and Cherokees’ successful challenge to the 1823 survey, the Cherokee chiefs’ supplementing of agrarian language with scientific literacy reinforced their power in the debates over settlement in the interior of the continent. These maps, though, revealed irreconcilable visions between the Cherokees and American settlers regarding how to delineate cultural settlement boundaries in the Arkansas Valley.

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The success of Cherokee chiefs’ environmental, geographical, and scientific strategies did not finalize the Arkansas Valley territorial boundaries so much as keep the

114 The Cherokee maps notation of clear boundaries challenges Peter Nabokov’s argument that indigenous maps were not made for fixed spatial demarcation. “Orientations from Their Side,” in Lewis, Cartographic Encounters, 247; John Lawson, A New Voyage to Carolina: : Containing the Exact Description and Natural History of That Country (London : 1709), 205; Thomas Kitchin, “A New Map of the Cherokee Nation,” 1760.
council in a position of persuasion to influence settlement patterns. While the Cherokees negotiated with federal officials, the Arkansas territorial legislature sought regional divisions that favored white farmers. Federal officials hoped to keep frontier tensions in check and to continue to encourage southeastern Indians to emigrate voluntarily. However, the maps of Long and the Cherokees highlighted an ideological divide between Cherokees who sought a clear segregation from white settlement and white Americans who debated between segregation and encirclement. The Treaty of 1828 resolved the segregation and encirclement debate by using the Cherokees’ preference for a segregated settlement to define Indian and white sovereignty in the Arkansas Valley.115

The Cherokee map demonstrated a decided interest among the Cherokees to remain segregated from white settlers. Cherokee chiefs had repeatedly requested not to be “surrounded by white people.” Additionally, the Cherokees sought assurances for the “western outlet,” for which Tolluntuskee had gone to battle, that provided access to game and avoided conflict with white settlers. The council seemed determined to maintain the lands along the Arkansas River while extending Cherokee rights farther west, crossing environmental boundaries to include both barren hills and fertile alluvial plain. The 1824 map extended Cherokee claims to the western extent of viable farm land as well as the game-filled prairies west of the Arkansas mountains.116

As Cherokees presented their preference for segregated settlement, American officials and white settlers also debated amongst themselves how to separate white and

115 For additional analyses of the 1828 treaty, both of which view the treaty favorable for the Cherokee, see Derek R. Everett, “On the Extreme Frontier: Crafting the Western Arkansas Boundary,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2008): 1–26; Agnew, “The Cherokee Struggle for Lovely’s Purchase.”

116 Arkansas Cherokee Delegation to Calhoun, March 12, 1825. “Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs”; Markman, “Arkansas Cherokees,” 172.
Cherokee settlers. Some Cherokee opponents hoped surveys of the western Cherokee boundary would effectively surround Cherokee families—limiting them to small parcels of farmland along the Arkansas and leaving them with a preponderance of mountainous land. An editorial in the *Arkansas Gazette* advocated encircling the Cherokees to “paralyze their wicked efforts.” Isolating the Cherokees in the mountains and river valley would create patchworks of white and Indian settlements that put whites in fertile farmland and restricted the Cherokees to limited agricultural areas. Other American settlers and politicians proposed a segregation policy similar to the Cherokees’, where the Cherokees would have to stay west of white settlement. Matthew Arbuckle, the military commander at Fort Smith, exemplified this form of segregation by proposing the removal of the Cherokees to the far western edge of the fertile prairies—and opening the rich soils of Lovely’s Purchase to whites.117

In late 1826, the American encirclement policy became the reality. Survey teams drew townships on Lovely’s Purchase, west of the Cherokee settlements. Within a year an Arkansas territorial politician lauded the “three thousand souls” who had taken root in “the most healthy—populous and wealthy portion of Arkansas.” Lovely County, created in 1827, walled off the Cherokee from their western outlet, and filled in the unclaimed area on Stephen Long’s 1822 map for white settlers. Cherokee families would occupy the highlands and limited farmland along the Arkansas River. The American vision prevailed in dividing valley settlement along racial and environmental lines.118

In the spring of 1828, a desperate Cherokee delegation was sent to Washington, D.C. to counter encirclement and to seek a clear title for Lovely’s Purchase. The Arkansas


118 Delegate Sevier to Secretary of War, February 18, 1828, *Territorial Papers* 19: 604.
Cherokees were split over how to address compromise, and an earlier delegation had threatened death to any Cherokees proposing to remove the Cherokees from the Arkansas River. A small group were willing to consider land exchange while others feared any resolution that would deny access to Lovely’s Purchase. For the Cherokees, the American solution of a patchwork landscape was equivalent to a slow death on deficient land and a rejection of a decade of highly coordinated agrarian rhetoric. Familiar council figures like Black Fox and Thomas Graves, along with literate negotiators like Sequoyah and John Rogers, were explicitly instructed not to negotiate a land cession. Instead, Cherokee success involved a clear separation of cultures and a removal of white families from Lovely’s Purchase.119

The delegation met staunch resistance to its request for increased land to the west. Aside from exchanging the land from the falls of the Verdigris eastward to essentially the existing western border, American negotiators were willing to either maintain encirclement or remove the Cherokees to the adjacent western lands of Lovely’s Purchase and move the boundary of Arkansas 40 miles to the east. The negotiators knew the Arkansas Cherokees would have to abandon the peach orchards, apple orchards, cornfields, vegetable gardens and cotton patches, which they had spent years improving. In May of 1828, the delegation signed a controversial agreement relinquishing their territory from the 1817 treaty in return for the Lovely’s Purchase lands immediately to the west. The 1828 Cherokee treaty ended white settlement of Lovely’s Purchase that had

begun the year before and granted Lovely’s Purchase to the Cherokees in return for Cherokee abandonment of their farms and hunting grounds.120

The persistence of Cherokees’ decade-old agrarian rhetoric appeared in the opening terms of the 1828 treaty. The treaty negotiators noted that “unfavorable” Cherokee lands in Arkansas would lead to “future degradation and misery.” The Cherokee delegation espoused the decade-long agricultural rhetoric of the Cherokee council by implying that limited farmland and extensive mountainous terrain were detrimental to their agricultural society. Despite the potential benefits of the treaty, many Arkansas Cherokees feared the precedent of continued removal in the face of white encroachment. The Cherokee delegation faced assassination and waited months to return. However, they secured a western outlet free from white settlement and gained seven million acres of land in the fertile prairies and bottoms.121

The eastern Cherokees presented the 1828 treaty of the Arkansas Cherokees as an object lesson in the dangers of voluntary removal. In the spring of 1828, the eastern Cherokees began to publish the bi-lingual Cherokee Phoenix. The early articles and editorials focused on attempts by the state of Georgia and the federal government to force Cherokee removal. When news arrived of the 1828 treaty of the Arkansas Cherokee, the editor, Elias Boudinot, called it “proof of the uselessness of this emigrating scheme.” He reflected on conflicts with the Osages, the empty promises of game, and the constant removal to new farms as evidence that the eastern Cherokees should not believe any endorsements of the benefits of voluntary removal.122

120 Ibid.
Within the larger frame of settlement in the Arkansas River Valley, the Cherokee treaty of 1828 reversed the patchwork encirclement of the Cherokees and marked a stunning blow to white settler interests. Having used agrarian rhetoric, survey systems and cartography to limit competing claims to the region, the Cherokees gained official treaty recognition of the Lovely’s Purchase tract they had claimed since at least 1816. Prior to the treaty, the multiple strategies of the Cherokee council compelled the territorial legislature to complain that “it is a well-known fact to the people of Arkansas, that the Cherokee have long desired to possess themselves of Lovely’s purchase, and that they have exercised every art which their ingenuity could invent to induce the government to withhold it from sale and settlement.” Thousands of white settlers were forced to abandon their farms. The Cherokees quickly moved into the region once thought to be well-suited to an extension of Anglo cotton production.

The adaptive negotiations of the Arkansas Cherokee help explain the persistence of multi-cultural settlements into the antebellum period. Though the treaty removed farms from the Cherokees, the Arkansas Cherokee saw their vision of a stark cultural divide written into American law. The Arkansas Valley, envisioned by federal officials as a location for removal of Southeastern Indians, became a site of rhetorical and scientific contests waged most successfully by the Arkansas Cherokees. Adapting ecological rhetoric and utilizing the scientific practice of mapmaking and surveying proved effective for a Cherokee society whose gender practices had remained largely consistent. The Arkansas Cherokee settlements along the Arkansas River—whether in the highlands before 1828 or in Lovely’s Purchase as the cornerstone of Indian territory after 1828—influenced white settlement, public land policy, and runaway slaves for decades to come.

CHAPTER 3

AT THE BORDERS OF KING COTTON:
SURVEYORS, TRAVEL WRITERS, AND LEVEES
IN THE ARKANSAS BOTTOMLANDS

In April of 1816, William Rector, the Surveyor General of much of the territory west of the Mississippi River, sent a sobering report to Edward Tiffin, the first commissioner of the recently formed General Land Office. Thousands of acres near the Arkansas River Valley were “inundated and wholly unfit for cultivation.” Of the fifteen surveyors he had sent to stake out the region for public sale, only one was willing to brave the extreme landscape. The heat and “vast number of musquetoes [sic], flies, & reptiles” promised to annoy any work parties. The Arkansas region was simply full of “swamps, marshes, & overflown grounds.” As federal officials sought to set apart the Arkansas Valley for Anglo settlement, the dense wilderness and profusion of water threatened to undermine extensive development. Nonetheless, surveys would soon find portions of the Arkansas region to be ripe for cotton cultivation. 123

From the 1810s through the 1850s, surveyors, travelers, newspaper editors, and magazine writers emerged as some of the leading advocates for incorporating portions of the Arkansas Valley into the Cotton Kingdom. As the first cotton booms spread through

123 Rector to Tiffin, April 1, 1816, Territorial Papers 15: 127.
the American South following the War of 1812, cotton-proponents identified the Arkansas Valley as a potential western extension of cotton plantation development. However, cotton farmers in the Arkansas Valley faced a confounding landscape of waterlogged forests and shifting climates. Indian nations and subsistence farmers occupied much of the prime farmlands. Cotton-growing immigrants struggled to identify where cotton plantations might take root, and many felt that the lower Arkansas Valley marked the northwestern terminus of viable cotton production. The reports of early travelers simplified the landscape by identifying general cotton regions. As travel writers and newspapermen located the borders of cotton production in the Arkansas Valley, they revealed the ecological and cultural biases that Cotton Kingdom devotees carried in their westward expansion.124

Before thousands of cotton farmers brought hundreds of thousands of enslaved men and women to Arkansas Valley, the advocates for cotton expansion created an imagined, yet recognizable space for the cotton frontier. Cotton proponents articulated ideal soil content, climate variation, landscape comparisons, and technological innovations that originated in the eastern woodlands. These assumptions influenced survey teams, travel reporters, and prospective farmers to exclude significant portions of the Arkansas Valley’s highlands and prairies, areas that had actually demonstrated cotton productivity. The mile-by-mile remarks of surveyors clarified the islands of cotton lands

124 I identify the “Cotton Kingdom” as a sort of “Cotton South” in which advocates created a variety of tools to claim land in the interest of cotton cultivation. Frederick Law Olmsted first used the term “Cotton Kingdom” in 1861 to encompass the political, social, economic, racial, and geographical elements of the soon-to-secede Confederacy. Recent scholarship continues to evaluate political, technological, and social components of the antebellum Cotton Kingdom. My use considers the Cotton Kingdom as a form of landscape control that oriented political power, economic development, labor control, scientific studies, and ecological management towards promoting and expanding the territory of cotton production. Frederick Law Olmsted, The Cotton Kingdom: A Traveller’s Observations on Cotton and Slavery in the American Slave States, vol. I (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861).
and provided legal means to disrupt competing claims from Indian nations and white subsistence farmers. Ultimately, Cotton Kingdom advocates expressed deterministic perceptions regarding the limits of cotton production that turned the lower Arkansas Valley into the northwestern boundary of the Cotton Kingdom.125

Using the reports of these advocates, white cotton farmers fundamentally transformed the waterways of the lower Arkansas Valley in order to make the presumed cotton region into a reality. In addition to clearing forests and planting fields, slaveowners coerced enslaved African Americans to build levees and canals to redirect the drainage patterns of the region. Cotton advocates also won state-sponsored levee projects to combat flooding in cotton areas, taking attention away from clearing rivers for steamboat traffic. By the 1840s, planters in the burgeoning cotton region forced thousands of enslaved men and women to transform the identified lowlands forests and fertile levees of the Arkansas Valley into cotton fields. By the end of the antebellum

125 Studies of the geography of the Cotton Kingdom often examine the plantation economy from central nodes of power like large plantations and trade centers such as New Orleans. Considering the Cotton Kingdom from its periphery clarifies that it was the most powerful of a number of contemporaneous landscape controls. Local studies of Arkansas reveal that a plantation society did develop, but only after the 1840s, as population and political power combined to direct Arkansas towards slave-holding interests. This chapter examines the development of the Cotton South as one of several forms of landscape control, highlighting the environmental presumptions as well as the survey and traveler accounts that identified and subdivided the region for cotton planters in contrast with subsistence farmers or Indian nations. My environmental framework suggests that the environmental ideas must be considered alongside capitalist impulses when understanding the locations of cotton expansion. Walter Johnson, River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Adam Rothman, Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South (Harvard University Press, 2005); Donald P. McNeilly, The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000); S. Charles Bolton, Territorial Ambition: Land and Society in Arkansas, 1800-1840 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993); Mart A. Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian: American Environmental History West and South,” Environment and History 11, no. 2 (May 2005): 143; This chapter on the Cotton Kingdom borrows from scholarly debates over imagined geographies in early American nationhood. James Drake argues that spatial imaginings were the critical prerequisite for a collective national identity. James Drake, The Nation’s Nature: How Continental Presumptions Gave Rise to the United States of America (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Martin Lewis and Karen Witgen define “metageography” as the “set of spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world.” Martin W. Lewis and Karen Wigen, The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography (University of California Press, 1997), ix.
period, massive hydrological reorganization of flood waters helped bring the once-imagined geography of the Cotton Kingdom into extensive cultivation.

Though identifying the environments suitable to cotton cultivation was paramount to Cotton Kingdom advocates, historians have turned away from definitions of the South as a cohesive region due the diverse environments and inhabitants. Since Ulrich Phillips famously argued that understanding of Southern distinctiveness should “begin by discussing the weather,” historians have eschewed Phillips’ environmental determinism. While historians still largely define the antebellum South by the “cotton frontier,” studies of cotton expansion, such as those of antebellum Arkansas, focus on the political, social, and economic structures reflected the patterns of the plantation districts farther east. Environmental historians have uncovered a mosaic of coastal rice systems, upland cotton farms, and bottomland levees. Yet, I demonstrate that cotton expansionists in the Arkansas Valley did try to imagine a cohesive Cotton Kingdom rooted in a deterministic environmental region. Ironically, cotton planters de-stabilized their own expansion by transposing their system of environmental ideas and land tenure tools, developed in the Deep South, west of the Mississippi River. The plantation system adapted only partially to the transitional environment of the Arkansas Valley and failed to oust competitors like Native Americans and white subsistence farmers. Even planters’ intensive reengineering of the Arkansas floodplains reflected both ingenuity and, at the same time, self-imposed geographical limitations. I argue that Cotton Kingdom advocates’ insistence on defining the region based on environmental parameters familiar to immigrant cotton growers ultimately undermined planters’ geographical expansion and geopolitical dominance.126

126 Recently, Southern environmental historians have avoided the sweeping environmental determinism espoused most notably by U. B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South*, 3. Nonetheless, cotton
With the admission of Arkansas as a new western territory in 1819, advocates for slave-driven cotton plantations sought to extend into the Arkansas Valley landscape. The various populations and diverse landscape, however, presented significant barriers to Cotton Kingdom expansion. Any attempts by cotton planters to dominate the region would have to compete with existing land claims of white subsistence farmers and powerful Indian tribes. In addition, the lowlands and transitional climate were substantial physical impediments. Frequent flooding isolated potential “cotton lands” and temperate weather shortened the growing season relative to farmlands farther east. Advocates of the cotton economy struggled to adapt the Arkansas Valley geopolitics and landscape to the development of the Cotton Kingdom in the lower Mississippi Valley.

In regards to the revolutions in the Southern cotton economy, the Arkansas Valley was peripheral to many of the early convulsions in the market following the War of 1812. The post-war boom unleashed speculators, cotton seeds, and slaves onto the southeast. Cotton was central to the new economy: between 1815 and 1820, cotton output tripled to 159,500 bales. Chattel slavery linked human bondage and labor in the production of cotton as over 1.5 million African Americans, one-third of the population, were enslaved.
in the South. Hundreds were being traded from Virginia and the Carolinas all the way to New Orleans. Meanwhile, in Arkansas the 1,617 enslaved men and women were 11% of the 1820 population, and local merchants were only just beginning to market cotton. Even though Arkansas Territory played an early role in the national crisis over slavery in Missouri, it was far from certain whether Arkansas would develop the slave society of the expanding Cotton South.\textsuperscript{127}

Travelers, newspaper writers, and government officials had commented on cotton’s extension into the Arkansas region beginning in the early years of Anglo settlement. In 1805, John Treat cheered the construction of a cotton gin and several acres under cultivation around Arkansas Post in southeast Arkansas. In 1818, the adventure-writer Henry Schoolcraft excitedly remarked upon the “several stalks of [cotton] growing spontaneously” along the White River at the northeastern border of Arkansas District. By 1820, the \textit{Arkansas Gazette} editor wrote that “men from every quarter of the Union…flocked” to the cotton lands of the Arkansas and Red River, in southwest Arkansas. The early seeds of cotton cultivation had made it to Arkansas in the first decades of the nineteenth century, but the future of cotton remained uncertain.\textsuperscript{128}

Indigenous powers dominated much of the Arkansas Valley. The Cherokee territory along the Arkansas River was uncomfortably close for many white immigrants. One white settler in 1826 reported traveling from Arkansas’ capital city to “the heart of

\textsuperscript{127} Rothman, \textit{Slave Country}, 177, 199; Orville Taylor, \textit{Negro Slavery in Arkansas} (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 23; Johnson, \textit{River of Dark Dreams} Especially chapter one; For a well-developed monograph on the development of the slave society in Arkansas, see McNeilly, \textit{Old South Frontier}.

\textsuperscript{128} John Treat to the Secretary of War, November 15, 1805 \textit{Territorial Papers} 13: 276. Schoolcraft, \textit{Journal, 27. Arkansas Gazette}, Nov. 25, 1820
the Cherokee Nation of Indians, about 100 miles from Little Rock.”

The Quapaws also occupied prime farmland along the Arkansas river before a treaty in 1824. In the early agricultural districts along the Red River, the federal government ceded potential cotton lands to the Choctaw during the 1820s in exchange for millions of acres in Mississippi.

Early outcomes of the Indian Removal policy in the Arkansas Territory discouraged Anglo expansion into potential cotton districts. Arkansas’ first territorial governor, James Miller, a staunch proponent of Indian Removal and white supremacy, actively discouraged the 1820 Treaty of Doak’s Stand with the Choctaw. Federal officials hoped the Choctaw would relinquish lands in Mississippi to cotton interests. However, Miller complained that the Choctaw’s new lands displaced an estimated 3,700 white inhabitants with pre-emption claims near the Red River, recognized as potentially fertile cotton lands. He requested that white farmers “be put on an equal footing with the savages and be allowed one half the good land.” In early 1821, the Arkansas Gazette joined Miller’s lament that “a very large portion of our territory is already occupied by Indians.” White Arkansans imagined that the fertile areas of the Arkansas Valley belonged to white farmers, and the evictions of white settlers for Indian Removal seemed like a denial of white superiority rights.

Meanwhile, cotton planters also encountered white settlers whose small-scale economies were well adapted to the vagaries of the Arkansas Valley environment. Hunters trapped wolves, bears, and deer in canebrakes. Rather than extensive cotton

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129 Hiram Whittington to Brother, August 1828 “Hiram Whittington Letters, 1824-1834,” SMC Box 20 No. 5, Arkansas State Archives.

130 Hiram Whittington to Brother, August, 1828 “Hiram Whittington Letters.”

131 Governor Miller to Secretary of War, December 11, 1820, Territorial Papers 19:244; Report of Committee on Public Lands, February 4, 1824, Territorial Papers 19:222; Arkansas Gazette, January 6, 1821.
fields, small scale subsistence farmers grew wheat, rye, and corn in fields cleared from the alluvial forests and mountain valleys. Ranchers allowed hogs and cattle to browse in the canebrakes that provided year-round forage. One traveler, lost in the muck of an early winter tributary, happened upon one of the many cattle tracks that wound through the forest back to a settler cabin. In one Red River county, a census taker in 1825 noted twenty-five hundred inhabitants, with fifty-five thousand cattle and twenty thousand pigs and horses. Meanwhile, of the six thousand acres under cultivation, only five hundred were dedicated to cotton. Subsistence settlers had built a regional economy around “the pelttries, the lead, and the agricultural productions of the country.”132 The subsistence and hunting based economy was well-established among the majority of inhabitants in potential cotton lands.133

Advocates of the Cotton South proffered cotton plantation society as a superior form of culture and environmental use compared to the alternative of Indians or semi-savage white subsistence farmers. Describing settlers around the White River in 1818, Henry Schoolcraft bemoaned “these people [who] subsist partly by agriculture and partly by hunting” in a state of society “not essentially different from…the savages.” Attacked through the popular press, the early settlers were considered “Ishmaels of the wild,


133 Census of the Western Portion of Miller County, July 10, 1825, *Territorial Papers* 20: 92; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, Chapter one.
without means or love of civilized life.” In 1824, the acting governor of Arkansas complained that the Quapaws were a “poor indolent, miserable, remnant, of a nation, insignificant, and inconsiderable” who nevertheless occupied prime cotton lands on the south bank of the Arkansas River. In the eyes of cotton advocates, both white subsistence farmers and Indian nations were impediments to cotton expansion, though Indian nations to a greater extent because they occupied prime farmland.

Newspaper editors lauded cotton planters both for their command of slave labor and their knowledge of the landscape. Cotton was seemingly synonymous with a vision of Southern settlement grounded in Anglo wealth, African enslavement, and the extraction of short-staple cotton for international markets. DeBow’s Review, a leading magazine of the plantation society, extolled “the agency of slave labor for cotton exportation.” The international markets, high reliance on coerced labor, intensive forms of environmental manipulation, and speculative forms of public land sales separated cotton production from squatters’ pre-emption claims. Throughout the antebellum period, Arkansas Valley residents sought to connect the Arkansas River watershed to the great “emporium” of New Orleans, orienting the Arkansas region towards the Lower Mississippi Valley.

135 Acting Governor Crittenden to Secretary of War, September 28, 1823, Territorial Papers 19:549.

136 Recent historiography of the antebellum South has argued forcefully that capitalist exploitation, not paternalistic morality, undergirded the development of a slavery-cotton regime that took root in the Lower Mississippi Valley following the end of the War of 1812. Johnson, River of Dark Dreams; Rothman, Slave Country; Edward Baptist, The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

137 The author’s reference to slave “agency” is undoubtedly about the physical labor of slaves to pick cotton rather than modern ideas of enslaved persons having relative autonomy and “agency” in their own decisions. M. Tarver, “Domestic Manufactures in the South and West,” DeBow’s Review of the Southern and Western States Vol. 3 No. 3 (March 1847), 193.
For Cotton promoters, perhaps the most beguiling characteristic of the Arkansas Valley was the landscape itself. The lower Arkansas Valley appeared as a puzzling patchwork of forests, water-courses, prairies, and mountains for Anglo cotton farmers. In eastern Arkansas, mazes of “Big Swamps” could cover twenty miles of forest with flood waters in a matter of days. Surveyors attempting to build a road from Memphis to Little Rock apologized for the “peculiar situation of this country as interspersed with lakes, swamps….with an unusual number of water courses.” Prospective cotton planters and subsistence farmers alike also feared the soggy, low-lying ground was a source of miasmatic sickness. Disease prowled the lowlands and could quickly induce fever and ague amongst enslaved laborers. Travelers complained of the vast swarms of insects. Not coincidentally, the early white population centers of the new Arkansas Territory were in the highlands and uplands rather than the low-lying bottomlands.

By the mid 1820s, Cotton South promoters identified two regions in the flood plains of the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers that would need to be managed in order to make the region more accessible. The “Mississippi Swamp” south of the Arkansas River extended a dozen miles with up to four feet of flood waters. The swamps near the St. Francis north of the Arkansas reportedly had water channels up to fifty feet deep. While bottomlands were the most fertile soils for cotton and could produce twice as much cotton per acre than upland tracks, cleared fields were frequently more mud than dirt.


139 William Rector to Edward Tiffin, April 1, 1816, *Territorial Papers* 15:127; Conevery Bolton Valencius, *The Health of the Country: How American Settlers Understood Themselves and Their Land* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 89 Valencius argues that American settlers associated their own health with the health of the land. If lowlands brought sickness to inhabitants, then the land itself was not fit. Cotton planters felt that transforming the land could make it, and its residents, happy.
Large scale cotton cultivation in these areas would require enormous re-organization of water courses and massive investment in enslaved labor.\textsuperscript{140}

For cotton promoters, the Arkansas Valley held significant challenges to incorporate into the Lower Mississippi Valley. Reports highlighted powerful Native American tribes, semi-savage subsistence families, and complicated hydrological patterns that confounded cotton investment in the peripheral region. With soils as fertile as other regions of the Lower Mississippi Valley, the task for Cotton South promoters was to reformulate the foreign landscape into a familiar cotton land. Surveys and travel reports became the prime mechanisms of introducing the Arkansas Valley as a Southern cotton region. While formally intended to open public lands to any farmer, surveys intentionally aided the expansion of the plantation districts of the cotton empire. At the same time, travel writers debated about how to determine the outer boundaries of cotton production in the Arkansas region.

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Between the 1810s and 1830s, both travel writers and surveyors transformed the vast forests of the Arkansas Valley into a less daunting landscape by identifying possible areas of cotton cultivation. Surveys and travel journals made the Arkansas Valley commodifiable for cotton speculators and created a venue to debate the contours of cotton production. Travel writers often identified the outer edges of cotton production by referencing transitions among vegetation and climate. Within the confines of cotton viability, surveyors uncovered interior tracts of alluvial soil that would be ideal for cultivation. Cotton speculators and politicians wielded surveys as a political tool to promote cotton investment and coerce Indian removal. Through their reports of the

\textsuperscript{140} Allen Martin to Jared Martin, February 19, 1834, “Jared C Martin Family Papers.”
Arkansas Valley, observers sought to annex the bottomlands into a cohesive cotton producing region that shared common environmental traits with areas farther east. 

Promoters of the Cotton South expected that “southern planters” would arrive in the Arkansas Valley and invest in the development of cotton. The *Arkansas Gazette*, the territory’s only newspaper, promised rich rewards to potential planters. In 1821, the *Arkansas Gazette* hailed the arrival of two Virginia planters and their twenty-five enslaved hands to an area that they had purchased as “peculiarly adapted” to cotton. In October 1825, the paper reported that “several gentlemen from some of the neighboring cotton-growing states” spoke highly of Arkansas cotton. The paper argued that such external praise “will go far towards establishing the reputation of Arkansas as an excellent cotton-growing” region. The newspaper editor hoped the arrival of cotton-farming immigrants would connect the region to the Lower Mississippi Valley and the wealthier states of the southeast.

State politicians, newspaper editors, traveler writers, and large-scale planters practiced an almost singular infatuation with cotton production as the language of regional unification. The Arkansas lowlands west of the Mississippi produced cotton alongside a vast region stretching back to the Atlantic. Cotton cultivation stretched,

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141 Walter Johnson argues that surveys’ “rectangular grid expressed the sovereignty of the United States of America over the landscape of the Mississippi Valley.” While my analysis supports his overall thesis, his economic argument sees the Cotton Kingdom’s expansion as fait accompli whereas, in my estimation, surveys were powerful but flawed expansionary tools. Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 36.


143 *Arkansas Gazette*, October 11, 1825.

144 Walter Johnson in *River of Dark Dreams* has argued that a cotton empire centered around the Lower Mississippi Valley sought to extend southwards into the Caribbean and even across the Pacific. However,
“from the southern borders of Virginia to the southwestern streams of the Mississippi, a space of 12,000 miles and from the seas for 200 miles to the interior.”¹⁴⁵ In fact, the cotton proponents to merging the South and West into the “two great divisions of the Union” which would now “supply great portions…of the world” with cotton—and displace the Indian nations and subsistence whites who inhabited much of the Arkansas Valley.¹⁴⁶

Despite the agricultural promise, travel writers and regional commentators also highlighted the ecological limits of cotton production in the Arkansas Valley. Writers for *DeBow’s Review* argued that “unlike other articles, [cotton] cannot be raised in different climates or latitudes.” As a result, “it seems to be settled, that in the United States of America there is a small parcel of land destined to supply the world with Cotton.” Rather than adaptation to a variety of landscapes, writers presented the Cotton Kingdom as subject to a deterministic environment defined by the limits of soil, climate, river proximity, and familiar vegetation based on cotton production on lands farther east.¹⁴⁷

The presumed northwestern boundary of cotton shifted depending on the commentators’ climactic, political, or vegetational standards. In 1826, Timothy Flint simplified cotton lands for immigrants arriving by water. The Arkansas River, he wrote, “mark[s] the distinct outline of another climate. About the latitude of thirty-three to thirty-four degrees seems to be the outline of the region of the profitable raising and growing of cotton.” Three decades later, the cotton line was described as “south of the

in situating this study on the northwestern edge of the cotton South in Arkansas, the language is much more focused on the continental cotton region than an expansion into the Gulf of Mexico.


¹⁴⁶ *DeBow’s Review of the Southern and Western States* Vol I No. 1(January 1846), 251

¹⁴⁷ “Cotton and the Cotton Planter,” *DeBow’s Review, of the South and West* Vol. 3 No. 1, (January 1847), 17.
baseline,” established by federal surveys of the Louisiana Purchase. The survey-based line slightly contradicted Flint’s statement because much of the baseline extended north of the Arkansas River. Nevertheless, the baseline assisted prospective buyers who were consulting maps prior to departing for the area. Emigrants needed only consult their deeds, as anything listed as “S,” south of the baseline, on the survey map was best adapted to cotton.148

The shifting boundaries demonstrated that cotton lands were not defined solely by the capacity of the land for large scale cotton agriculture but also the political interests of individual writers. J. Calvin Smith’s western guide used Spanish Moss, familiar to emigrants from many Southern states, to denote cotton-adaptable climates. The “festoons of long moss hang[ing] from the trees” marked the 33rd parallel, below which “commences the proper climate for cotton.” Not coincidentally, this parallel was also Arkansas’ southern boundary with Louisiana. If Smith’s guide were followed, the geographical limits of cotton would evict Arkansas from the Cotton Kingdom and promote cotton planters to move into Louisiana. Twelve years later, Professor W.C. Duncan noted that cotton, like rice, could be produced as high as 36˚ 30’149 Not coincidentally, that specific parallel was the northern boundary of Arkansas. Regional

148 Timothy Flint, Recollections of the Last Ten Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Co., 1826), 256. “Arkansas,” DeBow’s Review, 209. The article notes that cotton could be grown northward but was not as productive. Setting the boundary at the baseline marked the northern edge at 34˚ 38’ north.

writers understood their subjective power in a region where states gained and lost settlers’ interest in parallel with perceived environmental characteristics.  

Some regional writers focused on hybrid weather patterns and marked the northern line of cotton production as climatic rather than soil related. One travel-writer described “this [Arkansas] climate as a compound of that of Missouri and Louisiana” with a planting season “three weeks later than…New Orleans and more than [three weeks] in advance of Missouri.” The new land challenged the sensory understanding of immigrants from outside the southeast. Alluding to his own Northern heritage, one writer commented that for “the northern man…his feelings indicate a very uncomfortable degree of cold. But the vegetable creation clearly designates this to be a different climate from the contiguous state of Missouri.” As the cotton South extended northwards, Arkansas required that emigrants develop new conceptions of the air itself.  

Regional writers routinely marked the Arkansas Valley as the northwest boundary of profitable cotton production. Migrant guides to the region typically posited that cotton’s productive edge occurred somewhere between the 33rd and 34th parallel, roughly the southern boundary of Arkansas and north to the mouth of the Arkansas River. Regardless of the variance, few advocates for cotton-based emigration suggested any area north of Arkansas as the edge of the cotton South.

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152 Flint, Recollections, 258.
Whereas the northern boundary of cotton reflected climate and bias towards certain cotton-producing states, the western edge of the South emerged from immigrants’ bias for forests where the Arkansas mountains gave way to the extensive prairies of the Great Plains. In 1819, botanist Thomas Nuttall found the soil along the Arkansas River “extremely favorable for the growth of cotton.” Nuttall established a point near the Fort Smith garrison as the spot from which “the prairies or grassy plains begin to be prevalent, and the trees to decrease in number and magnitude.” Despite the vegetative transition, Nuttall had noted this area’s fertility. Anglo cotton farmers were also preparing to establish new farms higher up the Arkansas near Fort Smith. These farmers abandoned their plans only after the crash of cotton prices in 1819 as well as the imposition of Cherokee claims to that area. Nuttall, Anglo farming families, and Cherokee farmers recognized the viability of cotton crops in the transition region from bottomland forest to prairies.153

Despite Nuttall’s positive review, most early immigrants and writers utilized environmental perceptions ill-equipped for the new lands west of the Mississippi. The oft-read Henry Brackenridge described the prairies in 1817 as “little better than a barren waste.” Three years later, Stephen Long further popularized the “Great Desert” in his maps of the region.154 Long’s description coincided with a drought cycle, which caused him to view the desiccated state as normal.155 The regional implications were profound as “early settlers supposed that the scantiness of timber was owing to the sterility of the

153 Nuttall identified cotton regions 40 miles west of the site of Fort Smith. Nuttall, A Journal of Travels Into the Arkansas Territory, 215; 140; 234; 281.
soil” and called these areas “barrens.” Travel writers helped to stop expansion of the cotton cultivation at the prairies and Great American Desert as travel accounts did not spread enthusiasm for the region.

Writers’ focus on the hybridity of Arkansas’ northern boundary and the treeless prairies to the west reinforced a determinist understanding of the landscape’s possibilities. In 1820, the Arkansas Gazette already declared the limits of expansion as the land could only “perform the offices for which she was intended by the God [sic] of nature.” Cotton commentators also connected the pre-ordained teleology of nature in the Cotton South to validation of the racial slave labor system. “Nature,” declared DeBow’s Review, “has ordained that the negro shall serve the white man…in the cotton and sugar region”—a region by then restricted below 34˚ and, largely, east of the mountains. The Cotton South, limited by its nearly singular emphasis on cotton-based civilization, could lay claim to barely half of Arkansas.

As writers determined the exterior boundaries of cotton, surveyors opened up an interior cotton area to regional cotton speculators. Though surveyors ostensibly proffered public lands to anyone with capital, cotton was the driving motivation in and around the Arkansas Valley. The Red River appealed to surveyors because of extensive areas “wide and free from inundations and extremely rich.” In 1819, even as cotton prices plummeted throughout the southeast and drought hurt crop yields, a leading surveyor remarked that the area was “extremely well adapted to the produce of cotton, as well as everything else that will grow well in the United State at that latitude.” As surveyors prioritized which


areas to survey and bring to public sale, they gravitated towards cotton districts where settlements of cotton were already in production. One surveyor specifically laid out the townships for distribution by prioritizing settlements where “publick [sic] lands [are] very successfully engaged in raising cotton.”

The ability to discern potential “cotton land” required a practiced evaluation of landforms and vegetation. The alluvial soil of the Arkansas Valley, replenished by the troublesome floodwaters, beckoned imaginative cotton developers. The best lands were “high” above high water, while too wet or frequently inundated soil spelled doom for seedlings. River cane flourished throughout the southeast and served as a familiar ecological marker west of the Mississippi. Observers used dense stands of river cane, or cane brakes, as a proxy for flood patterns. River cane usually thrived on natural levees where inundation was temporary and infrequent. River cane was often associated with “first rate” cotton lands. The most detailed accounts of the potential cotton lands noted the height of cane brakes, the depth of soils, or the presence of natural drainages to prognosticate potential agricultural fields.

Surveyors aided cotton investors by identifying the patchwork of wet and dry areas with suitable soil for cultivation and preparing the land for purchase. The Public Land Survey System created a grid-based system that subdivided the landscape into townships. Each township was further surveyed and divided into 640-acre square mile sections, of which 160-acre quarter sections were the primary sale allotment. As surveyors moved their chains, the land came into focus. Along a one mile stretch of the


survey baseline near the Arkansas River, one surveyor reported, “the former part of this mile is a solid Cane brake & rather low for farm[ing] the latter very good land O[ak] Gum & some Poplar all large & lofty tim[ber], briers [sic].” As surveyors moved into the forested interior of the Arkansas Valley, the squared-off townships and sections simplified the ecological and topographical complexity of the lowlands into areas “fit for cultivation.”

Surveyors understood their reports to reflect the ideology of environmental determinism that connected assumptions of crop production and slavery. William Rector, the surveyor general of Illinois and Missouri, promised that “the slaveholder will no doubt settle in Missouri or Arkansas. The Cotton planter and man who is fond of a warm climate will prefer the Red River country.” For the surveyor general, the surveys were the necessary first step in the inevitable outcome of climate and slave differentiated settlement.

American officials used the survey system to encroach into Indian lands. As seen in the case of the Cherokees, surveyors and public land promoters surrounded Indian treaty lands in an attempt to isolate or pressure Indian nations into abandoning their lands. Cherokee and Quapaw treaty territories were not part of public lands, but surveyors intentionally pursued survey lines to Indian territorial borders. Cherokee leaders did undermine the survey system to thwart white annexation of Lovely’s


161 Rector continued to connect environmental preferences and opinions towards slavery, saying that, “The farmer who is a slave holder and prefers a cooler climate will settle in Missouri Territory. And those persons who are opposed to slavery and have no negroes will I presume prefer the state of Illinois.” William Rector to Josiah Meigs, April 18, 1819, *Territorial Papers* 19:67.
Purchase; but, elsewhere in the valley, surveys helped to create a contiguous region of cotton lands that anticipated the removal of Indian claims. In fact, the capital city of Little Rock was squared off directly adjacent to the western edge of the Quapaw tribe’s land along the Arkansas River. The Quapaws would abandon the valley by 1824 in exchange for lands farther west. Federal and territorial officials wielded the survey system as a geopolitical tool in addition to its economic and ecological functions.162

Despite their success in presenting a rationalized, purchasable landscape in the Arkansas Valley lowlands, surveys were prone to disruption. Corruption amongst surveyors also left the region with deficient quality surveys. The Surveyor General asked for continual extensions for surveys, claiming the difficulty in finding enough land “fit for cultivation” in specific townships. His critics argued that the ineffective surveys were due to nepotism and negligence. The geometric intersection of the beginning survey point was skewed. Survey contractors avoided other areas of potential farms as they were paid by miles surveyed and thus bypassed dense, waterlogged bottomlands for less optimal uplands. The surveys did not mis-identify cultivatable lands as much as reveal ideal locations more slowly than many white Arkansans wanted.163

By the late 1820s, cotton promoters had identified several potential regions for cotton production. The Red River, which was an early site of settlement, remained a key attraction on the southwestern boundary of the territory. Lovely’s Purchase and the Quapaw lands along the Arkansas were also coveted regions that required confrontation


Figure 3.1. Surveyors enjoyed some discretion in which lands to survey and set aside for sale. The survey plat above along the Red River shows that surveyors selected areas in the vicinity of waterways that were more conducive to agriculture while completely avoiding “Mountains.” The patchwork quality of surveys prioritized the sale of potential cotton lands. William Rector to Josiah Meigs, April 14, 1819, *Territorial Papers* 19:62.

with Indian claims. The lower end of the White and St. Francis Rivers also exhibited promise for cotton production. Yet the impediments of Native American claims, pre-emption rights, and inundation initially limited cotton development to islands of plantations in the midst of the Arkansas lowlands.¹⁶⁴

The surveys and travel guides informed a cotton landscape that was not just imagined but imposed on the landscape with commodified land sales and ecologically discernible boundaries. However, their environmental presumptions of the deterministic space of cotton production exposed the limits of the cotton regime’s ability to adopt

¹⁶⁴ John Trimble to Josiah Meigs, January 3, 1822 *Territorial Papers* 19:389; Benjamin Moore to Secretary of War, December 26, 1826, *Territorial Papers* 20:172.
diverse landscapes like prairies and mountains. Regardless, having identified areas potential production, cotton expansionists sought to unlock the interior areas of cotton lands through technological advances and designs for a massive hydrological re-organization of rivers, levees, and canals.

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After having used the survey system and vernacular observations of the Arkansas Valley landscape to outline the interior and exterior limits of cotton production, cotton planters and politicians turned to technological innovations to extend the reaches of cotton. These Cotton South advocates sought to fill in and expand the regions of potential cotton land by drying out the Arkansas Valley’s bottomlands and increasing access into the major and subsidiary waterways. The arrival of coerced slave labor and a view of flooding as a phenomenon to be defeated enabled the gradual opening of the Arkansas Valley bottomlands into the Mississippi Valley cotton economy. Cotton planters were more successful in recovering interior cotton lands than expanding the outer boundaries.165

Considering the perceived limits of cotton production, the Cotton South developed its scientific capabilities to identify optimal cotton lands beyond the early methods of assessing natural vegetation and flood conditions. During the antebellum period, planters turned to soil science to address diminishing soil fertility throughout the Cotton South and to identify cotton lands on Arkansas’ western boundary. The Farmer’s Register repeated the assertion that the best cotton was “most productive in alluvial soils

165 Christopher Morris argues that the Cotton Kingdom sought to “engineer the river of empire” following floods in the late 1840s after less intensive levee systems in the century prior.. This chapter chronicles that slow development of hydrological control in the Arkansas Valley as part of a broader scientific coordination in the southern borderlands. Morris, The Big Muddy, 112–46.
a little touched by salt.” Arkansas cotton farmers must have been pleased as the Arkansas River, like the Red, meandered through salt licks in the eastern prairies. That same Register included a self-described soil scientist whose “analysis” found “between one and two percent of carbonate of magnesia and two to three percent of carbonate of lime,” in the region, similar to the celebrated muds of the Nile. Arkansas Valley planters sent specimens of Arkansas soil to Mississippi planters to help improve the selling price of cotton plantations by increasing the familiarity of its soils.166

Once cotton lands were identified, planters directed their enslaved laborers to clear the land strategically and quickly. James Gill, a former slave, described the arrival of an enslaved crew from Alabama: “de han’s [sic] was put right to work clearin’ land and building cabins…dey just slashed the cane and deaden the timber and when cotton plantin’ time come de cane was layin’ there on de groun’ crisp dry and dey sot fire to it and burned it off.”167 Fields, buildings, fuel, and the season were all elements of the plantation enterprise that had to be considered. Enslaved men and women cleared understory brush and burned it during “log rolling.” Ax-men often girdled, or cut the circumference of bark, of the grandest trees to deaden them. By February or March, the first cotton fields would be planted amidst the scared trunks of dead trees.168

Cotton planters used steamboat innovations to travel up interior waterways and extend the edges of the Cotton South. Robert Fulton’s first Mississippi River steamboat


launched in 1811. Steamboat owners in the Mississippi Valley built vessels with shallow
drafts and large carrying capacity. Owners continually invested in increased power, often
at the expense of safety. Throughout the 1820s, steamboats accomplished new record
distances up the Arkansas rivers. In 1820, the *Comet* arrived at Arkansas Post. By the
early 1830s, steamboats had made it to Fort Smith and beyond. The Territorial Assembly
argued that strategic canals and riverways opened interior lands to the “great emporium
of the west” and would “attract the attention of hundreds of the wealthy planters of
Louisiana, Mississippi, and …throw into market thousands of acres of public land.” As
one commentator declared in northern Arkansas, “Our market is New Orleans, and when
we have water we can leave.” With each technological advancement and navigational
accomplishment, the Cotton South extended farther up the Arkansas, as well as the Red
River, Ouachita, White, and St. Francis. Cotton planters were able to connect more of the
Arkansas Valley region to the New Orleans cotton market.170

As steamboat owners improved steamboat travel, engineers implemented a broad
hydrological management to open settlement on the Red and Arkansas Rivers. In the
1830s, Henry Shreve first opened the centuries old “raft” on the Red River, accumulated
from trees on banks of the river that had collapsed into the channel of the ever-shifting
river. The raft impeded river flow for dozens of miles and forced flood waters to fill the
surrounding forest with lakes and wetlands. Inhabitants on the Arkansas River cheered
raft removal efforts to dislodge “snaps, sawyers, sunken logs, and cypress stumps” from

169 Walter Johnson, “The Steamboat Sublime,” *River of Dark Dreams*. This chapter considers the steamboat
as a metaphor for the Cotton Kingdom built on speculation and capitalism.

170 Memorial to Congress by Territorial Assembly, November 5, 1831, *Territorial Papers* 21:424; N,
“Northern Arkansas and its Natural Advantages,” *Debow’s Review: Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial
Progress and Resources* (J. D. B. DeBow., 1848), 303.
Along the White River, rafts were removed with the promise of drying up extensive swamps to reveal “cotton lands of the finest quality.” River management was predicated on the promise of cotton production. Cotton planters continually modified their understanding of the patterns of the alluvial valley floods and droughts that undergirded agricultural production. The earliest cotton planters often preferred upland terraces, though droughts made upland fields susceptible to disease. In contrast, bottomland fields could be deeply impacted by flooding at any time in the planting season. Early floods delayed planting while midseason flooding could destroy hundreds of acres of planted cotton. By the 1830s, planters considered Arkansas Valley planting to be adaptable to the fluctuations of droughts and floods, which emboldened cultivation in diverse areas of the lower Arkansas Valley. Advertisements for cotton lands promoted both upland tracts that were “two feet above the highest freshets and not inferior.” These were optimal areas during years with good rainfall. Advertisers also listed lowland areas “highly adaptable to the culture of cotton” that “can be secured by a levee of two feet.” These bottomland fields were ideal during drought periods, and cotton planters hoped levee construction reduced

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171 *Arkansas Gazette*, February 11, 1834.


173 *Arkansas Gazette*, April 29, 1823, June 14, 1849, February 11, 1834. Freshets, characterized by standing water in fields and forests, were somewhat more unpredictable. The typical flood month was June, but flooding also occurred in the early spring, like March and April. While planters dealt with droughts and floods as an inherent process that could even occur in the same year, the 1830s and 1850s had more frequently reported significant droughts while major floods occurred more frequently during the 1840s and 1850s. Newspapers reported droughts of varying extremes in 1825, ’30, ’32, ’33, “38,” 43, ’44, ’45, ’51, ’53, ’54, ’55, ’56, ’58, ’60. Flooding appeared in 1823, ’28, ’30, ’33, ’35, ’40, ’44, ’45, ’48, ’49, ’51, ’54, ’56, ’58.
the threat of flooding. A stable environmental period with no major floods between 1834 and 1839 further encouraged development of bottomland cotton fields. 174

Since planters felt upland and lowland areas offered remedies to the vicissitudes of droughts and floods, planters needed only the capital for slave labor. The men who brought new slave-based capital to the Arkansas lowlands were not local but immigrants from the upper south. Members of the politically-connected elite in Kentucky maneuvered their way into appointments in Arkansas. Kentucky planters had the wealth and enslaved workforce to buy and clear cheap delta land and immediately begin profiting from the increasing value of riverfront cotton. Between 1830 and 1833, the value of river front cotton nearly doubled from $36/bale to $68/bale. When Arkansas became a state in 1836, the first act of the legislature was to charter the Real Estate Bank to lend to agricultural investors. A slave-owning planter with a large enslaved workforce could turn 200 acres into as much as $13,600 per year. In the Arkansas Valley, levees promised wealth to individual land holders who could afford the initial risk. 175

These planters shifted the center of cotton production from the Red River Valley to the lower Arkansas Valley. By 1840, while the majority of Arkansas’ population lived in the healthier upland regions on small farms, enslaved inhabitants of the state were split halfway between the uplands and lowlands. By the end of the 1840s, seventy percent of enslaved Arkansans toiled in the Arkansas bottomlands. In some counties, enslaved persons comprised nearly three-quarters of the population, a proportion on par with the

174 Arkansas Gazette, March 18, 1834, November 7, 1832, October 27, 1830, November 28, 1851; Washington Telegraph, May 30, 1855.

175 Arkansas Gazette, June 19, 1833; Jeffrey Owens, “Holding Back the Waters: Land Development and the Origins of Levees on the Mississippi, 1720-1845.” (Diss., Louisiana State University, 1999), 619-21. Owens’ larger argument is that the immigration of new planters helped propel the influence of planters in southeastern Arkansas.
most extreme slavery regimes of the Mississippi Valley. The economics were obvious. An upland field yielded one-half bale of cotton per acre. In the lowlands, cotton output doubled to a full bale per acre. Slavery and cotton were about to spur tremendous environmental transformation.176

Enslaved laborers became the catalyst for the physical transformation of much of the prospective cotton lands. During the 1830s and 40s, no state or federal funds assisted with riverside levee construction, so the arrival of hundreds of enslaved men and women ensured that well-capitalized slaveowners outpaced other cotton farmers. Enslaved African Americans hauled clay for structural re-enforcement, cleared ditches of debris and cut down trees whose roots might damage the levee. Wealthy owners could afford to sacrifice important elements of planting in order to constrain flood waters. Owners might delay the planting of cotton seeds to repair levees. Others forced gangs of slaves to work until 10 pm at night to build up the levee near the plantation. One overseer, when emphasizing levee labor, said, “Levee making and fighting water is old business to me.” Slave-built levees would help solidify the Cotton Kingdom as the dominant geopolitical force in the lower Arkansas Valley.177

The first generation of levees frequently failed. The construction was often of low quality, and levees were relatively short at two or three feet. Enslaved workers filled levees with leaves, logs, and stumps to increase the speed of construction, which left levees prone to crevassing. Many of these levees failed during the significant flood.


Enslaved laborers then had to build culverts and ditches, usually enhancing natural stream beds, to drain flood waters. These localized levee constructions revealed the limited planning for a region-wide levee system. Slaveowners ordered levees to be built close to the river to maximize bottomland fields, but increased risk of devastating overflows. Further, with no comprehensive approach to levee building, water often spilled into gaps in the levees between land owners, compromising the effectiveness of any levee. The inadequacies of the levee system led to continued economic disruption from floods during the 1840s.178

In addition to riverside levees, cotton advocates hoped that canals and cleared waterways would also provide access to forgotten, isolated, and interior cotton lands. Local inhabitants felt that far more of the region was fit for cultivation than many believed. One frequent writer argued that the region was not some vast swamp; instead, most commentators were “lamentably ignorant of the topography of Arkansas.” Throughout the 1830s, members of the Arkansas Territorial assembly repeatedly lobbied for a canal that would connect the Bayou Bartholemew to the Mississippi River. They argued that prime cotton lands were “almost hid in the wilderness” because they were surrounded by yearly inundation. Internal improvement advocates insisted that the combination of canals, levees, and roads would open up the best cotton region in the territory.179


179 J. C. Jones to Delegate Sevier, December 14, 1832, Territorial Papers 21:579; Memorial to Congress by Territorial Assembly, November 5, 1833, Territorial Papers 21:834.
An onslaught of devastating floods in the 1840s created a psychological fear of floods and increased pressure to focus river improvements on cotton production via levee construction. The Great Flood of 1844 became the standard against which later floods were judged. After having flooded in May, the “Great Flood” rose in June with 15 feet of standing water marking the crest in some floodplain areas. The *Arkansas Gazette* openly hoped that the “immense damage to property” could serve as the “data to enable the legislature to…[pass] a general levee law.” Months afterwards, the *Arkansas Banner* reported, “All remember with sorrow, the river spread over those vast portions of our state” with “nearly half our cotton crop cut off.” In June of 1858, when another major flood threatened cotton lands, the *Vicksburg Whig* hearkened back to the 1844 flood, saying, “It became feared and shunned as a demon of the darkness.”

In 1850, the federal government passed the Swamp Land Act—following two consecutive years of flooding—attempting to simplify Mississippi Valley hydrology in favor of cotton production. The federal government donated flood-prone federal lands to the state for public sale, the profits of which would fund the levee system. The Arkansas governor called for nearly 500 miles of levee construction along the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers. Within a decade, white land owners purchased millions of acres, resulting in $2,500,000 for internal improvements in the state. The immediate geophysical result of the Swamp Land Act was the construction of hundreds of miles of levees and drainages along major riverways to “reclaim” millions of acres of bottomland. Surveyors quickly marked off townships and sections for public sale. The reclamation of

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180 *Arkansas Banner*, December 11, 1844; *Vicksburg Whig*, June 23, 1858; *Arkansas Gazette*, May 15, 1844.
Figure 3.2 Though Arkansas remained one of the least populated slave states, the Arkansas delta became a well-developed cotton district. Chicot County on the west bank of the Mississippi doubled its enslaved population between 1850 and 1860 as the 7,900 enslaved people comprised 82% of the population. *Annottated Map of Portions of Desha and Chicot Counties, Arkansas, and Washington and Bolivar Counties, Mississippi, Skipwith District., Part 1*. National Archives, Washington, D.C. Accessed May 23, 2019. https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2016/03/15/map-minutes-captured-and-abandoned-property-in-the-post-civil-war-south/ [Cropped].
soils demonstrated that Cotton South advocates felt that climate and vegetation patterns were fixed limits, but floodwaters could be overcome.181

As the decade wore on, however, failed levees undermined the engineering promise of the Cotton Kingdom. In 1856, a break in the Arkansas levee caused several plantations to be completely submerged. Overflows in the twenty-five mile wide Arkansas Bottom along the Mississippi River caused many to “lose confidence in the levee system…the majority wish the appointment of a competent and scientific board of engineers.” The millions of dollars in damage prompted the Southern Shield to disparage the “present defective levee system.” Proponents of the Cotton South had promised ever expanding interior cotton lands but overestimated the ability to engineer a dry South. The Arkansas Gazette, a typically staunch proponent of King Cotton, hoped that the river’s “rise will teach planters to construct such levees as will stand the force of the father of waters.”182

Re-engineering of the Arkansas Valley region meant opening potential cotton lands in the alluvial bottoms as well as penetrating the upland interiors and natural levees. The rising power of King Cotton sought to orient towards a more definitively pro-cotton, managed hydrology. Private landholders paid for the first levees, but the state sanctioned and subsidized additional cotton through taxation to the benefit of cotton growers. Yet, the levee system exposed the evolving hubris of cotton planters regarding the patterns of floods and droughts. Each promise of protection from floods lead to more destruction


182 Southern Shield, March 13, 1852; New Orleans Crescent, February 2, 1852; Memphis Daily Appeal, August 6, 1858; Times Picayune, May 21, 1856; New Orleans Crescent, May 17, 1859; Arkansas Gazette, April 24, 1858.
from unprecedented flood events. Nonetheless, King Cotton proponents proved willing to invest not only time, money, and labor, but also political capital into acquiring a significant portion of the Arkansas Valley within their control.

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Despite the influx of labor and wealth, cotton farmers did not extend into each area of viable farm land. Choctaws and Cherokees treaty lands and white immigrants’ disdain for “barren” prairie regions, blocked westward expansion. Cotton Kingdom advocates also disparaged subsistence farmers in mountain areas. By 1860, planters in the interior regions of the cotton lands succeeded in establishing a cotton-centric slave society. However, ineffective attempts to extend the borders of the cotton production revealed the ecological and cultural presumptions of Cotton South expansion.

As the cotton landscape of the lower Arkansas Valley matured in the 1850s, it began to imitate the plantation regions of the rest of the Lower Mississippi Valley. While decidedly more rural than slave states to the east, the riverside plantations along the lower stretches of the Arkansas appeared as a burgeoning cotton district. By the 1850s, Arkansas had only the twelfth highest population of enslaved inhabitants but was the state with the sixth highest output of cotton. Agricultural The development of the delta coincided with the importation of thousands of slaves as well as the massive engineering projects to tame the river. The enslaved population tripled in the lowlands between 1850 and 1860, totaling nearly half of the state’s enslaved population on just one-quarter of the land area.183 One Mississippi planter noted several “large and valuable plantations”

183 Hempstead County along the Red River had a higher number of slaves than any delta county but grew by 82% relative to the 200% increase in delta towns. Whayne and Gatewood, The Arkansas Delta, 242; Kelly Houston, “Slaveholders and Slaves of Hempstead County, Arkansas” (University of Arkansas, 2008), 28.
between Pine Bluff and Little Rock. In 1860, cultivated lands doubled to 2 million acres, or 6% of the Arkansas territory. Of slaveholders in the lowlands, the number who grew cotton increased from half in 1850 to nearly 85% in 1860. The hydrological transformation of the Arkansas lowlands coincided with a remarkable concentration of wealth in slave-based cotton production.184

One of the most successful plantations to emerge in the delta region was Elisha Worthington’s Sunnyside Plantation. Worthington located the plantation on a natural levee between the Mississippi and the Old River lake and forced hundreds of enslaved people to cut down thirteen hundred acres of dense bottomland forests. Worthington made Sunnyside the centerpiece of a sprawling collection of plantations and slave labor camps. Bondspeople picked, cleaned and prepared 1,700 bales a year at Sunnyside, while the enslaved men and women of the other plantations produced corn, sweet potatoes, and an additional thirteen hundred bales of cotton along with raising mules, cattle, and pigs. With Worthington and the 400 plus slaves he owned as the standard-bearer of Arkansas’ plantation-slavery, one observer remarked that Chicot County was the “richest, fairest, most productive county in the state.”185

Away from the interior cotton areas, Cotton Kingdom proponents struggled to incorporate the mountains and prairies into their cultural imagination. Writers tried, and

184 Charles S. Sydnor, “Diary of a Journey in Arkansas in 1856,” The Mississippi Valley Historical Review 22, no. 3 (December 1935): 423; Donald P. McNeilly, The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 18, 173; Comparatively, Mississippi had 5 million acres, or about 16% of the landscape under cultivation, but in the 1850s, Mississippi had a 20% increase in improved lands while Arkansas had a 100% increase. Kelly Houston Jones, “The Peculiar Institution on the Periphery: Slavery in Arkansas” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, 2014), 51.

Figure 3.3 The Arkansas River Valley was a “Dominant Cotton District,” producing two bales or more per enslaved person. The absence of cotton production westward in the Indian Territory, and the limit of cotton production north of Arkansas reveal a Cotton Kingdom bounded ecologically as well as culturally. David McLellan and Frederick Law Olmstead. A Map of the Cotton Kingdom and Its Dependencies in America. New York, Mason Bros, 1861. [Cropped].
largely failed, to incorporate the mountains into the cotton South through cultivation. In one telling article, C.F.M. Noland suggested that northern Arkansas offered “many inducements for the poor man.” The acknowledgement of the region’s poorer whites, though, suggested more begrudging awareness of mountainous lifestyles than inclusion of that population in the Cotton South. Noland admitted that the southern portion of the state “is better suited for cotton planters,” demonstrating the cultural separation between subsistence lifestyles and the Cotton Kingdom. Mountainous areas were often excluded from the early surveys of public lands, even though small farmers later established productive fields in the valleys of the hilly regions.

Subsistence settlers adapted more favorably to the mountainous regions as white hunters stalked the hills and farmers planted the sporadic valleys of the region. Cattlemen navigated the flooded lands of eastern Arkansas by moving cattle and hogs to higher land whenever waters did creep into the bottomland forest. Among the Anglo farmers who replaced the Cherokees near the Ozark Mountains, livestock and corn production provided a significant amount of subsistence and wealth. Some subsistence farmers did cultivate a few acres in cotton and produced just enough cotton to pay their taxes. However, most non-slaveowners never produced more than a small amount of cotton. In contrast, the language of the Cotton South de-emphasized alternative forms of landscape use, such as recreational or subsistence hunting, herding, or non-cotton staple crop production. Plantation owners did raise hogs and food crops in addition to cotton. Yet, by


the 1850s, particularly in the lowlands of the lower Arkansas Valley, cotton and slavery eclipsed more diversified production as hydrological management opened up more lands to cotton production.188

In the Arkansas Valley, Cotton South advocates employed their wide array of land holding tools, but they were also unable to appropriate large portions of the Arkansas Valley landscape. Regional writers and newspapermen espoused a deterministic view of nature. The transitional weather patterns of northern Arkansas and the encroaching plains to the west curtailed cotton’s expansion farther north and west. Planters knew enslaved laborers could clear forests and rivers could be redirected to reverse the destructive effects of floods. However, climate, prairies, and mountains appeared largely restrictive. Ecological bias in favor of familiar forested landscapes contributed significantly to the self-imposed limits of the Cotton South. Slaveowners did enjoy political connections to state banks and, later, legislation in the Swamp Lands Act that supported levee building for increased cotton-land production. However, these levees changed river flow in unexpected ways. Planters suffered from increasingly more devastating floods on the eve of the Civil War. Having failed to promote a more adaptive farm production in the Arkansas Valley, cotton promoters would turn to alternate economies in the form of health tourism to claim a foothold in the Arkansas mountains.

Unable to adapt to all of Arkansas’ geographic variety, political leaders of the Cotton Kingdom were forced to accept the persistence of white subsistence farmers and

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Indian nations. Indian nations, less insistent on over-emphasizing production of a single staple crop like cotton, populated the transition region between the forests and the prairies, with some even becoming wealthy from cotton production. White subsistence farmers also maintained a presence throughout the lowlands and particularly the uplands. Without large numbers of enslaved workers, they populated the Arkansas highlands, depending on an economy of livestock, hunting, and small farm plots. White cotton farmers, in contrast, worked under the assumptions of the limitations of soil and climate.

However, cotton advocates did adopt one area of the Arkansas mountains. The Hot Springs of Arkansas, located in a valley of the Ouachita Mountains, was a celebrated thermal area that gained national fame as a location of scientific examination and health resorts. In 1832, the federal government declared it the nation’s first public land Reserve, protected for the use of the public. Although none of the land was viable for cotton production, Arkansas legislators and entrepreneurs hoped to use improved roads and investment in the Hot Springs to facilitate settlement in nearby cotton lands. The Hot Springs Reserve emerged as a counter to nearby Indian lands and a bastion of white settlement.
CHAPTER 4

STATE-BUILDING IN THE MOUTAINS:
HOT SPRINGS AND AMERICA’S FIRST NATIONAL PARK

On the first day of January 1818, Stephen Long explored the famed hot springs near the edge of the Ouachita Mountains. Long, an army engineer sent to the Arkansas region to locate sites for frontier forts, recorded the “curiosity of the first magnitude” with diligent observations. He noted the temperature of sixty fountains of hot water along the valley wall, some measuring over 150°. He sent his observations in a letter to Samuel L. Mitchill, a leading figure of American natural science and the president of the New York Academy of Sciences. The American Monthly Magazine published Long’s letter for their scientifically minded readers. In addition to his contributions to natural science, Long included descriptions of “fabulous” tales told by hunters regarding the sources of the heat as well as identified fifteen “rude cabins” for seasonal visitors. Long’s presence represented the confluence of Indian policy, exploratory science, and regional immigration that undergirded the establishment of Hot Springs as the nation’s first public Reserve.189

189 Natural science, often called natural history, encompassed observations of nature and precise descriptions of what was seen. Though experimentation helped to unveil the secrets of natural phenomenon, cataloguing new places was of primary importance in the fields of biology, geology, and chemistry. James, Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, 1823; Stephen H. Long, “Hot Springs of the Washitaw,” in H. Biglow and Orville Luther Holley, eds., The American Monthly Magazine and Critical Review, vol. 3 (New York: Benjamin G. Jansen, 1818), 85–87.
Long’s visit was part of a generation of naturalist expeditions that elevated the Hot Springs into a natural wonder of regional and national interest. While the attention of the young country often lay east of the Mississippi, Hot Springs became a notable link between the new areas of American settlement and the Ouachita Mountains of the interior continent. Identified by Thomas Jefferson in his first report on trans-Mississippi exploration, the springs enjoyed veneration among antebellum explorers. These excursions left disparate records in the form of formal reports, private letters, and newspaper interviews and established a pattern of empirical debates over the springs’ origin, medicinal properties, and biological possibilities. Drawing attention to the borders of the Louisiana Purchase, these detailed discourses about Hot Springs promoted hydrogeological science at this southwestern wonder that served as an early foundation for national geological studies.190

Advocates of Anglo immigration to the Arkansas Territory subsequently harnessed the springs’ scientific fame to connect Hot Springs—and the territory—

190 Hot Springs has largely remained unexamined regarding its place in the development of American geological sciences. While historians have utilized the various explorations to determine development of the springs, these reports have not otherwise been considered as a significant arena of antebellum southwestern science or national geological debates. Hydrogeological analyses by naturalists and well-studied amateurs at Hot Springs emerged in the transition to formal geological science by the 1830s. In addition to examinations of the springs’ remarkable heat and peculiar fauna, the debates centered there reflected larger patterns in the national geological discourse. American geology emerged from the need to identify American rocks and minerals that might prove productive. As a consequence, naturalists were effective geological reporters simply by identifying general rock composition. Valencius et al. also argue that tracing the transmission of scientific knowledge in early America shows not only its widespread prevalence but also the frequent use of scientific texts to support American territorial expansion. Conevery Bolton Valencius et al., “Science in Early America: Print Culture and the Sciences of Territoriality,” Journal of the Early Republic 36 (Spring 2016): 73–123; Keith Thomson, The Legacy of the Mastodon: The Golden Age of Fossils in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 99–100; David Spanagel argues that American states nurtured the inchoate geological sciences by “harnessing natural history to the task of empire building.” David I. Spanagel, DeWitt Clinton and Amos Eaton: Geology and Power in Early New York (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 10; As was the case at Hot Springs, most of the early southern geological reports came in the form of travel guides. South Carolina was one of the first states to use geological surveys in the 1820s as a way to discern mineral resources to improve transportation, agriculture, and diversified industry. James X. Corgan, Geological Sciences in the Antebellum South (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 30.
towards the Lower Mississippi Valley by promoting regional health travel and
disassociating the region from nearby Indian Territory. After Arkansas gained territorial
status in 1819, legislators, newspapermen, and entrepreneurs attempted to leverage one of
the territory’s few recognizable locations for federally-funded internal improvements.
Arkansan agricultural leaders hoped that regional attractions like the Hot Springs would
dispel perceptions of the Arkansas Valley as the “receptacle” for dispossessed Indian
nations. Arkansas legislators positioned the Hot Springs as a southwestern health
destination that should be protected for the benefit of invalids. Cotton Kingdom boosters
employed language that highlighted the health benefits of the springs and, in particular,
promoted them as a health destination for Southern plantation gentility. In 1832,
Congress created Hot Springs Reserve for health seekers at the thermal springs. After a
generation of exploratory science, Indian Removal, and internal improvement, political
calls for invalid access and public health proved to be the most compelling arguments for
federal oversight.191

Tracing the connection between naturalist science and the calls for a national
reserve and internal improvements reveals the ways in which scientific curiosity and
health migration were critical to Southern state-building and infrastructure. Historians of
southern spas have focused on how elite Southerners developed nationalist sentiments

191 The mountainous thermal springs at Hot Springs was the westernmost expression of antebellum
mountain spring resorts that expanded “Southern” Cotton Kingdom landscapes beyond the lowland
agricultural areas. Mart A Stewart, “Let Us Begin with the Weather?”: Climate, Race, and Cultural
Distinctiveness in the American South,” in Mikulas Teich, Roy Porter, and Bo Gustafsson, eds., Nature and
Society in Historical Context (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 240-56.; Lauren E. LaFauci,
“Taking the (Southern) Waters: Science, Slavery, and Nationalism at the Virginia Springs,” Anthropology
& Medicine 18, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 7–22; For a consideration of thermal resorts as nurturing grounds of
southern elites, see C. Brenden Martin, Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double-Edged Sword
(Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007); Charlene M. Boyer Lewis, Ladies and Gentlemen on
Display: Planter Society at the Virginia Springs, 1790-1860 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press,
2001).
through Southern health science and the built environment. Conversely, studies of antebellum Southern science have recently discarded the notion that slavery dissuaded a vibrant scientific community by revealing the work of Southern naturalists discourses on soil science and the role of geological surveys in economic development. I demonstrate that the professional field of natural science and public interest in mineral springs as medicinal resources converged at the Hot Springs to make it one of the few recognized locations among white settlers in the Arkansas Valley. I show how debates about the role of the state in invalid access to public health created a new form of state-sponsored development in the form of Hot Springs Reserve. Boosters used Hot Springs to facilitate Mississippi Valley health migrations and draw Arkansas closer to the social and economic orbit of New Orleans. Legislators also hoped that Hot Springs would ease whites’ concerns regarding Indian presence on the cotton frontier. The legacy of health access and scientific exploration persisted as Hot Springs focused on invalid health and scientific leisure to a much greater extent than other prominent southern spas. Ultimately, I argue that federal intervention and scientific acclaim made the hydrothermal features at Hot Springs into a beachhead of white migration into the southern borderlands.192

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Scientific expeditions to the numerous thermal springs helped to promote the Hot Springs on the Ouachita River as one of the first natural wonders of the newly acquired

192 Environmental historian Adam Rome terms the coordination of state-building projects with resource management as the “environmental management state.” In Rome’s conceptualization, natural resource activities extend beyond conservation to issues such as public health and internal improvements. This chapter positions the state-building process of natural resource projects in the early 19th century through nascent public lands policy where the language of public access to natural resources was a proxy for transportation development, agricultural settlement, and Indian removal. Adam Rome, “What Really Matters in History: Environmental Perspectives in Modern America,” Environmental History 7, no. 2 (2002): 303–18; Paul Sutter renewed calls for this framework in, Paul S. Sutter, “The World with Us: The State of American Environmental History,” Journal of American History 100, no. 1 (June 1, 2013): 94–119.
Louisiana Purchase. Writing to Congress in February 1806, President Thomas Jefferson presented the report of the Hunter-Dunbar Ouachita River expedition as procuring knowledge of the “remarkable hot springs.”\textsuperscript{193} Between 1804 and 1820, naturalists wrote at least five published reports on the hot springs that debated the precise temperatures, the origins of the heat, the healing attributes, and possibilities of life in the thermal waters. These men of science engaged in debates while also addressing the more quotidian practices of visitors to the springs. Reports of the hot springs helped shape a southwestern exploratory science that merged geothermal and geological analysis with frontier utilitarianism.\textsuperscript{194}

The men who developed the geological and geothermal profile of the Hot Springs visited when the field of geology was still in its infancy. Men trained as physicians, naturalists, engineers, and botanists recorded rock strata, subjected the thermal waters to testing, and hypothesized about the heat’s origin and biological connections. The

\textsuperscript{193} For Jefferson, the expedition represented not only the first complete scientific reconnaissance of Louisiana, but likely piqued his personal curiosity as he had previously examined thermal springs in Virginia American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, Indian Affairs, vol. IV (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1832), 705–6; Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (London: J. Stockdale, 1787).

\textsuperscript{194} Hunter and Dunbar first explored the Hot Springs as a natural curiosity in 1804. By 1834 it was the primary destination for the first government-sponsored geology survey. Scientific development has long undergirded portions of southern environmental history. Christopher Morris’ call for “landscape history” involves recognition of the southern roots of ecological science. Morris, “A More Southern Environmental History”; Recent historiography of southern science counters a long-stated argument that the slave system stifled southern science. Ronald L. Numbers and Janet S. Numbers, “Science in the Old South: A Reappraisal,” The Journal of Southern History 48, no. 2 (1982): 163; Much of the focus has been on naturalists such as those in the Carolinas. Stephens, Science, Race, and Religion in the American South; “Naturalists,” Martin Melosi and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 8: Environment (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 104–10; Professionalization of soil science paralleled early American agricultural expansion, including into the Deep South Cohen, Notes from the Ground; Stoll, Larding the Lean Earth; Southern hydrological medicine also has roots in the antebellum South. Janet Valenza highlights how hydropathic medicine focused on Southern bodies and health in contrast with arguments that focus on how slavery stifled southern science. Janet Valenza, Taking the Waters in Texas: Springs, Spas, and Fountains of Youth (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000) Unlike the Charleston naturalists, Hot Springs served as a southwestern source of scientific inspiration rather than a center of science.
geological debates that enveloped Hot Springs were simultaneously undergoing formalization in the British Isles, and Charles Lyell’s foundational *Principles of Geology* would not be printed until 1830. The lack of formal training and the variety of forms of publication opened space for scientific reporting that included expert empirical data and an eye towards vernacular descriptions of the springs’ properties.\(^\text{195}\)

The earliest American scientific expeditions competed with fantastical reports to uncover the origins of the springs’ heat source. In the summer of 1804, a group from Mississippi Territory combined empirical tests with local hearsay in their report to a Natchez medical doctor. The informant supposed the heat of the springs to be near the boiling point, or 212 degrees Fahrenheit, and the visitors collected several mineral specimens and vials of water for chemical testing. Analysis of the mineral content left the Natchez doctor unable to account for the heat of the springs. However, second-hand reports also accompanied the group including a “great explosion of one of the mountains in the vicinity.” One hunter reportedly witnessed an “immense column of flame and smoke” as well as molten lava flowing from supposed newly-created fissures. Unable to determine a heat source via testing, the Natchez doctor allowed for the possibility of “volcanic productions” to explain the remarkable temperatures of the springs.\(^\text{196}\)

\(^{195}\) Charles Lyell’s work animated debate over catastrophism—sudden geological change—and uniformitarianism—immutable laws of nature that could be read back into the past. The potential volcanism at Hot Springs was of particular relevance to geologists debating a gradual history of earth or a landscape shaped by catastrophic events. George Featherstonhaugh, the first official American government geologist, would apply uniformitarian theories in his first government survey, which included the Hot Springs in the 1834. Sir Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology: Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface, by Reference to Causes Now in Operation* (London: John Murray, 1832); George William Featherstonhaugh, *Geological Report of an Examination Made in 1834 of the Elevated Country Between the Missouri and Red Rivers* (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1835); For a biographical approach to 19th century geological debates, see Kieran D. O’Hara, *A Brief History of Geology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

In the context of fantastical reports, the Hunter-Dunbar expedition offered the first government-sanctioned reconnaissance of the region to collect observable information. This and later government sponsored trips were motivated in part by the need to identify mineral deposits useful to the young nation. Dunbar enthused to Jefferson that the mountains were “covered with chrystallizations [sic] of various kinds with indications of metals and mineral productions hitherto not much explored.” While the expedition snuffed out hopes for precious metals, strata of quality flint and outcrops of quartz crystals indicated subsurface mineral sources and later become prized whetstones for sharpening blades. Dunbar, who Jefferson later hailed as a “citizen of distinguished science,” laid the foundation for later examiners who focused on the geology, heat source, vegetation, and mineral content along with descriptions of the accommodations of seasonal visitors.

While the nearby mineralogy attracted examination beyond the springs, the remarkable heat of the springs captured the astonishment of the expedition members. Thermal medicinal springs were familiar to upper class inhabitants of the southwest. In the mountains of Virginia, the Warm Springs, White Sulphur Springs, and others attracted commentary from Thomas Jefferson who recorded temperatures of 96° and 112°


198 “A Description of the Washita River, in Louisiana, Compiled from the Journals of William Dunbar, Esq. and Dr. Hunter,” American State Papers, Indian Affairs, 1832, IV:737.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Incredibly, Dunbar declared the temperatures of the four principal springs at Hot Springs to be between 130˚ and 150˚—making the thermals the warmest known natural water source in the young country. Curious observers found the thermal waters to be one of the first natural wonders of the western lands.

The unknown source for this heat provoked expeditionary scientists to consider a wide range of possible volcanic and mineralogical explanations. Volcanic origins were of particular interest as geological debates sought to differentiate igneous formations from sedimentary deposits. Dunbar categorically dismissed the earlier hunters’ report of volcanic activity, telling Jefferson that none of the surrounding hills demonstrated volcanic origin. Instead, Dunbar pointed to the presence of a reflective dark blue schistus mineralization at the base of the springs. Stating that chemists had discovered a thermal reaction between “aluminum schistus” and water, he hypothesized that the “cause of the perpetual fire” might come from decomposition of the mineral. However, though the expedition leaders dismissed volcanic explanations for the thermal waters, Dunbar’s letter to Jefferson ultimately left any final determination to later “scientific men.”

While the travelers took a tepid position on the thermal origins, the naturalists were more willing to apply empirical analysis to determine the medicinal characteristics

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202 While the head of the springs was the most notable find, Dunbar seems to have made a remarkable biological discovery. Finding moss-like strands of a “lively green appearance” in the hottest springs, Dunbar did a microscopic analysis to determine if it was a living substance. Though Dunbar hinted that it was likely a living organism, he was only willing to speculate that option because “no vegetable is known to exist in temperatures of 150˚.” Indeed, Dunbar had found proof of a thermophilic cyanobacteria that survives at such high temperatures over a century before scientists would officially conclude such a reality. Dunbar and Rowland, 273-5.

203 Dunbar, 292.
of the springs. European visitors had frequented the springs for decades, with Spanish reports of French hunters sojourning in the area as early as the 1770s and American visitors using the springs before the Louisiana Purchase. Amongst the expedition, several members stated that they noticed “cathartic properties” in the water. However, Dunbar and Hunter demonstrated skepticism saying that any particular qualities must have been “feeble.” Dr. Hunter subjected the water to a series of chemical tests and found no indication of elevated mineral concentrations. Hunter revealed only the slightest presence of carbonic acid, lime, and iron. In the first series of tests, Hunter and Dunbar revealed that the waters contained little mineral or chemical qualities to support medicinal powers.

While scientific observation lay at the heart of the expedition, Hunter and Dunbar also demonstrated the potential of these official reports to promote regional utilization of the waters. Their report to Congress described scattered log buildings and huts that had been built for summer encampment. Though crude and vacated much of the year, the expedition leaders revealed that permanent structures were available for visitors hoping to visit the springs “for the recovery of their health.” These observations offered both momentary snapshots of the physical development of the springs as well as an advertisement for the springs’ accessibility.

In the two decades following the Hunter-Dunbar expedition, numerous expeditions replicated their model of empirical geological observation and vernacular

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demonstration of the springs’ capacities in reports to national audiences. In 1812, Louis Bringier determined the hottest springs to be 192˚ Fahrenheit, with nearby springs measuring 186˚. Though demonstrably different from the Hunter-Dunbar findings, Bringier continued a pattern of presenting the springs’ temperature through instrumental analysis to establish scientific credibility. He also refuted the possibility of volcanic origins and described utilitarian uses for the thermal water such as for tea and other culinary purposes. By the end of the decade, leading national scientists were so intrigued by the Hot Springs that Bringier’s dated letter appeared in the prominent *American Journal of Science and Arts.*

Notable journeys to the southwestern Mississippi Valley included side trips to the Hot Springs for measurements and the promotion of local utilization. Stephen Long’s letter about his visit to the Hot Springs in the winter of 1817-1818 included descriptions of the built developments around the springs and uses of the thermal power. Long noted “15 rude cabins constructed along the creek, by persons who resort thither.” Long detailed the approximate discharge and exact temperature of twenty-two of the springs as well as the various constructions and excavations. He described a “sweat house” covering a spring of 132˚ while three nearby springs—measured between 108° and 124°—had been excavated for baths. He measured the hottest spring to be 151°. To explain the intensity of the heat, Long explained that the water was “hot enough to draw tee [sic] or coffee, cook eggs, and even meat.” Though medicinal uses might have drawn regional visitors, Long’s explanation of subsistence practices at the Hot Springs demonstrated

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207 Bringier, “Notices of the Geology.”
both a point of reference for frontier inhabitants to transform the unfarmable landscape into productive use.208

As the number of scientific visitors and published accounts increased, the Hot Springs provided a location to develop a specific genealogy of southwestern exploration. Thomas Nuttall, a leading British-American botanist and member of the American Philosophical Society, interviewed local informants in the Arkansas Valley to combine vernacular observations and the first generation of scientific findings. Relating the local uses, Nuttall identified the water as hot enough to boil eggs and fish and remarked on the crude steam baths built where the thermal springs mixed with cooler water. Nuttall also confirmed the international scientific interest in the springs. Referencing earlier expeditions, he noted that Hunter and Dunbar specified temperatures ranging from 132° to 154° while Long’s expedition measured an even greater range from 86° to 150°.

Nuttall’s list reveals the dense documentation of precise analysis in an otherwise poorly documented region of the southwest. He further compared the springs to internationally recognized thermal springs in New York, England, and Italy, suggesting a scientific resonance that had crossed the Atlantic.209


143
By 1820, scientists transformed numerous reports and letters into publicly consumed publications about the thermal area that established the hot springs’ national profile. Emigrant guides noted that Hot Springs was “the only part of this remote region that has been carefully examined by men of science,” and William Darby included several descriptions of path from New Orleans to Hot Springs. Nuttall declared that the springs would be of particular interest to “southern gentlemen” who sought health and recreation as a “delightful and rational amusement.” The combination of health rejuvenation and scientific discovery became the hallmark of the Hot Springs’ fame in the lower Mississippi Valley.

Though scientists hailed the Hot Springs as a natural curiosity in the southwest, writers and politicians primarily focused their repeated reports on the tremendous heat and healing qualities of the Springs. These promoters of the newly-formed Arkansas Territory hoped to transform the Hot Springs into a health resort that was part of the orbit of Mississippi Valley planter elites rather than the Indian nations. After its formation in 1819, American residents of the Arkansas Valley sought solutions to the perceived threats of Indian presence that limited settlement during the new territory’s first decades. Territorial officials and local boosters turned to the notable Hot Springs to better associate the region physically and culturally with the growing Anglo populations of Mississippi and Louisiana.


Despite its remote setting and limited settlement, on the eve of Arkansas’ establishment as a territory, Hot Springs was one of the few recognizable regional locations. John Melish portrayed the Hot Springs as remarkably accessible in an otherwise isolated region in his 1816 *Map of the United States of America*. Melish located the Hot Springs on the edge of the most extensive mountain chain on the continent—bounded on the east by “The Swamps” and “Army Lands.” To add to its physical isolation, a densely situated “Cherokee Settlement” appeared just to the west along the Arkansas River. In contrast, Melish drew the Hot Springs to have easy access to the Arkansas River. He erased much of the actual sixty mile distance and removed all watercourses and mountains between Hot Springs and a riverside landing. The most prominent path into the future Arkansas Territory was also the “Leading Road to Hot Springs,” a seemingly easy traverse to Natchez that connected the site to the lower Mississippi Valley. In this geographical projection, access to the springs countered the imposing presence of native tribes and inhospitable terrain.212

Allusions to nearby Indian presence were warranted as numerous Indigenous communities sought access to the Hot Springs in the early decades of the nineteenth century. From the north, Cherokees maintained a trace from Dardanelle to the Hot Springs that crossed “an extremely rugged and mountainous region.” The trip took one American expedition three days to complete. The Cherokee guides who directed white exploration parties to the Springs did not specify whether the area around the Springs was used for hunting or medicinal purposes. The Quapaws living near the mouth of the Arkansas did claim the Hot Springs as part of their hunting territory, and hunting parties

Figure 4.1 John Melish’s famed map also detailed the setting of Hot Springs in the Arkansas Valley. Hot Springs stands out in a region otherwise associated with Indian settlements and mountain ranges. One of Melish’s sources, William Darby, had used the exploratory accounts of the Hunter and Dunbar expedition as reason to focus significant attention on the wonders of the Hot Springs. Melish, John, J Vallance, and Henry Schenk Tanner. *Map of the United States of America: with the contiguous British and Spanish possessions*. Philadelphia: J. Melish, 1816. Library of Congress. Accessed July 15, 2019 https://www.loc.gov/item/96686678. [Cropped]
on the Ouachita River likely frequented the Springs. In the mountainous regions of the Arkansas Valley, the Hot Springs were a specific point of reference for Native and Euro-American travelers.213

To quickly address the threat of powerful Indian tribes and limited development, White Arkansans placed the Hot Springs at the center of the unresolved status of the territory. In 1820, the first territorial legislature asked congressional compassion for the small white population that formed “a barrier…in the protection of the great emporium of the west.”214 Along with their ambitious request for internal improvements like roads and land donations for a territorial capitol and county seats, the legislature argued that the Hot Springs were of “great advantage to the afflicted of the…Mississippi and its tributaries” and called for the Springs to be set aside and granted to the territorial legislature as a “watering place.” Specifically, the officials sought protection of the springs from monopolization and “avarice” by self-interested developers. The legislature recognized that the land was “extremely poor and worth little for farming purposes.” Though the surrounding land had little value for agrarian settlement, the territorial legislature wanted the federal government to move quickly to transfer title of the springs to the territory. The territorial legislature couched their request for control of the Hot Springs by combining the Territory’s interests in directing regional immigration with the lower Mississippi Valley’s patterns of health migration.215,


214 Petition to the President by the Territorial Assembly, February 11, 1820, *Territorial Papers* 19: 143.

The territorial assembly’s focus on mineral springs coincided with growing regional fascination with mineral springs. By the early nineteenth century, Saratoga Springs in New York and the springs in Virginia had developed into resorts for high society Americans. The wealthiest Virginia and South Carolina planters even followed a seasonal tour of springs in western Virginia that also offered outdoor recreation in the romantic setting of the mountains. Promoters highlighted springs’ capacity to heal specific maladies and attracted the attention of presidents from George Washington to Thomas Jefferson. Arkansas’ aversion to individual “avarice” perhaps referenced the expensive development around eastern springs that restricted access to less-wealthy citizens. Nonetheless, with the arrival of immigrant settlers from eastern states, Hot Springs was soon to become the western-most example of southern mineral springs.216

The federal government had established the precedent of protecting public land for natural resource use. The Land Ordinance of 1785 had given the US Congress power over the distribution of lands to private and public ownership in new territories. In each new territory, the federal government reserved sections of public land for public education and portions of certain mines. During the first decades of the new republic, the federal government also established the practice of protecting timber forests for military use. For naval supplies, Live Oak forests on the eastern seaboard and cedar groves along the gulf coast were purchased with a range of protection and management oversight. The

216 Anglo settlers brought European spa culture to the United States in the late eighteenth century. European spa culture became a key element of elite social life in the seventeenth and eighteenth century when resorts like Bath in England and Baden in Switzerland were key fixtures on the European Grand Tour. David Clay Large, *The Grand Spas of Central Europe: A History of Intrigue, Politics, Art, and Healing* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 52; Southern spas were generally more rural and less developed than northern spa like Saratoga Springs in New York. Valenza, *Taking the Waters in Texas*, 19–21; Regional distinctiveness became more pronounced by the late antebellum period as LaFauci argues that “white Southerners came to view Virginia’s mineral springs as a peculiarly southern natural resource.” LaFauci, “Taking the (Southern) Waters,” 8–9.
reservation of Hot Springs, though, was a new formula for preserving land for broad public use.217

The initial request for the Hot Springs to be set aside set off alarm bells in Washington, D.C. The Senate was unaccustomed to the breadth of requests from a new territory, including donations for territorial and county government. More provocatively, the Senate report revealed that there had never previously been “any donation of hot springs.” The report focused on thermal springs as a usable public resource. Their deliberations underscored that “usefulness” for the public was a shared concern, but they questioned why federal or territorial allocation would provide better “useful” access than the “interest…of individuals.” The Senate denied the request under the guise of equal access for private development rather than resource protection or management.218

With the lack of federal aid, geopolitical disputes between Indian and Anglo immigrants unsettled control of Hot Springs. Hot Springs was, in fact, intimately tied to the politics of Indian Removal. The Arkansas Cherokees’ negotiation for lands in the Arkansas Valley promised to define Arkansas as a “recepticle [sic]” for Indian nations rather than American settlers.219 In 1818, Quapaw leaders ceded millions of acres, including their hunting territory in the Ouachita mountains, and removed one possible roadblock to American occupancy of the springs. The Arkansas Gazette used the 1824 Quapaw treaty—in which the Quapaws relinquished the rest of their lands along the Arkansas—to highlight new access to the “celebrated Hot Springs of the Arkansas.”


219 Petition to the President by the Territorial Assembly, February 11, 1820, Territorial Papers 19: 143.
Using the springs to represent territory as a whole served as a beacon for the territory’s promise for settlement. The editorial promised readers that, as Indians were removed from the region, the Hot Springs “must become the great watering place of all the western country.”

Concerns over the proximity of Indian territory was foremost in the minds of territorial legislators and local entrepreneurs. In the late 1820s, Hot Springs boosters were troubled by widely-spread news of Indian murders in the Ouachita Valley. Pawnee Indians had allegedly killed three white hunters. Regional articles connected these murders to ongoing troubles with the Cherokees and Osages producing titles like “Trouble Among the Western Indians” and “More Indian Murders.” As legislators and boosters advocated for public control of the Hot Springs, their pleas took on the extra burden of countering characterizations of an uncontrolled border territory.

In the face of Indian presence, legislative and territorial promoters amplified the prospect of the Hot Springs as a regional health resort for white residents of the lower Mississippi Valley. The targets for Hot Springs resort pronouncements included thousands of wealthy New Orleanians who abandoned the city each summer for resort springs in the South and the North, fleeing the Yellow Fever and ague that struck the city each year. To tap into this annual health migration, Hot Springs writers called the thermal waters the “Saratoga Springs of Louisiana.” The rural mountains could heal both the body and mind of cotton planters suffering from the “voluptuous habits of a city.” The soothing possibilities compelled one sojourner to escape the “swamps and bogs” around

220 Arkansas Gazette, July 20, 1824. Ironically, the Quapaw moved to the Red River and stayed in close proximity to the Hot Springs.

221 Louisville (KY) Public Advertiser, June 14, 1826; Natchez (MS) Gazette, July 1, 1826; Daily National Intelligencer (Washington, D.C.), June 23, 1826.
New Orleans to seek treatment among the “springs of water, and pure air” of the mountains. During a surge of newspaper descriptions in the late 1820s, writers hailed the beneficial effects of the springs for cases of rheumatism, paralysis spleen discomfort, and liver ailments in particular. Hot Springs boosters advertised the natural setting and the curative waters as a solution to debilitating medical conditions of Southern residents by connecting the rural hinterlands to the urban center of New Orleans.222

Legislators’ and travel writers’ focus on health tourism had limited empirical grounding but spoke to widespread medical concerns. Testimonials frequently acknowledged the lack of mineral content but informed readers that the tremendous heat could heal all manner of southern ailments “produced by residence in a warm and changeable climate.” Therapeutic travel was often a necessity in this region in which physicians frequently failed to manage some chronic diseases.223 Boosters highlighted the success of the mountain hot springs in palliative care for chronic pains that might attract health migrants from the southwest. Visitors harnessed the high temperatures into a variety of vernacular practices. Steam houses and warm-water immersion baths constituted the majority of early infrastructure projects at the mouth of springs. Visitors drank the waters and used them for tea as a part of their medicinal regimen.224


223 Billy Mac Jones, Health-Seekers in the Southwest, 1817-1900 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), viii; Arkansas Gazette, August 26, 1829.

224 Visitors did use the heat for more functional practices from cooking eggs to tea to scalding hogs, but not for particular health benefits. Samuel R. Brown, The Western Gazetteer; Or Emigrant’s Directory (Auburn, NY: H.C. Southwick., 1817), 185-6.; John Bell was among the first to popularized the scientific foundations of mineral bathing in the United States. He wrote his observations on “the hygienic and curative powers of cold, warm, hot, and vapor baths” following years of travel to European spas. John Bell,
In an ironic twist, even as Arkansas and United States officials evicted the Quapaws from the Ouachita basin and tensions with Native Americans appeared in newspapers, promoters concocted a mythological Native heritage for the springs to depict their restorative powers. Sporadic reports from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries recognized Indian use of the area, but only one suggested its use as a notable “land of peace.” However, in 1827, a year after the Pawnee murders, a history of indigenous use of the springs began to appear frequently. One writer noted that “a humane compact” among the warring tribes permitted invalids to pass “to and from the springs without hindrance or molestation.” Additional mutations of the springs’ purported indigenous history suggested that “twelve miles square was consecrated as neutral grounds.” Local entrepreneurs also shared the news of the spring’s neutral history to assuage visitors and inhabitants of impending threats.

The sacred history of the Springs allowed promoters to reference the springs’ health benefits. The quasi-mythical capacity of the springs to transform a turbulent tribes suggested the known strength of its healing powers. The renewed history noted that Indians throughout the region sought to benefit from their use. Previous colonial use by the Spaniards was similarly based on the “salutary effects of the medicinal properties.”


225 The early Natchez travelers reported the story of its history of neutrality while Dunbar reported that the salt regions were, in fact, “a sacred land” but said the mountains, not political policy, protected springs visitors from the Osage. Mitchill, The Medical Repository and Review, III:48–49; Dunbar, Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar, 134; 276.; The Spanish commander did not report any particular native use of the Hot Springs. Jean-Baptiste Filhiol, “Description of the Ouachita in 1786,” Louisiana Historical Quarterly 20 (1937); George Hunter did recount a story told by the expedition pilot that he had seen an Indian man brought to the springs to recuperate from an unknown malady. Hunter, The Western Journals of Dr. George Hunter, 1796-1805, 104; European observers had long noted Native use of springs as proof of magical curative powers. Susan Cayleff, Wash and Be Healed: The Water-Cure Movement and Women’s Health (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 19.

226 “Hot Springs of the Washita,” Arkansas Gazette, August 7, 1827; Arkansas Gazette, August 26, 1829.
Indeed, the site soon became connected to Hernando de Soto’s 1540s *entrada* and Ponce de Leon’s search for the Fountain of Youth. The constructed history of the Hot Springs, likely even helped to ease concerns about the occasional “Sons of the Forest” who continued to use the springs seasonally. By calming fears of Indian disturbances through reference to the singular characteristics of the Hot Springs, the weakness of the border control regime was turned into a strength for southwestern health travel.227

In 1828, Ludovicus Belding promised a new era of resort comfort. Belding was a veteran and former lawman who claimed land near the Springs and constructed a local hotel. He acknowledged previous difficulties in finding “comfortable entertainment,” and suggested such concerns were now “removed.” A patron compared the “good fare, clean linens, and silver forks and spoons” to the Sweet Springs and White Sulphur Springs that served the elite of Virginia. After a decade of intermittent accommodations, Belding hoped that his more refined lodgings would support a new tourist economy that appealed to Southern elites.228

By the late 1820s, the tenets of health boosterism were well-established at the Springs. Articles in the *Arkansas Gazette* appealed to “the people of the Southern States” by combining “natural curiosity” with Indian use and medical benefits.229 Others

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227 “Hot Springs of the Washita,” *Arkansas Gazette*, August 7, 1827; The historical reconstruction also referred to only recent discoveries by American hunters after 1779, James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains Performed in the Years 1819, 1820.*, IV:45; Other writers referred to Indian usage dating back “many thousand ages,” December 25, 1827, *Arkansas Gazette*; One author referred to “old French inhabitants and Indians” who used the springs, August 26, 1829, *Arkansas Gazette*; The most fantastical account appeared in an article “The Geu-Uintah” which alleged a well-narrated Indigenous history of the springs replete with concocted Indian tribes and distorted forms of Native cosmology. *Arkansas Gazette*, October 27, 1841; Charles Cutter, *Cutter’s Guide to the Hot Springs of Arkansas* (St. Louis: Slawson & Co, 1885), 5.

228 *Arkansas Gazette*, July 9, 1828, October 16, 1833. After a year and a half, Belding moved his family to a nearby farm, but the Hot Springs visitors enjoyed uninterrupted accommodations from 1828 onwards.
promised improved infrastructure for visitors who would now find a public house and “a delightful residence” for visitors. Local developers had established the talking points to highlight Hot Springs’ fame among American scientists and regional health seekers and to address concerns over Indian presence and limited infrastructure.

Both legislators and promoters hoped to connect the springs as a health resort—not just a site of scientific interest—to the rest of the southwestern states. With the springs endorsed as a site of regional health recreation, the Hot Springs appeared as a key site in regional affairs. While local boosters and wider territorial developments had affiliated the Hot Springs away from Indian territory and towards the lower Mississippi Valley, concerns over internal improvements remained unresolved.

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By 1830, with private development only slowly taking shape, Arkansas officials once again turned towards federal assistance to improve access to and utilization of the springs. Officials in both the territorial legislature and in Congress urged the creation of state-funded road infrastructure and public health facilities on the Arkansas frontier under the guise of invalid access. The United States established the Hot Springs as the first federal reserve in 1832 with a vague proclamation that protected free access for the poor and invalid to the springs but perpetuated the underdeveloped conditions that visitors had found at the end of the previous decade. Arkansas legislators saw the federal protection

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229 Eight articles appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* between 1827 and 1830 after just one extensive article had appeared between 1819 and 1826. *Arkansas Gazette* August 7, 1827, August 26, 1829.

230 *Arkansas Gazette*, July 9, 1828, March 30, 1830.
as a temporary status until the future state of Arkansas could claim local control and
direct more public and private development of Hot Springs.  

Despite the hopefulness of territorial boosters, Arkansas’ underdeveloped
infrastructure limited seasonal health migrants to mostly invalids from the surrounding
region. Arkansas saw its first major road from Memphis to Little Rock mostly completed
by 1828. However, throughout the 1820s, regional thoroughfares continued to be limited
to “rough and dangerous roads.”

Travel from Little Rock required sixty miles of
difficult travel to the Hot Springs marked only by blazes cut into trees.

Visitors came largely from nearby states, with some national visitation, but visitors complained
frequently of poorly marked, rocky roads.

Despite attempts to promote the thermal
waters and surrounding hills for leisure travel, the Hot Springs mostly attracted sick
sojourners in search of medicinal cures.

The Springs’ shoddy accommodations undermined visitation even for those
willing to make the journey. In Little Rock, the editors reported that visitors from
Louisiana had begun to crowd the town while looking for “conveyances for the

231 Most internal improvements focused on transportation and opening land for farming. Notable projects in
the 1820s and 1830s were the Memphis to Little Rock road and removing the Red River Raft. Levee
building, as discussed in the previous chapter found greater resonance in the 1840s. S. Charles Bolton,
Territorial Ambition: Land and Society in Arkansas, 1800-1840 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas

232 William Pope reminisced that “their almost inaccessibility prevented any large numbers of invalids from
seeking their healing touch.” William F. Pope, Early Days in Arkansas: Being for the Most Part the
Personal Recollections of an Old Settler (Little Rock: Frederick W. Allsopp, 1895), 186–87; Carolyn
Thomas de la Peña, “Recharging at the Fordyce: Confronting the Machine and Nature in the Modern Bath,”

233 Arkansas Gazette, May 25, 1830; Mattie Brown, “River Transportation in Arkansas, 1819-1890,” The
Arkansas Historical Quarterly 1, no. 4 (1942): 347; Featherstonhaugh, Excursion Through the Slave States,
1:1; 121.

234 Charles Daubeny, Journal of a Tour Through the United States, and in Canada, Made During the Years

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springs…to pass the summer.” However, in Hot Springs, only a handful of local proprietors offered housing for families. Two log storehouses offered limited supplies, and most visitors resided in tents or crude huts with little refinement. Baths continued to be hollowed out logs stretched over spring openings and no permanent physicians lived at the springs. Observers estimated peak summer crowds in the hundreds, while the lack of accommodations left “great numbers… deterred from going.” Despite its status as Arkansas’ most recognized destination, the Hot Springs suffered from poor access, limited accommodations, no medical oversight, and an overwhelming number of invalids.

Arkansas’ political class seemed blame the lack of local development on “poor and indigent” health travelers. Ambrose Sevier, the territorial delegate to Congress, noted the lack of “comfortable cabins for the destitute.” By implication, the burden for care had to be carried by a small group of private landowners, of which his cousin James Conway was the most prominent member. The next year, the territorial legislature bemoaned the poor who “depend on the charity of the surrounding neighborhood” and were too destitute to offer compensation. The language of invalid access reflected the 1820 proposal but also seemed to coincide with local inhabitants’ frustrations with overwhelming crowds of desperate health seekers.

235 *Arkansas Gazette*, April 20, 1830.

236 Asa Thompson, *Arkansas Gazette*, March 30, 1830. The first public house had been constructed in 1828 by the “industry and enterprise of Mr. L Belding.”

237 *Arkansas Gazette*, July 9, 1828; Bringier estimated 280 people in his 1812 letter published in 1821. Bringier, “Notices of the Geology, Mineralogy, Topography, Productions, and Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Region Around the Mississippi and Its Confluent Waters”; Another writer counted 122 visitors from around the southeast. *Arkansas Gazette*, August 5, 1829; A N Sabin announced that an average of 400 visitors came each year. *Arkansas Gazette*, October 10, 1832.

Arkansas’ legislators sought public-private solutions that brought in federal involvement yet protected private interest. Ambrose Sevier, a member of Arkansas’ leading political regime, spearheaded the new attempts to increase state control over Hot Springs. Sevier’s original legislation would cede the hot springs to the Arkansas Territory, which would then lease the Hot Springs for private development. The revenue would support the “maintenance of poor and indigent persons,” including the cabins. Sevier also promised that any existing private claim would be grandfathered in with his bill. Effectively, the federal and territorial government would support poor health migrants while private entrepreneurs would accommodate paying visitors.239

In Sevier’s letter explaining his attempts to gain territorial control of the Springs, the territorial delegate tried to soften any concerns over territorial ownership of the Springs by also showing his interest in protecting white citizens near the Indian border. Following his statement that he hoped for territorial control over the Hot Springs, he publicized that he had assisted white Arkansans who had suffered from “Indian depredations.” He also attached an 1802 law that criminalized Native Americans crossing into American territory and stealing property. Many white Arkansans were still reeling from that the federal government’s decision to displace Anglo settlers from Lovely’s Purchase in order to appease the Arkansas Cherokees. Sevier’s message prioritized federal and territorial support in claims against Indians and hinted that white farmers’ should not be concerned about territorial control of the Hot Springs. Sevier’s attempts to

239 “Extract of a letter to the Editor, from the Hon. A. H. Sevier,” Arkansas Gazette, March 23, 1830. Sevier was careful to note that private claims to the Springs, based on public lands provisions enacted in 1830, were valid and that this bill would not affect the rights of land holders who might be frustrated with the federal government disavowing residency claims. In 1830, Sevier submitted several requests to the committee on public lands that would cede oversight of the springs to Arkansas Territory. January 26, 1830, Congressional Serial Set (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1829), 212.
claim direct control of the Hot Springs thus reflected his larger concerns with Indian Removal policy.\textsuperscript{240}

The territorial legislature offered a more ambitious proposal for massive, sustained investment from the federal government. The assembly requested that Congress appropriate a hospital, a superintendent, and pay the salary of an attending physician. The public investment would aid health migrants who were “poor and arrive without means of support…from almost every part of the Union” and must “return before a cure is effected [sic].” The request offered a class-based appeal, stating that the physician would also be paid by “wealthy nabobs who also resort these springs.” This vision of the Springs as a democratic public and private resort was in sharp contrast to the elite developments at the Virginia springs, though private interests were supported in both proposals. The legislature hoped to leverage the Hot Springs as a regional resort to secure both transportation infrastructure as well as a publicly-funded infrastructure that might attract more visitors.\textsuperscript{241}

Both proposals emphasized internal improvements by affiliating the Hot Springs with southern health migrations. The territorial legislature called for road construction between Louisiana and Arkansas “especially to all those persons who are increasing in numbers annually from Louisiana and the southern part of Mississippi, who resort to the Hot Springs in Arkansas for their health.” Sevier’s bill was more circumspect on a

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{240} \emph{Arkansas Gazette}, March 23, 1830. Local Arkansans even wrote the president that “we are all easy alarmed” by the precedent of giving land to the Cherokee who “never are satisfied” with land cessions. Robert Bean to the President, November 23, 1829, Delegate Sevier to Secretary of War, April 15, 1832, \emph{Territorial Papers} 21:117, 495. A rumor-later proved to be false-suggested that the federal government had proposed to give up two counties to Cherokees. Sevier threatened to actively oppose Indian Removal policies if the rumor was true. ; S. Charles. Bolton, \emph{Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless}, Histories of Arkansas (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 44–45; Ronald N. Satz, \emph{American Indian Policy in the Jacksonian Era} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 223.
\item \textsuperscript{241} Memorial to Congress by the Territorial Assembly, November 3, 1831, \emph{Territorial Papers} 21:415.
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specific Hot Springs road but included leasing salt springs and using the funds for road
building. As Arkansans requested a flurry of road construction and appropriations to
support territorial settlement, legislators in Little Rock and Washington, D.C. hoped to
position the Hot Springs as a regional health destination. The intent of these acts was not
to protect the natural features of the Hot Springs but to grant the territory financial
interest and development control to protect invalid access.242

With pressure from both territorial and national delegates, Congress passed
federal protection for Hot Springs, though with a much more limited form of oversight
than any previous requests. The act that established Hot Springs as a national Reserve on
April 20, 1832 borrowed language from Sevier’s 1830 bill, but did not extend leasing and
renting rights to the territorial legislature or appropriate any funding for infrastructure.
Instead, it stated that the hot springs, and four sections of land, “shall be reserved for the
future disposal of the United States and shall not be entered, located, or appropriated, for
any other purpose whatever.” The vague language gave the United States interest over
more than 2,000 acres centered on Hot Springs, while other sections of the bill allowed
leasing of nearby salt springs to support internal improvements. The bill omitted Sevier’s
clarifications about territorial control. In fact, the vague language of federal control
highlighted the underlying purpose of unfettered, democratic access to the natural
resources of the springs though without any commensurate federal investment.243

While the initial response within the territory was congratulatory towards the
architect of the legislation, Ambrose Sevier suggested that the Hot Springs Reserve was

242 *ibid*, 412.

only temporary. The *Arkansas Gazette* hailed the 5-year lease of the territory’s many salt springs for internal improvement. Also noting the reservation of the Hot Springs, the newspaper extended “much credit for accomplishing these important objects.” Sevier walked a delicate line in his explanation of the bill. He explained that the Hot Springs bill was inserted to prevent additional bounty or squatter claims. In effect, this left open the possibility of ceding the hot springs to the state. Further, any existing land claims deemed invalid would be given to Arkansas, an alternative approach for Arkansas to gain control of the site. He wrapped these land statutes in concern for “the cause of humanity” for “afflicted paupers,” but also to compensate the “people of the county,” including his own cousin, for their care for the paupers. Sevier’s driving interest was local control of the Hot Springs, and he apparently hoped that the federal reserve was a temporary status before eventual territorial ownership.

For Southern gentility, the immediate development of Hot Springs as a mountain destination was decidedly a failure. Occasional visits from prominent figures like Sam Houston did not spur development. One visitor from New Orleans admitted disappointment with the purported mountain resort, describing “a few old rickety cabins scattered around a barn of a tavern” with cabins “not fit to shelter cattle.” Clearly accustomed to material comfort, the writer urged visitors to “bring with them their servants” and supplies to pass the season. The esteemed geologist George


245 “To the Editor,” *Arkansas Gazette*, May 30, 1832. Four years later, the first Arkansas state constitution included a clause to take ownership of the Springs, but the federal government rejected the cession.

246 “From the New Orleans Bee,” *Arkansas Gazette*, August 28, 1839.
Featherstonhaugh’s 1834 visit left him perplexed as to “how invalids contrive to be comfortable who come to this ragged place.”

Hot Springs Reserve was, to a large extent, an accidental park. The territorial legislature wanted control vested in Arkansas. Sevier’s did not intend his compromise legislation to give control of the springs to the federal government to be permanent. Furthermore, the limited federal protection of the springs failed to address issues of infrastructure or public health facilities and only guaranteed public use of the waters. The most significant impact of the 1832 reserve designation was to throw land claims into confusion and frustrate local development. The reserve act muddied 1830 federal legislation on preemption rights that would become tied up in federal courts for decades. Few visitors revealed any awareness of the reserve status except that, “uncertainty about the possession is perhaps the main reason that the settlements here are so temporary.” Locals and visitors alike hoped a clarification on ownership by the federal or territorial Arkansas government would allow development of the hot springs.

While federal protection thwarted immediate efforts to gain local control, Arkansas legislators shifted tactics in their bid for state funded investment in the region by promoting road construction to improve public access for health migrants. The territorial assembly Arkansans pled to Congress that “these Springs will be the great place of resort for the invalids of the Southwest, and nothing prevents it at the present day


249 Jansma, Jansma, and Engelmann, “George Engelmann in Arkansas Territory,” 236; The same year of Engelmann’s visit, a writer suggested that the unsettled pre-emption rights and lack of survey were all that kept the Hot Springs from improvement, “The Hot Springs,” *Arkansas Gazette*, April 28, 1835.
except the want of roads over which to travel.” The legislature hoped that investment in public infrastructure for invalid access would also serve to increase the development of the Cotton Kingdom.

Southern plantation society stood to benefit the most from improved roads as immigrants to the Ouachita and Red River areas would follow the paths of Southern health migrants. Roads to the Hot Springs necessarily improved road construction to the fertile cotton lands of the Red River and created buffer populations near the Indian boundaries. Sevier, the architect of the federal reserve, received letters stating that roads to the Hot Springs would facilitate the immigration of Southern cotton growers due to the “superior profits to be derived from slave labor in this territory.”

Just as slaveowners along the Arkansas River promoted levee construction in the 1840s, Ouachita Valley residents hoped roads to Hot Springs would unleash the potential bounties of the Ouachita region. Locals expressed the urgency to couple the developments of Hot Springs with area plantations. Roads leading to Hot Springs were “a matter of incalculable moment for this section of Arkansas.” Petitioners alluded to a divine origin of the Hot Springs as a “bounty of providence” for the inhabitants of the South and West. Hot Springs and its potential visitors remained the crucial axis for this larger regional development.

In reality, a public road to Hot Springs already existed. Though not fully developed with uniform width and grading, the Southwest Trail from Little Rock to the


Red River passed within eight miles of Hot Springs. Proponents of additional improvements sought more comfortable routes from northern Louisiana and across the southern section of Arkansas. Such roads would support overland traffic directly to southern cotton regions. The most immediate solution to transportation issues would only appear by in the private horse and carriage service that would make the journey from Little Rock more comfortable for the wealthiest visitors.

The Hot Springs did have a small part to play in Indian removal. In 1833, a delegation of Chickasaw leaders stopped at the Hot Springs on their way to survey the Red River for an area to which to immigrate. Unfamiliar with the springs, several of the Chickasaw chiefs hoped to stay for an extended time. Curiously, one of the leaders reportedly presumed that “Hell” must be near the surface under the heated waters, and the group left. Despite the dramatic encounter, white inhabitants continued to promote the Hot Springs’ sacred Native history. A prominent local figure, Hiram Whittington, recounted the story that Native Americans came to the Springs “for the purpose of healing their sick, and it was always considered a sacred ground…The tomahawk was buried, and the pipe was passed.” 253 These stories magnified the healing powers of the Springs, but also reinforced its proximity to Indian Territory.

Due to slow transportation improvements in the 1830s, outside observers continued to view the springs as a border resort. As one observer quipped, it was “a wild and nearly unsettled region, only a few days ride from the areas where the Indians roam about.” 254 Featherstonhaugh remarked that “all roads of every kind terminate at the Hot

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253 Whittington was a local inhabitant who might have shared the history by word of mouth showing the written and oral transmission of this new Indian history of the Hot Springs. Whittington to Dear Brother, March 3, 1833; November 24, 1833 “Hiram Whittington Letters.”
Springs: beyond them there is nothing but the unbroken wilderness, the trails and forests of which are known only to a few hunters.”255 While development slowed, promoters of the Hot Springs presented a modified version of southern spa resorts that appealed to a broader range of Southern health tourists and incorporated scientific discovery into leisure travel.

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Hot Springs developed a unique identity among notable southern resorts due to its scientific past and designation as a federal reserve. Local proprietors continued to provide accommodations but, without the assurance that they had clear title to their property, their buildings and bathhouses remained rudimentary. The public land status also attracted renewed scientific interest that had been largely on hiatus for nearly a decade. Through the end of the antebellum period, local proprietors and state tourist boosters actively cultivated Hot Springs ties to the Mississippi Valley and, particularly, to New Orleans, while building an identity as a middle class resort that offered scientific amusements.

By the 1830s, mountain spas in the southern Appalachian mountains had developed into a Southern style of resort oriented towards leisure and recreation as much as health. The Virginia Springs became the center of a Grand Tour, in which elite patrons travelled from spring to spring, and where elite pleasure seekers from tidewater South Carolina and Virginia interacted with Northern travelers and Mississippi Valley planters. High class travelers outnumbered invalid health seekers. Enslaved laborers also provided

254 George Engelmann, influenced by Featherstonhaugh’s trip and possibly by a meeting with famed botanist Thomas Nuttall, visited the springs in 1835 and recorded his romantic thoughts for publication in Germany. Jansma, Jansma, and Engelmann, “George Engelmann in Arkansas Territory,” 243; W. Byrd Powell used his own examination of the Hot Springs to debate geological theories with Featherstonhaugh, particularly regarding the age of the earth. “Presented to the National Institute for the Promotion of Science,” June 3, 1843.

255 Featherstonhaugh, Excursion Through the Slave States, 1:121.
the comforts of plantation districts while recreation in the surrounding mountains offered rejuvenation. Scientific inquiry around the springs largely revolved around hotel owners subsidizing analyses of the waters.\textsuperscript{256}

The Arkansas Hot Springs would differ from the Virginia Springs. Proprietors in Arkansas promised recreation and health opportunities to residents of the Mississippi Valley, but the clientele was non-elite and comprised mostly of invalid health seekers. One Arkansas commentator acknowledged that “it is not a place of splendor or gaiety.” In order to broaden the class of visitors, promoters continued to appeal to its heritage as a site of scientific curiosity and developed medicinal practices geared towards middle class health seekers. An article in 1835 epitomized such a portrait of Hot Springs. The writer wrote to “the population on the Mississippi, including New Orleans,” of the “highly picturesque and romantic countryside” where “sportsmen, too, may find abundant exercise in pursuit” of game. The writer also noted that, “The geologist, as well as the mineralogist, may find ample employ for all their leisure.” Hot Springs promoters incorporated scientific curiosity as an element of Southern leisure.\textsuperscript{257}

Hot Springs’ public land status helped to facilitate the ongoing connection between the Springs and scientific inquiry. In 1834, as part of the first official Federal geological survey, Congress charged George Featherstonhaugh to explore the public lands between the Red and Missouri Rivers. He planned an examination of the Hot Springs to be the terminus of his journey. Upon arriving in the valley, he found the


\textsuperscript{257} \textit{Arkansas Gazette}, October 10, 1832; “Hot Springs of Arkansas,” \textit{Arkansas Times and Advocate}, April 24, 1835; May 1, 1835; Other springs resorts in Arkansas reflected more traditional southern resorts. Near Dardanelle, a resort owner advertised, “the medicinal properties of the water, the romantic scenery which surrounds the place, and the opportunity for amusement and healthful exercise.” “Dardanelle Springs,” \textit{Arkansas Gazette}, April 28, 1841.
Figure 4.2 Hot Springs’ accommodations were notably lacking due to difficult access. Legislative requests focused on internal improvements to ease invalid access, but local proprietors also hoped wealthy Southerners would come to the mountains for recreation and relief. Boosters also emphasized that the scientific curiosities of the area offered a unique opportunity among southern travel destinations. The seasonal resort model increased Cotton Kingdom interest in the otherwise limited farming prospects of the Ouachita Mountains. Illustration. “The Hot Springs of the Washita,” in George Featherstonhaugh. *Excursion through the Slave States* Vol. 4. New York: Harper and Brothers. 1844. Cover Image.

thermals to be “so great an object of curiosity to men of science, and so little known to the rest of the world.” He sought to test theories of volcanism and uniformitarianism by determining whether geological processes were similar between Europe and the United States. In finding commonalities, the British-born Featherstonhaugh hoped American capitalists might quickly borrow established European industrial processes. His
examination of the area again brought the thermal springs into important debates in early geological studies.258

Like previous scientific observers, Featherstonhaugh sought to make his notations both useful and understandable. The report, like previous examinations, promoted the springs as of “use to the inhabitants of the lowlands” of the Mississippi Valley, while noting its significant scientific wonders. Featherstonhaugh also drew considerable attention to the nearby oilstones not merely for their unique mineralogy but also as material evidence of indigenous use of novaculite quarries in the vicinity of the Hot Springs. The excursion reinforced the Hot Springs as one of the preeminent scientific destinations in western public lands.259

Some Arkansas commentators, however, remained frustrated that federal ownership stymied development and limited Hot Springs’ appeal to elite Southern leisure travelers. In 1839, the editor of the Arkansas Gazette called for the federal government to pass the land to private ownership. The editor lamented the “immense number who would flock to them from our southern cities, to spend the summer in recreation, who are

258 Featherstonhaugh’s initial report fit Hot Springs into developing ideas of geology, particularly Charles Lyell’s arguments regarding uniformitarianism. Featherstonhaugh also continued the model of earlier scientific reports as he emphasized the mineral content of the water, the thermophilic green bacteria, while submitting water samples to a battery of tests. Featherstonhaugh, Geological Report of an Examination Made in 1834 of the Elevated Country Between the Missouri and Red Rivers, 64–70; Featherstonhaugh adapted his report to a popular description of his journey. Only portions of his report changed, particularly regarding specifying temperature, noting the early American history of the springs, and commenting on the springs’ location on the edge of an “unbroken wilderness, known only to hunters.” Featherstonhaugh, Excursion Through the Slave States, 1:107–12; For the definitive biography of Featherstonhaugh, and his time in Arkansas, see Edmund Berkeley and Dorothy Smith Berkeley, George William Featherstonhaugh: The First U.S. Government Geologist (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1988); Arkansas’ first formal geological survey occurred in 1858. David Owen focused on the source of the heat while also determining that any medical properties were due to the high temperature rather than mineral content. Walter B. Hendrickson, “David Dale Owen Visits the Hot Springs,” The Arkansas Historical Quarterly 1, no. 2 (1942): 141–47; Leonard Wilson, “Lyell On The Geological Similarity of North American and Europe,” Earth Sciences History 1 (1982): 45–47.

259 Arkansas Gazette, November 18, 1834, April 21, 1835; Daily National Intelligencer, June 19, 1835.
now compelled to journey a thousand miles.” Instead of attracting the elite class of
Southerners who journeyed to the Virginia Springs, the Hot Springs were “useful to
invalids and a health man willing to rough it a little…in search of health, amusements,
and curiosities.” Federal ownership, in other words, reduced the incentive for hotel and
bath owners to invest and the resulting modest accommodations appealed to more middle
class travelers and invalids.260

Not until the 1840s did impatient proprietors at Hot Springs begin to implement
elements from more established Southern resort springs to the east while accommodating
middle class health seekers. With the federal government disinterested in oversight, local
inhabitants simply began to construct new buildings.261 Doctors began to frequent the
Arkansas Hot Springs more regularly, regular carriage transportation arrived from Little
Rock, and the first large-scale bathhouse went up over one of the primary springs.262

*DeBow’s Review* noted that “the air is bracing—society pleasant—scenery beautiful—
game abundant,” and offered respite to New Orleans citizens “after the severe labors of
the commercial season.” One local spa owner, Jocob [sic] Mitchell, also responded to a
new wave of medical “hydropathy” that focused on cold water cures and appealed to


middle class reformers. He installed cooling pipes for visitors who wanted to “take[e] the Cold Bath.”

Southern health seekers also adopted Hot Springs into an increasingly sectional health migration. The *Times-Picayune* noted that “an extensive portion of our citizens will hasten, at once, to enjoy the society of that region.” In 1851, a *DeBow’s Review* writer called on Southern health seekers to “cease their annual migrations to the North,” where they “squander millions...We have watering places that need but fashion to make them equal to Saratoga.” Cotton planters successfully annexed the Hot Springs in the Ouachita Mountains. The springs’ first physicians used enslaved attendants to assist in bathing, thus bringing the labor practices of the South to the bathhouses and hotels of Hot Springs Valley. Arkansas’ secessionist governor also doubled as a hotel and bathhouse owner, and by 1860 146 of the inhabitants of Hot Springs Township were enslaved.

By the 1850s, the combined elements of local development, protected public access, and publicly funded science had established Hot Springs as the leading mineral spring resort on the western frontier. The hot springs were fully integrated as a society of southern geological examination as well as medical travel. Local customs included drinking water, pouring hot water directly onto affected body parts, and sitting in steam


265 Scully, “Dr. William H. Hammond.”

baths. Regional physicians took up new studies for more efficacious use of the springs. The springs attracted medical practitioners from throughout the lower Mississippi Valley to study the temperature, mineral composition of the waters, and the number of springs in order to ascertain the medicinal powers. The increasing analysis by physicians replicated many of the oldest analyses of Dr. Hunter while adding new studies.267 David Dale Owens’ *Geological Reconnaissance* of Arkansas between 1857 and 1860 sought to identify soil and mineral resources that might attract investors. His chemical testing of the Hot Springs, which concluded that any medicinal benefits were principally due to the high temperature of the water, became regularly cited in subsequent health and travel journals.268

The hot springs remained a subject of land litigation into the 1850s. The state government persisted in framing state control around preserving invalid access. The Governor argued that state control would prevent the monopoly of the springs by “individual cupidity” while also garnering funds for public education. However, the need to protect free use and public access to the thermal waters seemed unquestioned.269 The federal government faced local claimants to pre-Reserve land claims, largely dismissing the preemption claims of would-be developers. Congress’ successful legal defenses validated the federal government’s vague oversight and prevented significant

269 “Governor’s Message,” *Arkansas State Democrat*, November 10, 1848; Though tensions over pre-emption claims simmered throughout the 1830s and 40s, focus increased in the 1850s as several land claimants had their petitions go all the way to the federal supreme court. Brown, “The Henry M. Rector Claim to the Hot Springs of Arkansas.”
development of the Springs. Hot Springs therefore remained a site of public access leveraged by the state for public monies for internal improvements270.

Hot Springs persisted at the nexus of scientific investigations, Indian policy, and American state building. Promoters of Hot Springs Reserve found their greatest legislative successes by focusing on invalid access. However, the Reserve served a larger purpose as a landmark for investment in support of white settlement and a health destination for the planter society of the Mississippi Valley. Scientific investigations of the springs continued to raise their profile among national and international audiences. Territorial, state, and federal officials harnessed the public interest in the springs to promote various development projects. Entrepreneurs failed to develop Hot Springs as an elite destination like those in Virginia. However, it remained a notable location for Mississippi Valley health migrations in the highlands of the Arkansas Valley and a centerpiece of internal improvements in Arkansas.

CHAPTER 5

RUNAWAY SLAVE GEOGRAPHY:
ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE AT THE EDGE
OF THE PLANTATION FRONTIER

In the fall of 1840, Henry Bibb, alongside a fellow enslaved man named Jack, moved through the plantation landscape of southern Arkansas. Having eaten the last of their provisions, the freedom seekers scouted a plantation from the cover of the nearby forest. Though they were strangers to the area, the men elected to risk asking for food from an enslaved cook they had seen through the course of the day. The plan was nearly a disaster. When Jack approached during the night, the cook began screaming about the appearance of an unknown runaway slave. Slaveowners and dogs pursued Jack into the surrounding woods. The next evening, still hungry, Bibb and Jack soothed their empty stomachs near another plantation by killing several young pigs and a wild turkey sitting on a farm fence post. Bibb and Jack’s flight through Arkansas came as enslaved laborers were quickly transforming the region into the northwestern corner of plantation agriculture. The men’s choice of hiding, the areas in which they moved, and the
selections of food they consumed all reflected the complex environmental shifts taking place in the Arkansas Valley region as a result of plantation agriculture.271

The experience of fugitives like Henry Bibb demonstrated how the environmental strategies of freedom seekers influenced the runaway slave geography in the antebellum Arkansas Valley. The forests and canebrakes of the Arkansas region were not inherently familiar to the thousands of enslaved men and women brought west in the internal slave trade, and freedom seekers suffered from exposure, hunger, and wild animals that derailed attempts to flee. Instead, temporary and long term freedom seekers preferred the uncultivated spaces in close proximity to agricultural settlements for access to supplies, family connections, and concealment. In the Arkansas Valley, movement of freedom seekers from the edge of agricultural fields to the outer limits of enslaved husbandry and hunting defined the runaway slave geography.272

Throughout the antebellum period, enslaved Arkansans developed a distinct area of autonomous black mobility on the margins of agricultural expansion. The spotty historical record undermines reconstruction of linear change over time; however, the decisions made by runaway slaves reflect the increasing agrarian settlement that took hold in the Arkansas Valley, particularly after the 1840s. Slave communities shared environmental knowledge gained from labor and folklore that informed the decisions of


272 I define runaway slave geography as how runaway slaves developed a geographical space in which to escape. Mart Stewart highlights “uncultivated spaces,” areas used largely for hunting and husbandry, as the links between cultivated areas, which became crucial to slave resistance. Kelly Houston Jones borrows Stewart’s term to argue that enslaved inhabitants in Arkansas, ostensibly forced to convert uncultivated spaces to fields, began to use the “seams between white domains” for resistance. Stewart, “If John Muir Had Been an Agrarian,” 143–46; Houston Jones, “Peculiar Institution,” 9–10 Uncultivated margins better describes the portion of forested areas that fugitive slaves traversed as it signals the presence of slave agrarian influences.
runaway slaves as they exploited the changing plant and animal regimes. The cross
generational knowledge was not merely ecological and geographical, but also religious as
men and women in bondage sought the tools to understand and manipulate the
landscape.273

Freedom seekers’ ability to use the resources of forest concealment,
environmental change, and slave gardens was the spatial element of contests over power
and autonomy in the Arkansas Valley plantation landscape. Recent studies of runaway
slavery have focused on escape as a form of slave “agency” and enslaved people’s
resistance to enslavement. In this historiography, enslaved mobility was part of broader
patterns of challenging white control. As historians recover the “rival geographies” of
slaveowners and enslaved, Stephanie Camp argues that runaway slave “agency” should
instead be understood as “mobility in the face of constraint.” In this chapter, I explore
this mobility as part of the unintended impacts of environmental changes in the Cotton
Kingdom. In the Arkansas Valley, runaway slaves’ success required navigating the
rapidly transforming landscape at the edge of plantation cotton agriculture. 274

273 Camp, Closer to Freedom; Historians of Arkansas fugitives center debate on whether runaway slaves in
Arkansas region showed similar characteristics to eastern areas. Charles Bolton, who offers the most
comprehensive study of runaway slaves, uses demographic data to argue that “resistance through escape
and flight in Arkansas was not very different from what it was east of the Mississippi River.” Jones argues,
in contrast, that Arkansas’ frontier of uncultivated expanses made slavery itself a relative outlier even
within the Old Southwest experience. This and the following chapter morph those two arguments by
demonstrating that runaway slaves navigated the strange Arkansas environment by using landscapes
transforming into agricultural areas similar to the east. Nonetheless, the social milieu of immigrant Indians
and white settlers in the borderland made the social context of Arkansas fugitives fundamentally different
from the east. S. Charles Bolton, Fugitives from Injustice: Freedom-Seeking Slaves in Arkansas, 1800-
1860, Historic Resource Study (Omaha: National Park Service, Department of the Interior, 2006), 4–21;
Houston Jones, “Peculiar Institution,” 10; Kelly Houston Jones, “‘A Rough, Saucy Set of Hands to

274 Studies of slave-contested geography have built on gender history, slavery and capitalism, the slave
family, and the steamboat world. As Camp’s quote suggests, these studies largely push back against a
historiographical tendency towards over-emphasizing slaves’ agency to direct the course of their own lives
in the face of slaveowner oppression. Rather, this contested geography insists on understanding slave
autonomy as always limited by the status of enslavement. Camp termed these “rival geographies” as
Fugitive slaves created a vast geography of relative freedom, the diverse
destinations and pathways of which are still coming to light. Freedom seekers attempted
to reach places of formal freedom—the American North, Mexico, and Spanish Florida—as well as informal freedom by traveling on the margins of slavery, near plantations, and by hiding in plain sight in southern cities. Environmental historians have drawn attention
to slave escapes into the large swamps and forests of Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana. Historians have recognized runaway slaves’ use of “uncultivated spaces” to evade detection from slave patrols and slave catchers, but enslaved Arkansans’ understanding of the Arkansas Valley landscape has yet to be evaluated in regard to the environmental changes occurring in the region. Enslaved labor in the Arkansas Valley transformed a foreign place into a familiar agricultural landscape of fields, domesticated animals. I argue that runaway slaves benefitted from the environmental changes produced by the cotton economy and intentionally sought areas that were reminiscent of the eastern agricultural regions from which they had been brought.275


275 The geography of slavery from the perspective of enslaved Americans is now a vibrant focus of slave studies. As scholars begin to highlight the experience of runaway slaves within the American South, Sylviane Diouf argues that most “did not look for freedom in remote locations; [but] instead settled in the borderlands of farms and plantations.” Sylviane A. Diouf, Slavery’s Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons (New York University Press, 2014), 72; Damian Pargas also calls for a “broader understanding of the geography of slavery and freedom in America.” Damian Alan Pargas, Fugitive Slaves and Spaces of Freedom in North America (University Press of Florida, 2018), 117; Upton and Ginsburg, both geographers, argue that slave masters and enslaved perceived the landscape differently to the extent that there was a distinct “slave landscape” focused on the outbuildings, forests, and fields rather than the big house. Ginsburg, “Freedom and the Slave Landscape”; Upton, “White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.”
The runaway slave experience in the Arkansas Valley largely revolved around their ability to navigate the changing environment on the frontier of plantation agriculture. Driven by desires for freedom or to avoid harsh treatment, the Arkansas Valley’s more rural setting offered runaways particular risks and rewards. Reports of runaways reveal that enslaved Arkansans struggled to survive on forest resources in their escapes for freedom. Yet, enslaved Arkansans did utilize the concealment of forests. Many Arkansas slaves found a middle ground to mitigate between danger and self-determination by avoiding the depths of the forests and instead staying within close access to the plant and animal resources introduced by plantation agriculture.

Henry Bibb’s numerous flights to freedom displayed the contrasting realities of slave mobility in the heavily populated regions of the east and the plantation frontier west of the Mississippi. Like many enslaved blacks in the Arkansas Valley region, Henry Bibb arrived near the borders of Arkansas from farther east. Born in Kentucky in 1815, Bibb was in his early twenties by the time he was sold to a planter near the Red River. Bibb attempted several short term and permanent escapes both in Kentucky and Arkansas. In the towns of the Ohio Valley, he gathered food from urban and rural enslaved communities. He avoided hiding in the forest where he might be “tracked by bloodhounds and overtaken,” and, instead, moved through the social networks of towns and settlements in Kentucky and Ohio. When Bibb returned south in an unsuccessful attempt to collect his family in Kentucky, he stayed hidden in “the house of a friend” for several days. He moved locations to a friend’s barn near to where his wife and family
lived until he was betrayed and captured. In the east, Bibb’s flights relied extensively on
the social world of the Ohio Valley.276

Following his removal west of the Mississippi, Henry Bibb’s series of escape
attempts in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Indian Territory revealed that environmental
considerations were at the core of his fugitive experience. The new region was
geographically unfamiliar, and the lack of social connections forced him and his wife to
seek forest concealment. Instead of traveling near settlements, Bibb, his wife Malinda,
and their child Frances fled into the river bottoms. Traveling for days with limited food,
the family became lost. They felt exposed to insects, snakes, and “wild ferocious beasts
which were numerous in that section of the country” that Henry had avoided in
Kentucky. Indeed, as they traversed across rivers, waded through swamps, and slept in
canebrakes, Bibb wrote that he fended off a “gang of blood-thirsty wolves” with a bowie
knife. The Bibbs, however, also had to contend with meager food supplies. During the ten
day flight, the family ate “parched corn with wild fruits such as pawpaws, percinmons,
grapes… and sweet potato.” The journey eventually came to an end as “savage blood
hounds” led slave catchers through cane brakes, bushes, and briers to the huddled family.
Rather than a story of helpful conductors and hidden rooms, the Bibbs’ escape narrative
through the frontier centered on survival in an unforgiving landscape with little food and
limited geographical orientation.277

Throughout the Arkansas region, numerous enslaved people affirmed Bibb’s
experience of having to contend with the unfamiliar landscape in their bids for freedom.

276 Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 74-86.

277 The recent formation of slave communities in Arkansas and relative lack of abolitionist sentiment likely contributed to the lack of a coherent social world in which Arkansas-based fugitives moved. Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 121-8.
While farms and plantations rapidly expanded through the antebellum period, the population was much smaller than other southern states, leaving the region predominantly rural and undeveloped. Among the bottomlands of the Arkansas River Valley, Old Henry sought occasional respite from slave labor. Kittie Stanford remembered that Old Henry was prone to “runaway and hide in the swamp” on several occasions. The margins along streams and in the forest surrounding farms became the escape routes of long distance runaways and areas of periodic respite for short term runaway slaves. Reports from runaway slaves suggest a persistent struggle to exploit the wildlife and wild sustenance of the Arkansas forests. Numerous men and women were forced to return due to exposure and hunger. Claiming he would “stay till his bones turn white,” one runaway returned a short time later when he got hungry. Boston Blackwell fled through the upland pine forest near the Arkansas River; but, after two days of frosty October weather, his partner wanted to return to their plantation. Blackwell instead “drug” the “cold and hungry” runaway for two days to safety. Slaves who might have initially envisioned the forest as a safe abode often found it difficult to survive beyond deep in the woods, away from the resources of settlements.

279 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 212.
280 Franklin and Schweninger offer the most systematic description of runaway typology from temporary absentees to long-term outliers to permanent maroons. Truants were mostly enslaved men and women who visited family in other settlements or attended illicit meetings. Owners rarely mentioned this daily form of slave mobility in advertisements. Some were temporary absentee who fled for several days to several months, often to avoid work or punishment. A small subset of outliers were long distance escapees who fled to areas of formal freedom. Their runaway slave autobiographies helped elevate their methods over more common, localized fugitivism. John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
281 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 212, 186, 425.
Figure 5.1 Bibb’s image of fighting off wolves in the Red River valley was the only depiction where no slaveowners or slave catchers were present. The wolves epitomized the threat of the forest in this region. Records of runaway slaves in eastern states like Alabama and Mississippi contained no references to wolves. Illustration. Henry Bibb. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. New York: Henry Bibb, 1849. 125.

The wetlands and rivers of the region created additional dangers for escapees. The turbulent undertow of the rivers frequently claimed slaves in drowning deaths. In the swamp lands of northeastern Arkansas, Scott Bond reported that poisonous snakes and briers were always a hindrance to safety. Several former slaves recalled stories of wild animals attacking runaways. Slaves along the Red River often kept watch against predatory bears and other wild animals in the lowlands. Rather than an area of comfort,

282 *Arkansas Gazette*, June 11, 1822, July 20, 1822, April 20, 1824, June 12, 1826, August 31, 1827.
the relative safety of uncultivated areas for runaway slaves was always mitigated by the realities of the Arkansas wilderness. 283

Freedom seekers, however, recognized the power of “the woods” as a bargaining tool. Many chose to seek shelter in uncultivated areas to negotiate better treatment or to avoid abuse. Jane and Peter Brown, brought from Tennessee, escaped to a thick canebrake to protest Jane’s work while she was heavily pregnant. They stayed away until Jane gave birth, despite being attacked by a panther. The Brown’s ploy was successful as their owners agreed to never put Jane to labor as long as she and Peter promised to “stay out of the woods.” Others ran away to avoid punishment, like whippings, understanding that hiding created labor shortages and cost resources that might hurt plantation production. 284

Runaway slaves therefore sought the forest not for sustenance but to counterbalance the visual control of the plantation system. Henry Bibb articulated the environmental decisions that freedom seekers considered between faster movement and covered movement. Upon reaching an open prairie north of the Arkansas River, he noted the white men following him “were all on horseback…Had this been in timbered land, I might…have dodged them, but I was out in the open prairie, where I could see no possible way by which I could escape.” 285 Historians argue that slaveholders recognized the physical and visual control of open spaces to such an extent that they artificially created a “Carceral Landscape” built on treeless landscapes, long site lines, and the verticality of overseers’ horses. Enslaved African Americans used forests to “neutralize

283 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 24, 74, 242, 262; Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 124.
284 Lankford, 262; Jones has argued that slave owners harbored some fear of the wild spaces of “the woods Houston Jones, “Peculiar Institution,” 58.
the advantage slaveholders enjoyed on open land.” 286 For transplanted enslaved persons brought to the Arkansas Valley, the draw of the uncultivated areas was likely concealment rather than the ability to survive on the resources of the Arkansas Valley forests.

Despite frequent labor and movement by slaves in these areas, geographical familiarity did not turn slaves into denizens of the forest. The threats of wild animals, snakes, and exposure frequently undermined freedom seekers’ plans. Instead, freedom seekers often selected the middle ground where the forests met the advancing fields and forage areas of expanding agriculture. Their relative successes largely derived from their ability to exploit the increasingly agrarian landscape. Runaway slaves survived in the margins of the new landscape created by slave labor.

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Rather than escape deep into the forest, most freedom seekers utilized a landscape undergoing significant transformation from the labor of enslaved African Americans in the Arkansas Valley. Black labor in the Arkansas Valley landscape helped to transform a region previously focused on hunting economies and small scale subsistence farming to include market agriculture of products like cotton, wheat and corn.287 Enslaved black laborers cleared cane, girdled forests, and introduced new plant regimes along the regional waterways and lowlands. The new disturbance regimes of slave labor thinned canopies, introduced woody shrubs, and changed wildlife browsing patterns by the end of

286 Johnson, River of Dark Dreams, 221–25.
the antebellum period. The fugitive slave geography of Arkansas sprouted from the environmental changes wrought by slave labor.288

The growth of plantation agriculture set in motion the environmental changes that aided freedom seekers like Henry Bibb.289 Several months after Henry Bibb’s attempted escape with his family failed in the Red River, he and another slave ran away north towards Little Rock. Traveling along the road that bypassed Hot Springs, Bibb and Jack, like many runaways, traveled at night while hiding nearby during the day. As they moved into the plantation areas in the pinelands of southern Arkansas, Bibb’s partner, Jack, replenished their provisions with six baby pigs from a roadside plantation. Several miles later, Bibb and Jack met more luck: a turkey perched on a fence at the edge of a farm house.290 Though Bibb and Jack were caught days later by slave catchers, their success in finding sustenance reflected their movement through a plantation region that was changing food resources, forest cover, and animal life.

Slave laborers’ industrial-scale clear cutting and burning shifted soil and plant regimes at the edge of forests. Sallie Crane reported “chopping cotton… threshing wheat,

288 Mart Stewart has examined how the labor regimes of enslavement exploited the desire to re-organize southern ecological zones like river cane into “productive” areas. This combination of European and African labor systems and their effect on regional environmental disturbance patterns is also explored by Max Edelson and others. Mart A. Stewart, “From King Cane to King Cotton: Razing Cane in the Old South,” *Environmental History* 12, no. 1 (January 2007): 59–79; S. Max Edelson, “Clearing Swamps, Harvesting Forests: Trees and the Making of a Plantation Landscape in the Colonial South Carolina Lowcountry,” *Agricultural History* 81, no. 3 (2007): 381–406; Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy*; Bolton, *Territorial Ambition*.


lifting logs, and splitting rail in the pine forests of Arkansas. Henry Morton Stanley, of Dr. Livingston fame, recorded the proficiency of slaves clearing the “tall pine forest” of the Gulf Coastal Plain. He assisted a slave work party as a participant-observer with permission to “cut down as many trees as I liked.” The “negroes at work” rotated their process, first felling twenty large pines, before “toting” and rolling logs to the edge of the newly cleared field. The cut logs fed “blazing” fires. Whether Stanley knew it, these annual fires replenished the soil with nitrogen rich ash utilized by the next season’s crops. Domestic gardens, livestock, and fruit orchards also increased to support the new populations.

The patchwork of old clearings and new fields shifted the amount of sunlight reaching the forest floor and catalyzed new plant growth. In the pinelands of south of the Arkansas, the edges of loblolly-shortleaf forest gave way to pawpaw trees and fruit bushes that took root in the sand and gravel soils without competing for shade. In abandoned fields, woody plants like persimmons and blackberries were some of the

291 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 136.


293 Silver, A New Face on the Countryside, 105; In some areas, the quick pace of deforestation in the loamy piedmont led to long term soil erosion across the region Eric Proebsting, “Economy and Ecology on the Edge of America: The Historical Archaeology of Three Farming Communities in the Arkansas Landscape, 1820-1860” (PhD diss, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, 2009), 83; Sutter, Let Us Now Praise Famous Gallies; Adeline Blakeley remembered frequent spring fires. WPA Early Settlers’ Personal Histories of African Americans in Arkansas, University of Arkansas Special Collections, https://libraries.uark.edu/specialcollections/wpa/#individual.

294 Janet Sullivan, “Asimina Triloba,” Fire Effects Information System (United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, Fire Sciences Laboratory, 1993); While pawpaw trees might take several years of plant succession to take root, there was time in the succession process as loblolly canopies could take 17 years to fully close. Michael D Cain and Michael G Shelton, “Secondary Forest Succession Following Reproduction Cutting on the Upper Coastal Plain of Southeastern Arkansas, USA,” Forest Ecology and Management 146, no. 1 (June 2001): 223–38; The expansion of cropland paralleled deforestation as plantations erected thousands of new split rail fences every year from pine and locus logs. Proebsting, “Economy and Ecology,” 80–82.
earliest fruit bearing seedlings to take root both in the lowlands and uplands. Berry bushes and orchards emerged from the cleared lands around plantations. Chess Johnson remembered gathering pokeweed, a widely consumed plant prepared as a salad, and wild onions, which thrived in edge habitats and overgrown openings. As enslaved laborers created forest clearings and planters invested in new lands, the edges of fields offered potential new life to runaways like Bibb.

In the bottomlands along the lower Arkansas River, black men and women shifted the hydrological system, aiding new edge species along ditches and in clearings. New wild plant communities emerged while thousands of enslaved laborers drained disease infested bottomland for cotton. Nelson Densen remembered the transformation of the vast bottomland hardwood forest of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain. Densen reported that the plantation workers raised cotton and grain, but that “strawberries, apples, dewberries, and blackberries” also proliferated around the plantation. The slight shift in water disturbances and raised areas along levees and ditches possibly aided the spread of these forage plants that supplemented the meals of enslaved families throughout the region.

Black labor also expanded hunting and husbandry practices, which contributed to reductions in the region’s large game. Wild game provided material comforts and added food supplies for frontier slave communities. Numerous Arkansas slaves labored as fur trappers, hunting deer, bear, and wolves. Mary Ann Millan captured, skinned, and traded

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297 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 38, 96.
small game like raccoon, deer, mind and beaver for “calico prints and trinkets.”

Groups of slaves also hunted by “stalking deer, panthers, and foxes.” Scott Bond hunted with other young enslaved boys for possums and squirrels that he could bring back to the family cook pot. While enslaved hunters pursued pelts and meat for consumption and clandestine markets, the overall hunting market declined after the 1820s, in no small part due to the increase in regional populations and landscape cultivation wrought by slave labor.

Slave husbandry of cattle and hogs also assisted in replacing wild game and shifting forage patterns. Free and enslaved Arkansans drove livestock through the Arkansas Valley bottoms. Livestock turned the mast and cane growth of the bottom land into consumable calories. The “timber” one slave claimed, “made it a good place for cattle and hogs.” Elisha Washington, one of the state’s largest cotton producers, owned 340 pigs and 650 cows at his Sunnyside plantation. By the 1850s, some areas of along the boundary of cotton cultivation had as many as five hogs for every resident, which were often allowed to browse freely around plantations. On larger plantations, slaves slaughtered dozens of hogs to provide food for the winter and early spring. Increasing livestock gradually over browsed the bottomlands and reduced the vitality of canebrakes

Lankford, 129; McNeilly, Old South Frontier, 148.

“Pate Newton,” Personal Histories of African Americans in Arkansas.

Lankford, Bearing Witness, 74.


For a discussion of slave husbandry, see Taylor, Negro Slavery, 131–36.

Lankford, Bearing Witness, 38.

Figure 5.2 The highlighted areas of the Arkansas Valley show where slave populations concentrated. River valleys were natural corridors of work and escape. These areas introduced new plant and animal regimes that runaway slaves would have adapted to and sought out for several days or even months. Edwin Hergesheimer. *Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: 1861. Library of Congress. Accessed November 18, 2018 https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3861e.cw0013200/. [Cropped].
—the refuges of large wild game. Small game flourished in the new agrarian habitats and became the main target of slave hunting.  

The introduction of trees, hedge rows, grasses and bushes also shifted animal browsing patterns. In northeastern Arkansas, Betty Brown remembered “they wuz [sic] fruit trees planted all along the road…for about a mile. And all the fruit dat fell in de road, de hogs got. We’ens could go get any of it, and travelers along de road [sic].” Pate Newton trapped animals like deer, turkey, and hogs that browsed on young leaves along field edges while pigeons and doves concentrated for roosting. The importation of enslaved labor and large scale agrarian agriculture thus shifted the types of produce, the populations of animals, and the behavior of browsing animals. With each recollection of formerly enslaved Arkansans, the animal and plant resources encountered by fugitives like Henry Bibb and Jack come into greater focus.  

Slave gardens were arguably the most intentional ecological transformations brought with the western expansion of slavery. Slave communities incorporated gardens, and the yards surrounding them, into important social and production spaces to gather, work, and supplement their food. Enslaved Africans and African Americans had tended these gardens in Virginia and other Atlantic slave regions for generations, creolizing foods of Native and European origins with their own African-influenced diets. The work in these yards—cooking, cleaning, mending—and gardens—cultivating, weeding,  

305 Proebsting, “Economy and Ecology,” 90. Stewart, “From King Cane to King Cotton.”  
306 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 129.  
307 “Pate Newton,” Personal Histories of African Americans in Arkansas.  
tending chickens and other fowl—comprised what one historian called the “second shift”
of slave labor that fell largely on the shoulders of enslaved women.309

Slave gardens helped slave communities adapt to the unfamiliar landscape and
compensate for the relative amount of food distributed by slaveowners. DeBow’s Review
argued that “a vegetable or kitchen garden will be established and well cultivated so that
there may be, at all seasons, an abundance of wholesome and nutritious vegetables for the
negroes, such as cabbages, potatoes, turnips, beets, peas, beans, pumpkins, &c.”310 John
Bates, living near Little Rock, reported that his family subsisted on wild game and the
vegetables of the garden. In these yards, Arkansas slaves produced mustard, okra,
collards along with corn, peas, beans, and potatoes. Formerly enslaved Arkansans
reported eating these foods in addition to the seemingly ubiquitous poke salad that
proliferated in the disturbed soils of old fields and clearings. These yards and gardens
appeared in multiple runaway stories. One child remembered his mother hiding a
freedom seeker behind the fence in her yard.311

Enslaved Arkansans expanded plantation agriculture by clearing fields and
introducing new crops and husbandry practices. In the process, these enslaved
communities created the environment which runaway slaves used for survival. The
agrarian landscape appeared more like eastern farmland than western wilds. Near
plantations domesticated cows and pigs replaced panthers and bear. Cleared farm acreage
shifted edge browsing habitat along the edges of fields and fences. The rapid ecological

309 Camp, Closer to Freedom, 32–33.

310 “Agricultural Improvements and Progress,” DeBow’s Review, Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial
Progress and Resources 14, no. 2 (February 1853): 175–81.

311 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 316, 20.
transformations taking place over only a matter of decades became the source of supplies and survival for freedom seekers. For enslaved Arkansans, knowledge about how to navigate the transforming landscape became critical to the success of bids for freedom.312

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As enslaved Arkansans transposed the animals, crops, and garden spaces of eastern plantation districts into the Arkansas Valley, freedom seekers benefitted from being able to use environmental knowledge from the east during their attempts to escape. Slave communities developed knowledge from their labor in and around plantations in ways that were beneficial to covert movement through the Arkansas region. As the landscape turned to more familiar agrarian distributions of plants and animals, slave communities were able to combine new environmental awareness with more time-tested knowledge. Older generations shared knowledge with family members and with potential escapees to create larger geographical understanding. Enslaved Arkansans also honed knowledge through a spiritual understanding of the natural world, which some freedom seekers used to gain control over specific elements of the landscape. Their shared knowledge offered African Americans a range of environmental tools to increase mobility, particularly in creating practices to deter dogs. While evidence of this knowledge network only appears piecemeal, Arkansas freedom seekers moved within a gradually more familiar world where shared ability to navigate changing landscapes was at the core of the runaway experience.

As slave labor brought familiar resources to the region, Henry Bibb and Jack brought together complementary skills to traverse the plantation frontier. They chose to

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312 Runaway slaves throughout the plantation districts of the South relied on the foods produced on plantations to survive. The transformation of plantation agriculture thus made the food choices of Arkansas fugitives similar to those of runaway slaves in the Deep South. Diouf, Slavery’s Exiles, 106–9.
runaway together but agreed to split the duties along their path from bondage. Bibb, who frequently ran errands on the plantation and often sought respite in the woods, served as pilot due to his knowledge of the landscape. Jack, who could procure food but “knew not where to go for refuge,” would carry the baggage and keep up provisions. Their combined understanding suggests that runaway knowledge had to be both geographical and ecological. These core needs shaped whom the runaways sought out for assistance and how they moved near roads and farms.313

Many enslaved Arkansans developed their knowledge of the landscape as a result of direct experience in planting and hunting practices. Slave cowboys in Arkansas frequently pursued hunting and husbandry practices ever deeper in the Arkansas bottoms. On the Bullock plantation, enslaved men honed their familiarity with the surrounding forests while driving deer through the woods towards the firing positions of the plantation owner and his guests.314 Runaway slaves, perhaps familiar with tending these animals, targeted these hogs and free range livestock as sources of food. Louis Johnson recalled his owners’ attention to free-ranging livestock due to runaways in the woods eating hogs. These labors expanded the area impacted by the expansion of plantation agriculture and pre-figured the areas in which runaway slaves might gain familiarity for flight.315

While labor offered hands-on familiarity with the Arkansas landscape, enslaved Arkansans owned by Indian slaveowners developed distinct ethnobotanical knowledge. Cherokees taught R.C. Smith the medicinal use of numerous wild plants used in “old


Indian remedies.” Similarly, Louis Pierce, learned how “medicine was gathered from the fields and forests” by Choctaws. His list of resources included species like Button Snake Root, native to the prairies, as well as imported species like peach trees, originally introduced by Europeans. Despite the common presence of peaches on plantations, no Arkansas interviewees formerly enslaved by whites mentioned the use of peaches for medicinal purposes. Cobray Hill recounted that Creek Indians brought his enslaved family west during Removal, and his family “ate the typical Indian foods as eaten by the Creeks,” primarily corn dishes and wild game. Enslaved people owned by Native Americans understood that their knowledge of the landscape reflected the particular ethnobotanical practices of Native communities.316

Native Americans also shared geographical knowledge with African Americans, who used it to maneuver through the mountains and river bottoms of the region. One woman who was fleeing with her three young children failed in her attempt to swim across the Neosho River with her children on her back. Exhausted, she hid in the forest near the home of an “Indian woman” for over a month. Eventually, she caught the attention of a Cherokee traveler who transported the fugitive family to their cousin’ home. In the water-filled lowlands near the Red River raft, Caddo Indians were fixtures in guiding American settlers and slaves. In addition to navigating the numerous lakes, the Caddos paddled small watercraft suited to transporting traveling through the tree-logged raft. Throughout the Arkansas Valley, Native communities shared their knowledge in ways that benefitted enslaved peoples’ movement through the landscape.317

316 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 389–90; Pierce Louis, University of Oklahoma Libraries Western History Collections, Indian-Pioneer Oral History Project, 368; Cobray Hill, ibid, 277.
The enslaved communities, however, remained the foundation of shared geographical and environmental knowledge. In the summer time, men and women sometimes traveled nearly a dozen miles to gather for brush arbor meetings. Slaveowners were often suspicious of slave gatherings, some owners even prohibited such activity. Nonetheless, men, women, and children, often moved through the night or through the forests to gather, dance, eat, and consummate. Mack Bertrand frequently traveled between settlements to see his wife and family members. Young people gathered for dances that slaveowners sometimes permitted and sometimes disrupted with slave patrols. Slaveowners also sent their chattel to nearby farms for barn raisings, log rollings, and quilting bees, which expanded social connections and geographical knowledge, especially among African American men.318

Slave narratives suggest that older generations frequently taught environmental information to enslaved children. Occasionally, parents involved their enslaved children in understanding how to feed and protect runaway slaves. Judy Taylor explained to her daughter Victoria how slaves running from “mean masters” needed help hiding from bloodhounds. Judy would keep them in her kitchen and then direct them when to cross the river into Indian Territory.319 Older slaves told their children of how they evaded capture from patrols by running through underbrush. The storytellers used their own success as a teaching tool for tactics. 320

318 “Adeline Blakeley,” “Recebba Childs,” “Chess Johnson,” “Pate Newton” Personal Histories of African Americans in Arkansas; Lankford, Bearing Witness, 60, 186, 421.

319 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 20.

Runaways risked being exposed when they attempted to gain geographical information from other slaves. During their escape, Bibb and Jack scouted plantations and identified enslaved workers who might provide food and, possibly, information. At night, Jack approached the kitchen to “try his luck with the cook.” The cook screamed of Jack’s presence, forcing the men into the woods. Describing the encounter, Bibb remarked that “domestic slaves are often found to be traitors to their own people, for the purpose of gaining favor with their masters.” More importantly, the episode showed how geographical knowledge was often localized and fugitives slaves had to piece together knowledge of the landscape from different slave communities.

The runaway slave geography revealed the gaps between Arkansas’ slave communities. While families shared information and stories, asking the same of unknown enslaved people broadened the risk of punishment to new settlements. Feeding and hiding fugitives, which some enslaved Arkansans did, was too risky for others. Anthony Kaye argues that these decisions must be viewed through the lens of distinct slave communities or “neighborhoods.” A bondsperson, like the woman who alerted the presence of Jack, might assist in capturing a strange runaway in order to protect their own family and friends. Enslaved men and women contributed to the formation of the localized slave communities of the slavery frontier as they chose how to share and withhold knowledge of this new landscape.

During a later flight, Bibb did have success in acquiring geographical information from a variety of slave traders and Cherokee Indians. Having been sold to passing slave traders, he convinced them to sell him in Indian Territory where he felt it might be easier

322 Kaye, Joining Places, 218.
to escape. His temporary owners told him to follow the boundary between Arkansas and Indian Territory up to the Missouri River. He eventually arrived in the North one final time, after which he became a figure in the anti-slavery movement. Bibb’s numerous escapes in the vicinity of the Arkansas Valley exemplified the complex considerations of the runaway slaves in the region, and his collection of piecemeal information showed the social context in which runaway slaves shared geographical knowledge on the frontier.

Slave communities knew that the ability to avoid detection was as important as knowing where to go. For many freedom seekers, the ability to outfox bloodhounds was among the most celebrated skills of the forest. Former slaves filled their recollections with references to barking hounds. Avoiding capture was often critical in the first few minutes and days of escape. The key for runaways was to confuse the scent, hopefully causing hounds to double back on themselves or lose the trail altogether. Some runaways successfully evaded hounds by running through streams that dotted the bottomlands. Given the frequency of black slaves’ movement in the marginal land near river bottoms, running through streams was likely common. Whether in the first moments or after days of travel, freedom seekers also stole horses and mules, when possible, not only for increased speed, but also in order to divert the noses of chasing bloodhounds. As bloodhounds sped after runaways, men and women escaped to waterways and onto the backs of horses to evade capture.

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323 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 77.

324 Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 121; Arkansas Gazette, January 10, 1823; Slaves across the South used scents, such as pepper, to confuse dogs and gain space in their flight. Franklin and Schweninger, Runaway Slaves, 162.

325 The skills of avoiding slave-catching dogs was one of the most important for runaway slaves throughout the Cotton Kingdom. Diouf, Slavery’s Exiles, 94–95.
Black men and women also experimented with particular chemical and herbal remedies specifically calibrated to undermine the smelling power of bloodhounds. Solomon Northup, who was enslaved down the Red River from Arkansas, suggested that African Americans had a “slight, mysterious scent, which enables the quick-smelling hound to follow.”326 Runaway slaves applied pungent perfumes to cover the supposedly distinctive smell. One slave reported that slaves applied turpentine “on the soles of their feet to prevent captures.”327 Turpentine, a concoction manufactured from pine resin, would have been familiar to enslaved farm workers. The turpentine applied to the bottom of escapees’ feet not only left a strong smell, but also might have caused inflammatory reactions to dogs’ noses and feet.328

Slave communities also derived knowledge of how to use the forests and avoid slave catchers from more religious frameworks. Conjurers occupied important roles both amongst the slave community and on the plantation as a whole. Slaves who knew how to collect and prepare herbs and roots for food and medicine were prized both by slaveowners and among enslaved blacks who wore preventative “charms” to ward off spirits and danger.329 Conjure knowledge could be passed through material charms and

326 Solomon Northup and David Wilson, Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River, in Louisiana (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 139.


328 People sometimes touched it to their own skin to purposely created blisters to extract infections, while dog owners applied mixtures of turpentine to cure dog mange. Colin MacKenzie, Five Thousand Receipts: In All the Useful and Domestic Arts (Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell, 1854), 222; William Youatt, The Dog (Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1855), 386.

incantations while folk knowledge also came through tales like Peter Rabbit, containing information of how to navigate the agricultural landscape.330

Like other facets of mobility, runaway slaves’ evasion of dogs was not simply a physical act but involved their spiritual understanding of the natural world. Many slaves turned to the material and spiritual power of “conjure” to manipulate the environment in their favor against dogs. A man remembered as Uncle Henry alluded to these supernatural spells when he recounted having to “work the conjure” to avoid bloodhounds and patrols.331 Recognizing the power of spiritual materials, some enslaved runaways carried “quantities of soil from a graveyard” to ward off capture both as a physical act and as a supernatural preventative. Grabbing yearling calves by the tail and stepping in their droppings also warded off the evil hounds and “paddyrollers.”332 As prospective runaways shared ideas of how to confound dogs, the conjure allowed slaves to alter nature’s spiritual subsurface in the quest for freedom.

Because spirits abounded in the connections between the natural and supernatural world, African Americans moving in the Arkansas landscape had both material and spiritual elements to contend with and seek out for assistance. Messages and even physical attacks by spirits dot the oral histories of former enslaved people who recognized those who “went through life marked by the Spirits.” Graveyards, in particular, contained potency that had to be respected, and new graves held particularly

330 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 131–34; For more on the gendered, diasporic, and environmental elements of slave religion, see, Fett, Working Cures especially chapters 3 and 4.
331 Rawick, Arkansas Narratives vol. 9, pt. 3, 87.
volatile power. Many enslaved Arkansas understood that their autonomous space existed in the confluence of the spiritual and material worlds.333

Freedom seekers’ understanding of the Arkansas Valley environment encompassed a spectrum of self-taught, generationally shared, and spiritually framed beliefs regarding how to navigate the landscape. The numerous failed escapes due to hunger and exposure reveal that information was not always widespread or effective in sustaining long term flight. Nonetheless, enslaved people developed and passed along tools to manipulate and exploit the forests and river bottoms of Arkansas. The foods and spiritual beliefs that African Americans brought westward remained key tools in quests for freedom. While hunger and bloodhounds often posed the greatest threat to survival, runaways used the breadth of the landscape touched by agrarian expansion and believed in being able to manipulate even the keenest noses of the slavery regime. Slave-derived knowledge shaped a runaway slave geography that directed movement towards more familiar agrarian areas rather than the deep forest.

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As the expansion of settlements and towns domesticated parts of the Arkansas Valley forest, runaway slaves often appeared in runaway slave notices as “lurking” near settlements. Half a dozen towns of considerable size punctuated the region, offering the environmental changes of farms along with the material concentration inherent with hundreds of people at trade centers. 334 The presence of slaves on the outskirts of

333 Lankford, Bearing Witness 219; 306; Slave Narratives, II:53.

334 Diouf similarly argues that “seclusion, not distance, was in most cases the determining factor” for slave hideaways. Diouf, Slavery’s Exiles, 10.
settlements and farms epitomized the environmental adaptation and geographical preference of runaway slaves on the frontier of plantation cotton.

Towns were particularly appealing targets for runaway slaves. Runaway slaves could interact with free blacks and unscrupulous proprietors of gambling halls and taverns. While the context of Arkansas Valley slavery was primarily rural, there were half a dozen towns of considerable size sprinkled throughout the region. In two towns, Camden, on the Ouachita River, and at Little Rock, the capital, lived over 800 slaves, while other towns had over 200 enslaved inhabitants, making these some of the highest concentration of slaves in the Valley region. Numerous slaves sought out the area around Little Rock in particular as illicit gambling halls and taverns along with greater anonymity allowed runaways to interact with slaves, free blacks, and unscrupulous whites. Henry Bibb’s stated preference for fleeing near settlements rather than the deep woods seems to have been shared among numerous runaway slaves in Arkansas.335

Freedom seekers’ ability to utilize towns appeared in the increasing anxiety of white town residents. In 1838, the Arkansas Gazette reported that a negro man was shot “in the bottom, a few miles below town,” where he had been “skulking…for some time.”336 Little Rock townspeople in 1858 complained that “runaways congregate by dozens…for years at a time” in the pinelands near the city. These runaways reportedly found food with free blacks and “degraded whites,” thereby combining the cover and sustenance in the regions surrounding town. A year later, a newspaper warned,

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336 Arkansas Gazette, March 23, 1842.
“runaways are hid in the vicinity and are in the city every night.” These incidences suggest the existence of a frequently trafficked hideaway if not a permanent settlement in the area south of Little Rock. Runaway slaves sought a formula for success in the marginal zones where environmental changes offered access to material goods and forests obscured their temporary and permanent hideouts.

Runaway slaves could survive in the vicinity of a variety of settlements. Freedom seekers were able to combine the forest concealment and material access of settlements throughout Arkansas. In the summer of 1856, four enslaved men were found in a cave “not four miles” from their owners’ plantations near Helena, bordering the Mississippi River. Men had reportedly survived in the cave for more than a year, having amassed hundreds of pounds of bacon along with notable quantities and varieties of alcohol.

The farms and towns along the Arkansas River helped to concentrate runaway slaves along the river valley. Sam, a “very likely and intelligent” freedom seeker, hid near the stretch of farm land north of Little Rock, along the Arkansas River. He possibly crossed the river on multiple occasions, likely never left the area, and survived with the help of “acquaintances on both sides of the river.” Near the settlements around the mouth of the White River, Charles, a 24 year old man, hid for several months with the

337 *Arkansas True Democrat*, November 30, 1859.


340 *Arkansas Gazette*, March 26, 1859.
help of “bad disposed negroes.” 341 Much like Henry and his wife Ann, runaway slaves sought supplies from the agrarian settlements rather than attempt to survive solely off the forest.

In July of 1831, runaway slave advertisements warned readers along the Arkansas River that a man named Henry, “stout” at 5’9” and 180 pounds, might be moving upstream from a plantation south of Little Rock. Henry brought extra clothes with him as he tried to reach his wife, Anne, and their children at the Maumelle settlement. Though Henry tried to move cautiously between the forest and the farm carrying extra clothes, he was seen by several people who recognized the man with a burn scar and stab wound on his back. Nonetheless, by coordinating with his wife, perhaps for food and information, Henry successfully hid out on the margins of the settlement for seven months despite repeated calls for his capture. 342

For runaway slaves in the Arkansas Valley, understanding and exploiting the environmental changes of slave agricultural was fundamental to mobility and survival. In narratives from the period and in post-Civil War interviews, enslaved and formerly enslaved Arkansans repeatedly highlighted the environmental context of their flights. Enslaved Arkansans imported a variety of material, geographical, and spiritual tools to make the landscape into a more familiar agrarian region in which thousands sought spaces of relative freedom. The labor of enslaved laborers around the Arkansas Valley effectively created thousands of acres of domesticated edge spaces that freedom seekers used to move outside the control of slaveowners.

341 Southern Shield, March 20, 1840.

Runaway slaves created a clear geography of escape that harnessed environmental changes around agricultural settlements, even if that runaway slave geography was never formalized in treaties or charters. As agricultural labor transformed the Arkansas Valley into a region more familiar to enslaved African Americans, freedom seekers were able to make decisions on where and how to flee based on a deep well of shared knowledge. Given the tremendous power differentials between slave masters and enslaved, enslaved Arkansans only utilized this autonomous space intermittently, whether for respite or long distance flight. Yet, the “problem” of enslaved movement was so pervasive as to compel Arkansas slaveowners to develop a formal police state in response. The geography of surveillance and policing ultimately combined consideration of the region’s environment along with the Native, enslaved, and White spaces of the Arkansas Valley.
CHAPTER 6

POLICE GEOGRAPHY

SURVEILLING THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE ARKANSAS VALLEY

In October of 1849, a frustrated resident of Washington, Arkansas complained about the unrestrained movement of enslaved townspeople. Writing in the town newspaper, he declared they “do nothing but travel about at night from one kitchen to another.” Such activity was not simply a nuisance but “renders [them] unfit for service the next day.” More troubling, however, was the egregious disinterest from the designated patrollers. “What has become of our town patrol” whose duty it was to enforce slave codes and prevent the movement of bondsmen. The writer threatened that he would take extra-judicial steps to prevent unwanted black men and women on his property at night if the patrollers did not do their duty to surveil the town. Enslaved Arkansans’ mobility in and around Arkansas settlements prompted slaveowners to develop a police geography focused on controlling the social lives of slaves.343

Slave patrols and newspapers were critical mechanisms that slaveowners created to control unauthorized slave movement in the Arkansas Valley. The article author’s anxiety about slave gatherings was part of a larger fear of how enslaved Arkansans interacted with the variety of communities that inhabited the Arkansas Valley.

343 Washington Telegraph October 31, 1849. Washington was an important trade center near the Red River cotton lands, and many of its residents were prominent cotton planters and slaveowners.
Slaveowners’ fears of illicit slave gatherings reflected a fear of slave uprisings shared by slaveowners across the South. However, in Arkansas, slave patrols and newspapers addressed interactions not just with untrustworthy white settlers and other slaves, but also with nearby Indian nations. As such, Arkansas slaveowners situated the threat of runaway slaves within the diverse communities of the southern borderlands. To address their perception of the social world of runaway slaves, white slaveholders created what I term a “police geography”—formalized in town slave patrols, newspaper descriptions of slaves’ potential paths, and cultural antagonism towards Indians and other unknown travelers—that defined the way slaveowners understood the pathways of runaway slaves and the outside social threats that needed to be controlled in order impose order over enslaved Arkansans.

Arkansas slaveowners adapted the mechanisms of slave policing from across the Cotton Kingdom to the social world of the southern borderlands. As in eastern states, runaway slave advertisements communicated the possible direction of runaway slaves, while patrols enlisted both slaveowners and non-slaveowners alike into policing the movement of enslaved people. However, slaveowners’ reports about their slaves’ movements reflected their anxieties about the numerous communities in the Arkansas Valley. Newspapers advertisements for runaway slaves largely depicted three vectors of travel and concealment: around local settlements, into Indian Territory, and by riverboat transportation. Slaveowners broadcast concerns over slaves’ social world by highlighting runaways returning to loved ones still enslaved east of the Mississippi, interacting with strange immigrants, or attempting to pass as Indians. With their focus on the social world of runaways, slaveowners chose not to develop efforts to control the environmental
setting in which fugitives moved. Instead, the borders of the police geography calcified throughout the antebellum period as surveillance efforts focused on towns, slave dwellings, steamboat landings, and even the borders of Indian Territory.

Freedom seekers’ illicit movements and unsupervised gatherings were among the most direct threats to the slaveowners’ racial order throughout the antebellum period. Scholars have detailed the efforts by slaveowners to engender a collective effort among to control slaves among slave-owning and non-slaveowning white Americans to control slaves. Sally Hadden’s seminal Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas places slave patrols as an outgrowth of early militias and shows how slave surveillance involved white Southerners across classes and ownership status. Yet, these studies typically focus on efforts to create institutional controls over enslaved African Americans. This chapter demonstrates how efforts to control enslaved people in the Arkansas Valley expanded beyond that binary slaveowner-and-enslaved relationship to incorporate additional groups of Native Americans as well as unknown white Americans to the frontier of the Cotton Kingdom. Slaveholders’ surveillance interwove the threat of runaway slaves with a broader frontier dynamic of migrating Indian nations, the anonymity of the steamboat world, and disreputable white Americans. Slaveowners in the antebellum Arkansas Valley felt threatened not only by disobedient slaves but by the wider chaotic social milieu that characterized the southern borderlands.344

344 To emphasize his argument about the limits of slave agency, Johnson identifies the “Carceral Landscape” as one rationalized in the open vistas of fields and surveyed lands of the Cotton Kingdom. Johnson, River of Dark Dreams, 217; The foundational work on slave patrols focuses on their role as cross-class community police force. Sally E. Hadden, Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Franklin and Schweninger’s chapter “The Hunt” details the forms of slave capture from slave patrols, to hired slave catchers, to slave catching dogs, to intra-owner communication. Franklin and Schweninger, Runaway Slaves; Charles Bolton argues in his chapter, "Each One is Made a Policeman," that slave surveillance informally deputized all white adults. Charles
Runaway notices provide the most complete depiction of how white Arkansans understood the illegal movements of enslaved Arkansans. These notices ignored freedom seekers’ ability to exploit the environmental changes around towns and plantations. Instead, slaveowners’ advertisements responded to fugitive mobility by often detailing where fugitives might run and focusing their conceptual geography around familial ties and places of origin. The notices for captured runaways depicted three primary corridors of travel that defined freedom seekers’ patterns of short and long distance flight. Based on the reports of captured runaways interrogated by sheriffs, freedom seekers often traveled up the Mississippi Valley from Louisiana and through the state to Indian Territory while truants hid out on the margins of settlement areas. Slaveowners also explained their thoughts on how runaways were able to move undetected by focusing on fugitives utilizing steamboats and passing as migrating Native Americans. Most importantly, owners sought to anticipate the movements of individual slaves and focus potential slave catchers on fugitives’ likely whereabouts based on social connections.

These written sources encapsulated the types of knowledge that slaveowners prioritized to curtail African American movement. Planters often shared information with one another about when and why slaves fled, where they might go, and who might assist them. Birthplaces, the location of family members, and even former masters were


345 Historians analyzing slave ads have argued that these printed ads were “remarkably free of racial stereotypes” and provide relatively unbiased insight into how slave holders understood their human chattel. Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*, 170.

346 Charles Bolton argues that these advertisements demonstrate that the Arkansas region attracted both trans-regional movement as a through place and locally originated freedom seekers. Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice*, 24.
essential information. An enslaved man named Jerry, who ran away from the Little Rock area, seemed to have told his owner that he was raised near Georgetown, Kentucky, leading his owner to say, “It is possible that he may endeavor to get back to the place where he was raised, in Kentucky.” Some slaveholders kept notes about slaves’ families and copies of deeds of sale that listed previous owners. To fill out dozens of notices, slaveowners wracked their memories for conversations or pieces of information regarding slaves’ familial origins, revealing the types of information owners collected to exercise spatial control over the enslaved.

In addition to birthplaces, slaveowners demonstrated anxiety and concern about their slaves’ westward migration. Benjamin Bonneville traced the remarkable journey of a man named Simon. He was born in Alabama then sold to a Creek Indian woman with “whom he immigrated to the Creek nation west.” During his later escape, Bonneville thought Simon would attempt to return to Alabama “by the route the immigrants came.” Simon’s extensive geographical familiarity stands out because of the multicultural element of his journey, but slaveowners likely feared that Simon’s geographical knowledge seemed to have been common among freedom seekers. One captured runaway revealed the breadth of his steamboat-derived geographical familiarity. Abraham, jailed in northeastern Arkansas, claimed to have worked in northwestern Arkansas, October 25, 1830. Dialogues between runaway slaves and either their owners or captors were foundational to how the runaway insurgent geography developed through newspapers. In addition to slave owners incorporating slaves’ personal history, state law required that jailors interrogate captured slaves to learn their owner and origin and to publish the geographical and ownership associations of runaways. Occasionally, runaways and captured slaves were even known to manipulate these conversations by identifying different owners or origin locations.

347 Arkansas Gazette, October 25, 1830.
348 Franklin and Schweninger, Runaway Slaves, 165.
349 Bolton argues that slaves brought to Arkansas gained a geographical knowledge that “may have made them more capable of escaping from it.” Bolton, Fugitives from Injustice, 4.
350 Arkansas Gazette, November 18, 1837.
Missouri after being brought from Virginia. Hired to work on a steamship, he escaped while bound for New Orleans. Enslaved Americans’ labor mobility, which enabled slaveowners to transfer human chattel westward, appeared in runaway advertisements to undermine the control necessary for the institution of human bondage.351

In addition to connecting runaway slaves to slave districts in the east, the reports also identified the threat of Indian regions throughout the South. In April 1821, the first advertisement for a runaway slave in the Arkansas Valley initiated a pattern in which slaveowners situated fugitives in the wider social context of the frontier. The slaveowner proclaimed that Austin, 35 and “slender,” might attempt to return to his former owners: a Cherokee family. The owner warned readers that Austin would “no doubt make his escape to the Cherokees, either in Tennessee or on the Arkansas River.” The advertisement revealed a foundational fear among Arkansas Valley slaveholders: enslaved men and women in the domestic slave trade had accrued vast socio-geographical knowledge of the Arkansas Valley region and beyond that included Native communities. Furthermore, the sale of human chattel westward familiarized enslaved people with numerous cultures, individuals, and family members whose dispersal across the Cotton Kingdom undermined slaveowners’ control.352

With so much focus on social connections, runaway notices often ignored the physical landscape that was actually integral to runaway slaves’ decisions on where and how to flee. When the writers of runaway notices did reference “lurking” areas, like swamps and canebrakes, they hinted that they understood these areas as meeting places.

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351 Southern Shield, January 29, 1842. Thomas Buchanan argues that enslaved boatmen developed a vast geographical knowledge that helped them become maintain social connections among dispersed slave communities throughout the Mississippi Valley. Buchanan, Black Life on the Mississippi, 21.

352 Arkansas Gazette, April 7, 1821.
for potential thieves and outlaws. Slaveowners paid attention to the uncultivated spaces around settlements insofar as the forests were locations where illicit collaborations between runaways, other enslaved Arkansans, and outlaws might take place. The most explicit references to slaves’ mobility in the uncultivated margins often cited runaways “lurking” around river bottoms or settlements in the company of other slaves. Sam, a “very likely and intelligent” fugitive, was “likely lurking” near the Arkansas river “as he has acquaintances on both sides of the river.” Charles, a 24 year old man, was “lurking during his absence” with the help of “bad disposed negroes” in the bottomlands near the mouth of the St. Francis River. Freedom seekers’ ability to gather for clandestine meetings and “lurk” about undetected undergirded slaveowners’ concerns over their slaves’ mobility.

Aside from concerns about “lurking” slaves, slave advertisements largely ignored the environmental context of runaway slaves. Freedom seekers’ paths and use of forested and uncultivated areas rarely appeared in notices. From over seven hundred runaway advertisements in the Arkansas Valley, only one explicitly referenced the region’s bottomlands, telling readers the “slaves [are] supposed to be in…river swamps.” One article explicitly predicted a forest route for slaves fleeing from the Ouachita region, saying, “It is thought they will make for Missouri by way of the Mountains.” Another pointed readers “in the direction of the Big Prairie when he left.” Slaveowners rarely predicted which road a fugitive might follow. Rather than expend resources policing travel routes, slaveowners connected runaways slaves to the presence of collaborators.

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353 *Arkansas Gazette*, March 25, 1859.

354 *Southern Shield*, March 20, 1840.
Slaveowners’ collective understanding of the geography of runaway slaves appeared in runaway slave advertisements to focus on slave families and their social connections across the Cotton Kingdom. Much of the geography was anticipatory as white slave masters guessed at fugitives’ final destinations. In so doing, slaveowners privileged information about enslaved Arkansans’ life stories: birthplaces, former owners, and the locations of loved ones. Slaveowners’ construction of runaways’ movement became the basis for the development of policing mechanisms like slave patrols and laws against certain slave gatherings.

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White fears of fugitive collaboration augmented the threat of runaway slaves by connecting these flights to prevalent social disturbances in the Arkansas Valley. Runaway slave notices appeared regularly, but the percentage of runaway slaves remained low relative to the enslaved population. With nearly 20,000 enslaved Arkansans in 1840, less than thirty unique runaway notices appeared in area newspapers. The numbers of advertisements remained low for the next two decades, even as the numbers of enslaved Arkansans ballooned to over 100,000. Nonetheless, white owners frequently linked the patterns of runaway slaves to migrating Native Americans, rumored bandits, fluid steamboat labor, and, occasionally, abolitionists. Far more than a property dispute between owners and enslaved, white slaveowners associated runaway slaves with the

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355 *Batesville News*, January 30, 1840; *Arkansas Gazette*, June 10, 1840, March 29, 1852; *Arkansas Times and Advocate*, January 15, 1836.
turmoil of the frontier. The proximity of Indian Territory prompted them to connect the perceived threats of runaway slaves, Indian Removal, and racial ambiguity. 356

White slaveowners highlighted the proximity of Indian Territory as one of the earliest possibilities for long distance travel networks for slaves. Westward migrating Indian nations were among the early nineteenth century slaveholders who moved into the Arkansas Valley, incorporating enslaved men and women in the cultural landscapes of the Arkansas Valley. 357 Soon after the first 1821 advertisement reporting Austin’s endeavor to “escape to the Cherokees,” the jailer in Little Rock, notified readers that “Celia” would “make for the nation” where she had previously been owned by “Walter Webber (a Cherokee).” The Cherokees occupied the region immediately west of early American settlements, and their proximity as a western destination for runaway slaves created persistent anxiety for white slaveowners. 358

Some freedom seeking slaves did exploit Indian Territory River valleys offered natural corridors through the Arkansas mountains into Indian Territory. Toney, a man enslaved in the bottomlands near the mouth of the Arkansas River, escaped, as his owner predicted, up the Arkansas River to the Creek Nation where he had previously labored. Runaways also traveled north of the Arkansas River along the edges of settlements that bordered Cherokee treaty lands. Some slave communities aided runaways. Near the

356 Bolton, citing evidence that the numbers of slave advertisements decreased from the 1830s (280) to the 1850s (139), argues that the increased population of the state hindered flight. Bolton, Fugitives from Injustice, 23. Though slave advertisements did not include every truant or slaves caught before an ad could be printed, they demonstrate the limited number of fugitive cases. .


358 Arkansas Gazette, October 14, 1823.
Figure 6.1 The boundaries between the state of Arkansas and the Indian Territory represented legal and cultural barricades. Runaway slaves did cross these boundaries in search of relative freedom. However, most Indian nations adopted slave patrols and slave codes that mirrored those in southern slave states. Warren, G. K., et al. *Map of the Territory of the United States from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean.* Washington, D.C., War Dept, 1858. Library of Congress. Accessed on September 19, 2019. https://www.loc.gov/item/76695835/. [Cropped]

Illinois River, which helped informally mark the boundary with Indian Territory, one enslaved woman hid “runoffs” in her yard before helping them cross the river towards Indian Territory. For enslaved men and women, Indian Territory appeared as a refuge for those willing to brave long distance flights.359

Through newspapers, white slaveowners suggested a variety of intertwined reasons why runaway slaves might be pulled towards Indian areas to the west. A handful of advertisements implied an affinity between African slaves and Native Americans. The jailer from Little Rock advertising Celia’s escape suggested that she would return back to

359 Charles Bolton notes that as many left Indian Territory moving east as fled west to the area. Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice,* 23; *Arkansas Times and Advocate,* July 23, 1838, October 30, 1843; *Arkansas Gazette,* April 11, 1836; Lankford, *Bearing Witness,* 20, 392.
the Cherokee territory despite that being the area from which she had fled. As communities of displaced Chickasaw Indians moved west during the 1830s, one Memphis slaveowner feared a runaway slave might head west towards “Chickasaw Nation where he is acquainted.” Such advertisements suggested that runaways preferred and sought out the company of the Chickasaw Nation and other Indians communities. While not directly implicating the Chickasaws, slaveowners revealed a base level of uneasiness in regard to how Indian nations in the valley might impact enslaved inhabitants.

White Arkansas Valley slaveowners also feared a more relaxed Indian policing system that undermined white control of slave movement. The most damning indictment appeared in an editorial claiming a “negro town” in Seminole territory was a “den of runaway slaves where every negro who can make his escape from Louisiana and Arkansas is harbored.” The “negro town” validated fears of Native Americans’ lax policies that had allowed “over a hundred able bodied men,” many of them armed, to remain at large away from their respective owners. Other advertisements referenced the presence of a vibrant illegal slave trade market where stolen human chattel could easily become untraceable as they were traded through unofficial slave sales. Owners also feared runaways in “neighboring Indian nations” might easily “obtain forged free papers.” The combination of an affinity between African Americans and some Indian tribes along with the perception of limited oversight of slave movement, prompted white owners to feel threatened by what they perceived as ineffective Indian slave controls.

360 *Arkansas Gazette*, October 14, 1823.
361 *Helena Constitutional Journal*, March 21, 1836.
However, slaveowners’ anxiety over slaves’ movement towards Indian Territory was not only about geographical proximity or lax policing, but also whites’ fears of racial ambiguity on the frontier. Arguably the most unsettling issue for white slaveowners was runaways’ ability to “pass” as “Indian” in order to gain passage westward. Warnings of freedom seekers’ multilingual language abilities or physical appearance impressed upon readers the threat that not all the immigrant Native Americans they met along roads were who they claimed to be. Jordan, whose owner described him as a “bright mulatto…spare made, sharp nose, and thin visage,” was thought to “attempt to pass himself off as part Indian…as he has a strong resemblance to an Indian.” The “bright mulatto” man, might feign to be a “Choctaw and white man, half breed.” Freedom seeking race shifters threatened white owners not only with mobility but challenged the racial order of the frontier. Mixed-race families and light-skinned enslaved African American attempted to forge new racial possibilities as “mulatto” Indians in the borderland society.363

Numerous fugitives did distort their appearance to exploit the cultural milieu of the region. In a fascinating episode, two enslaved “mulatto negro” brothers from Alabama, who were conversant in Chickasaw, took a canoe to move quickly westward. According to witnesses, who realized the ruse after the fact, “their disguise [was] so complete that it will be difficult to detect them, unless their hair is examined, and their hands, which are harder than those of Indians.” The intimate physical understanding

362 Arkansas Gazette, July 12, 1850, January 25, 1833, November 22, 1840, February 18, 1851, August 2, 1852.

363 Arkansas Gazette, July 28, 1835, May 24, 1850, May 18, 1853. Claudio Saunt reveals the borderlands dynamism of shifting racial identities between family members of mixed African, Indigenous, and European heritage who turned on one another based claiming particular racial heritage Claudio Saunt, Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Krauthamer argues that perceived racial mixing in Indian-African slavery developed unique paradigms within the Choctaw and Chickasaw cultures. Krauthamer, Black Slaves, Indian Masters, 18.
needed to parse the difference between Indian and African identities undoubtedly left
white settlers baffled as to their inability to easily distinguish physical attributes. Yet,
other runaways found success with even less effort. One “well formed…dark mulatto
boy” named Carter, who was questionable enough to have his possessions checked at a
popular river crossing, succeeded in “passing himself off for an Indian, being dressed
similar to an Indian.” In a frontier setting, the implications of racial ambiguity
undermined racial and geographical control.364

White fears of Indian-slave relations increased during Indian relocation through
the region and during periods of conflict between white Arkansans and Indian nations.
Notices suggesting that nefarious Native Americans aided runaway slaves appeared in the
same weeks that Native communities were immigrating through the region to the west.365
The opportunity to fault Indians for slave unrest compelled one prominent Little Rock
slaveowner to declare a runaway slave had probably “made for Cherokee nation” with
“some gang of Indians.” His assertion came just days after seven hundred Cherokees
passed through Little Rock during the height of Cherokee removal.366 Similarly, the
reports of a massive “negro town” harboring fugitive slaves appeared as troubles grew
between the Seminole nation and white settlers. Newspapers called for increased troops
to fight both Seminoles and demolish the “den of runaway slaves.”367 Much of white

364 Arkansas Gazette, January 24, 1834, May 28, 1840.

365 In 1832, a slave owner decried that two men “had been run to...the Creeks or Cherokees...by some white
villain or Indian.” Arkansas Gazette, April 19, 1832. In that same spring, 400 Cherokees immigrated by
steamboat from Alabama amidst false rumors that federal officials would cede additional land in the
Arkansas Valley to the Cherokees. Arkansas Gazette, May 2, 1832.

366 Arkansas Gazette, August 1, 1838, August 6, 1838.

367 Van Buren Intelligencer, July 6, 1850; “An Indian War Brewing on Our Frontier,” Arkansas Gazette,
July 12, 1850.
slaveowners’ concern with the interference of Native Americans coincided with white settlers’ broader conflicts with relocated Indian nations.368

Beliefs among white settlers that Indian nations offered a safe haven were overblown and lessened somewhat following the end of the Removal era. After 1840, slaveowners references to slaves running towards Indian Territory fell off significantly, which correlated with less concern over immigrating Indians.369 In 1842, a slave revolt involving over two dozen men and women from Cherokee, Creek, and, later, Choctaw plantations fled from Webbers Falls along the Arkansas River. In a series of firefights, which left several dead, the group attempted to reach Mexican territory to the Southwest. It was the most significant documented slave uprising in the Arkansas Valley.370

Historians have subsequently used the 1842 slave revolt to show the similarities of slave ownership between white Arkansans and Native Americans. Rather than affinities between African Americans and Indian Americans, one historian argues that Cherokees in Arkansas had “adopted all the worst features of Southern black slave codes,” which prompted the armed revolt. In refuting the idea that slave ownership had become more harsh under Cherokees after Removal than before, another historian nonetheless argued that the arrival of Seminoles in the area had likely spurred the uprising. Seminoles did not have nearly as stringent slave codes, and Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws objected to the Seminoles’ lax enforcement. In the aftermath

368 Arkansas Gazette, February 1, 1839; Batesville News, July 11, 1839.
369 In fact, only one direct reference to slaves running to Indian Territory appeared between 1841 and 1850 after slave owners wrote 18 such ads between 1832 and 1840. Arkansas Times and Advocate, October 30, 1843.
of the revolt, Cherokees adopted increasingly more aggressive slave codes, such as aggressive restrictions on the free black population. Regardless, Cherokees’ militarized response to the uprising demonstrates that many Native slaveowners sought to curtail enslaved persons’ mobility as much as white slaveowners.371

In fact, while many fugitives fled for Indian Territory, the Removal period brought particular dangers to enslaved blacks. Violence between anti-Removal Cherokees and the “Treaty Party” often involved targeting of the enslaved of Treaty Party Cherokees. Chaney Richardson, a formerly enslaved child, remembered not traveling off the plantation unguarded for several years due to fears of “Party killing.” The Cherokee Advocate noted that enslaved African Americans in Indian Territory ran away back to Arkansas to avoid the violence. Fugitives’ movement in and out of Indian Territory in the early 1840s therefore reflected the social disruptions of the Removal period rather than the Indian-Slave conspiracy that whites feared.372

White Arkansans’ social policing exaggerated collaborations between Native Americans and runaway slaves in part due to heightened sensitivity towards immigrating Indian nations. Undoubtedly, Indian Territory offered a promising outlet for freedom seeking slaves moving through the Arkansas Valley. Runaways used the ability to pass as Indian while traveling and probably benefitted from lax policing as relocated Indian nations established new governance in Indian Territory. Whites’ response often denigrated Indians and opened new questions of racial identity that invoked larger regional strife between Indian and white settlers. However, slaveowners’ fears of social


upheaval was not limited to Indian communities and connected runaway slaves with numerous communities in the Arkansas Valley. The motivations for such linkages were several—racial animosity, social reform, legal statutes, and chronicling slaves’ backgrounds—but the effect raised the specter of runaway slaves with every passing Indian group, every sighting of bandits, and every steamboat paddling up to the dock.

The rise of the Mississippi steamboat world introduced additional threats to Arkansas slaveowners’ fears of slaves’ threatening collaborations: quick mobility, social anonymity, and increasingly cosmopolitan communities. Freedom seekers sought the confusion of steamboat travel both on ships and at steamboat landings to exploit the anonymity of river transportation. White slaveowners recognized the dynamism of river travel as both the lifeblood of cotton and a threat to their control over enslaved men and women. Slaveowners linked runaway slaves to the fluid labor markets of the steamboat economy and to interactions with disruptive free black and abolitionist communities.

Among runaway slaves’ best tools was their ability to integrate into the fluid labor system of the steamboat world. Slaves worked as firemen, deck crew, cabin crew, barbers, and maids. Steamboat captains often hired enslaved laborers for stints of one to several years, assuring that a significant portion of the enslaved population was connected to the world of steamboat transportation. Owners feared that runaway men and would exploit the river corridor using previous work experience on steamboats. Anderson, a “pleasant spoken” man, attempted to identify as a hired out laborer on an

373 Lankford, *Bearing Witness*, 264; 269; Buchanan’s profile of St. Louis steamboat chambermaids in 1850 found three-quarters to be free and enslaved blacks. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 13.
Arkansas River steamboat before he was outed. One owner surmised that a runaway from southwest Arkansas would “endeavor to get to the Arkansas or Mississippi Rivers as he has been on steamboats as a cook.” The transferable skills that gave prompted owners to rent human slaves also provided freedom seekers the opportunity to manipulate the steamboat world to their advantage.

Enslaved steamboat workers, transported slaves, and runaways gained a unique, often detailed knowledge of the physical and social landscape, which aided their attempts to flee bondage. Historian Thomas Buchanan has called the river routes travelled by free and enslaved black men and women the “African American Mississippi World” to demonstrate the extent of geographical knowledge and the mobility of slaves throughout the region. Enslaved steamboat workers gained knowledge of Louisiana and Mississippi as well as Kentucky, Tennessee, and even Pittsburgh.

Fugitives used the anonymity and chaos of the steamboat world to sneak onboard these far-reaching vessels. In the din of boarding and disembarking, slaves sought to disappear in the masses of men and women, free and slave, who used the river for transport. One of the more daring examples of the social risks and rewards of a fugitive on an Arkansas Valley steamboat took place with the help of the abolitionist Reverend Calvin Fairbank in 1842. William Minnis, a mulatto man illegally enslaved in Little

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374 *Arkansas Gazette*, July 15, 1847.
375 *Washington Telegraph*, May 2, 1848.
376 Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 5.
377 *Arkansas Gazette*, January 9, 1832, May 28, 1844.
379 Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 86–87; *Southern Shield* January 29, 1842; *Arkansas Gazette*, November 28, 1840.
Rock, Arkansas after having been promised his freedom by his dying owner, used the aid of Fairbanks to smuggle on board a steamship. Minnis borrowed a wig, false beard, and mustache to resemble a “Mr. Young” from the central Arkansas area. Minnis copied the speech and appearance of Mr. Young to such an extent that he purportedly encountered his owner on the boat, played the part of Mr. Young, and passed without a hint of suspicion. In a period when the masquerade of false identities compelled the writer Herman Melville to pen *The Confidence-Man*, runaways exploited the social transformation of the region to undermine race and status.

Steamboat fugitives expanded the geographic scale of possible slave escape in the Arkansas Valley. Arkansas’ most infamous example of a steamboat escape caused an international incident in 1841. A “negro dandy” named Nelson Hacket stole a horse and several expensive personal items from a farm in the mountains north of the Arkansas River and fled east. After subsisting on roots and berries for several days, he arrived at the Mississippi River, found aid from a negro boatman, and found passage towards the Ohio River. Hacket traveled to Canada. However, his owner sued for his extradition on the grounds that Hacket stole personal items. While the Hacket case was extraordinary in its international ramifications and legal questions, Hacket demonstrated the ability of runaways to harness the technological developments of the Mississippi steamboat world.

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Steamboats also brought the cosmopolitan communities of American society onto the riverboat landings of the Arkansas region. From the earliest days, steamboats carried military troops, migrating Indian populations, and white settlers amidst their trade cargoes. Regular steamboat schedules appeared in 1828, and by 1831 nearly three hundred emigrants might dock in Little Rock over the course of a month. Steamboats arrived from New Orleans, Pittsburgh, and every landing in between with thirty to forty passengers. In periods of low water, passengers might wait for days and weeks at a port before departure. By the 1850s, a new boat might arrive in Little Rock every day. Each riverboat landing was a social event as hunters, politicians, speculators, settlers, soldiers, and gamblers disembarked into a crowd of “blacks, porters, and drays.”

While each of these events brought merchandise, newspapers, and wealth, slaveowners also recognized the threat of disruptive strangers. Arkansans recounted stories of steamboats with a “whole gang of villains on the deck.” A Little Rock paper reprinted the story of a “mulatto fellow” who arrived in St. Louis as a cook onboard a steamship only to attack men in town with a knife. Newspapers reported on a free black “scamp” who was known to express “his views of the ‘rights of man’ and the equality of the races, among the local save community.” In 1859 the Arkansas Gazette warned of the possibility of “too many free-soil boats” that would supposedly disrupt trade. Steamboats not only threatened to quickly disperse runaway slaves, but also carried populations of

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383 Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi*, 16.

384 During episodes of Indian Removal, human cargo was even greater as several hundred were crammed on westward-moving boats. Arkansas Gazette, February 16, 1831, “Steamboat Register” June 6, 1851, February 20, 1858; Arkansas Banner, February 26, 1845; Brown, “River Transportation in Arkansas, 1819-1890,” 344–46.
relocated Indians, potential thieves, and abolitionists to the trade centers of the cotton frontier.385

Cosmopolitan travelers in the steamboat world appeared in rumors of slave insurrections. Reports alluded to a variety of outside agitators that might have stoked the unrest. In the summer months of 1856, news of slave insurrections caused a stir across the state. Editorials feared that “incendiary white men and free negroes” were cultivating insurrection among the enslaved population of southern Arkansas and northern Louisiana. As Christmas approached, rumors arose again that “white abettors” were causing unhappiness among the local enslaved population. The presumed social provocateurs thus ranged from free blacks and abolitionists to brigands and Indians. The social tumult of the frontier compelled slaveowners to consider runaways within broader concerns about the social dynamics of the Arkansas Valley region.386

Slaveowners in the Arkansas Valley recognized every docking steamboat or moored canoe as a potential disruption to their attempts to control slaves’ movement. Steamboats accentuated the concerns about controlling slaves in the Arkansas Valley as fugitives could integrate into the labor and cultural systems ostensibly developed for the benefit of slaveowners. To control enslaved peoples’ movement in the steamboat world, slaveowners kept one another alert for unfamiliar faces and stories from enslaved laborers that seemed suspicious. From the 1820s to the end of the antebellum period, Arkansas Valley slaveholders established formal patrols and surveillance systems through which to police slave mobility.

385 Featherstonhaugh, Excursion Through the Slave States, 1:98; Arkansas Times and Advocate, June 3, 1836; Van Buren Intelligencer, March 3, 1849; Arkansas Gazette, September 24, 1859.

386 Washington Telegraph, October 22, 1856; Southern Shield, December 20, 1856.
Fears of slaves’ possible integration into the wider social transformations of the frontier region created a coordinated effort to police the social geography of runaway slaves. Though laws initially incorporated the environmental context of fugitive slaves, the legal apparatus of the state formed a de jure geography of police surveillance to limit social interactions. Beginning with the formation of slave patrols in 1825, a series of vagrancy laws, patrol practices, and fugitive slave addendums codified a police geography that responded to fugitives’ mobility.387

In 1825 the Arkansas Territorial legislature began the process of legally defining the geography of possible slave escape by instituting slave patrols. Arkansas Territory’s slave statutes established slave patrols to “visit negro quarters, and other suspected places of unlawful assemblies of slaves” in their respective townships. Patrols were entrusted to impose constraints on slave movements by checking for slaves “strolling about from one plantation to another” without a pass.388 Unlike later iterations of runaway slave law that ignored environmental components, the legislation also reminded justices of the peace that “slaves run away and lie hid and lurking in swamps, woods, and other obscure places.”389 As the slave patrol laws transformed, however, environmental references disappeared and only references to plantations and settlements remained.

387 While historians debate the effectives of patrols for enforcement, Stephanie Camp argued that policing emerged from “consensus among most slaveholders that enslaved people’s movement must be severely limited.” Camp, Closer to Freedom, 25; Hadden, Slave Patrols.


389 The original runaway slave laws borrowed from the language of the 1804 laws of Louisiana Territory, Laws of Arkansas Territory, 530; 523.
Localized slave patrols responded to fears of clandestine collaboration and “unlawful assemblies” among slaves by policing known gathering places. For many Arkansas slaves, escape involved short excursions to nearby plantations or religious meetings for a few hours of unsupervised interactions in taverns and clearings. While some slaves attended religious gatherings with the consent of their owners, other enslaved men and women at religious meetings had ignored the explicit commands of their owners. Henry Green remembered slaves often moved at night “on account dey [sic] courtin’ some gal what libes on some udder place.” These courtships and religious services became a constant site of contestation between truant slaves and the slaveowners’ police force.

City ordinances in Little Rock attempted to broaden the scope of slave policing. The city outlawed dances and unsupervised “assemblages” for both free and enslaved African Americans. Slaveowners did not permit enslaved Arkansans to trade in stores or live apart from owners without explicit written permission. White citizens restricted free

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390 These time-constrained freedom seekers often sought to maintain relationships with the wider enslaved community through these movements, even as owners often declined to support such interactions on work nights. Historians have recognized these time-constrained movements as a key element of slave resistance. Bolton, *Fugitives from Injustice*, 4; Franklin and Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves*; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 211.

391 Amanda Trulock to Dear Brother, April 29, 1847; Amanda Trulock to Very Dear Sister, February 18, 1848, “Trulock Family Letters, 1837-1855,” Arkansas Studies Institute MS.0046; McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 151.


and enslaved blacks with a nine o’clock curfew. Enhanced vagrancy laws in Little Rock created a local “company of guards.”

Runaway laws addressing the threat of slaves’ collaboration expanded in the late 1830s during a period of rumors about white slave bandits. In 1834, rumors of slave insurrections in Mississippi led to hysteria surrounding a “negro-stealer” John Murrell. This “Western Land Pirate” also allegedly conducted his theft and conspiracy in the bottomlands of the Arkansas Valley. A year after Murrell was tried and convicted, new reports of a “gang of negro thieves” concealing themselves “in the wilds of Arkansas” stirred up fears among Arkansas observers. Newspaper editors called for increased vigilance around settlements and towns. These later rumors struck close to Arkansas slaveowners as John Steele, previously a well-regarded lawman in Little Rock, was identified as the “notorious” leader. In response to the news of these “lawless and abandoned men,” lawmakers expanded slave laws to impose greater racial divisions. The 1837 state legislature prohibited “any white person, or free negro” from unauthorized meetings with slaves. Slaves’ social boundaries became increasingly restricted as white slaveowners highlighted connections between slaves and wider unrest.

Slaveowners used slave pass laws to simplify their understanding of unpermitted slave movement. By 1838, Arkansas law defined runaway slaves as those found “more than twenty miles from the plantation…or other place…without a written pass.” All white Arkansans were empowered to detain any person travelling “without a token or

394 Arkansas Gazette, February 7, 1826, September 15, 1835; Arkansas Times and Advocate, February 8, 1832.
395 Arkansas Gazette, August 26, 1834, September 23, 1834, August 18, 1835, September 1, 1835.
396 Arkansas Gazette, October 27, 1835, September 1, 1835, “Governor’s Message,” October 6, 1835; The local and state statutes similarly built off of anti-gambling provisions and connected vagrants to riotous and disorderly behavior. Ball, and Roane, Revised Statutes of the State of Arkansas, 734.
written pass.” These laws encouraged collective surveillance of any black person deemed suspicious.397

Town leaders throughout the Arkansas Valley sought to transform local patrols into a more general police force. Beginning in the 1840s, numerous local jurisdictions modified the state slave patrol model to attend to wider concerns of town policing. Patrolmen selected from the town population were instructed to break up unlawful assemblages of slaves and check slave passes while also curtailing law breaking among white inhabitants. In June 1840, Little Rock officials announced that selected patrolmen would gather at nine in the evening, “armed with a good rifle or smoothbore, loaded with powder and ball, and six rounds of powder and ball.” Their charge was to “visit all negro quarters and suspected places” as well as “suppress all riot and tumult” in the city. Helena, the principal Arkansas town on the Mississippi, established a local slave patrol the following year to visit “all parts of the town and all negro quarters.” Towns along the region’s major waterways continued to adopt patrol ordinances that associated control of enslaved movement with general “riotous” behavior as slaveowners associated runaway slaves with broader social unrest.398

Patrol captains and lawmakers adapted the structure of these local companies to police the chaotic anonymity and fluid labor of the steamboat world. Though slaveowners never fully controlled the movement of freedom seekers on the Arkansas riverways, they enforced numerous provisions to limit the geographical and social mobility of slaves on steamboats. City patrols often guarded the docks, checking passes and collecting free

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397 Ball, and Roane, Revised Statutes of the State of Arkansas, 715; Bolton, Fugitivism, 183.

398 Arkansas Gazette, June 24, 1840, “Town of Princeton,” February 9, 1855; Southern Shield, July 16, 1841; Van Buren Intelligencer, April 19, 1845; Washington Telegraph, June 4, 1851.
By the 1840s, slaves needed written passes to move or trade up and down the river. The Arkansas legislature passed laws dissuading steamboat captains from hiring or transporting unknown slaves. The $500 fine was roughly the cost of an adult slave, perhaps designed to prevent captains from selling slaves illegally. Steamboat captains largely obliged as the jails of Chicot and Mississippi counties near the mouth of the Arkansas were filled with runaways whose identities were unmasked as they attempted to disappear into the labor milieu of steamboat commerce. These provisions notably policed the social mobility of slaves—reducing incentives to work or exploit anonymity—as the primary means of limiting fugitives’ movements via steamboat transportation.

While white slaveowners were able to oversee policing in towns and on steamboats, they had to trust in a more indirect policing in Indian Territory. Despite white slaveowners’ attempts to associate runaway slaves with migrating Native Americans, white slaveowners eventually came to see Indian slaveowners as partners in efforts to maintain the slave regime. The Arkansas Gazette hailed a Cherokee legislation for “an act for the protection of slavery in the Cherokee Nation.” The editorialist sought Indian Territory as an ally with Southern slave states against abolitionists’ attempts to end slavery. The writer warned that Indian Territory “may soon become the field where shall be fought the great and final battle in the cause of slavery.” He linked Indian Territory

399 Buchanan, Black Life on the Mississippi, 107; Police hired to patrol a steamboat landing on the Ouachita River detained a young enslaved man who claimed to be disembarking with the travel trunk of his absent owner. Arkansas Gazette, January 10, 1838.

400 Elbert Hartwell English, A Digest of the Statutes of Arkansas, Embracing All Laws of a General and Permanent Character in Force at the Close of the Session of the General Assembly of 1846 (Little Rock: Reardon & Garritt, 1848), 952-953.; Thomas Buchanan has argued that white passengers and workers in the lower Mississippi Valley created a surveillance of indirect mastery for the thousands of African Americans on the river Buchanan, Black Life on the Mississippi, 94.

401 For a general overview of the increasingly strict steamboat laws, see Buchanan, Black Life on the Mississippi, 24.
with the conflict over popular sovereignty in Kansas, fearing that “attempts [may] be made to lay the track of an ‘underground rail road’ through the Indian Nations and south to Texas. Pro-slavery Arkansans thus found unity with slave-owning Native Americans through the ownership of African Americans, contrasting with decades of racial antagonism against Native Americans. 402

Ironically, the federal government rebuffed Arkansans’ attempts to extend direct police presence into Indian Territory. White slaveowners argued for extending U.S. laws regarding the capture of fugitive slaves into sovereign tribal territory. In 1838, the U.S. Attorney General decided against extending jurisdiction of fugitive slave cases into the Indian Territory. Only after the storm of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act emerged did white slaveholders enjoy another opportunity to extend their policing activities. In 1854, the new Attorney General overruled the 1838 decision and declared the Act did extend into Indian Territory. 403 Indian Territory boundaries complicated cross-cultural attempts to control slave movement because such efforts undermined Indian sovereignty. Nonetheless, freedom seekers in the Arkansas Valley experienced ever growing legal limitations across jurisdictional lines.

Despite anxieties aroused by Native American removal, most of the relocated Indian nations adopted Anglo legal codes to restrict the geographical mobility of black slaves in the Arkansas Valley. 404 In 1840, the Cherokee and Creek nations began to

402 Arkansas Gazette, December 28, 1855.


404 Adaptation of racialized legal and social paradigms was a widespread development among the “Five Civilized Tribes” during the first decades of the 19th century. Krauthamer, Black Slaves, Indian Masters, 2013; Miles, Ties That Bind; Seminoles were an exception, allowing slaves to own property and carry
reinstate slave codes that restricted the movement and social world of enslaved men and women.405 The Cherokees established slave patrols in 1841 to police slaves “strolling about, not on their owner’s…premises, without a pass.”406 In response to the 1842 escape attempt, the Cherokee National Council resolved to send one hundred “effective men” to pursue, arrest, and, if need be, kill, the fugitives.407 Rather than harboring runaway slaves, Indian nations like the Cherokee replicated judicial models passed throughout the southern slave states.

Whether in Indian Territory, at steamboat landings, or in slave quarters, patrollers never fully restrained the movement of enslaved people in the Arkansas Valley. Patrollers’ failure to definitively curtail slave movement created a reputation for laxity among whites.408 Newspapers in the 1850s reported on the inability of patrols to effectively control slave mobility. “Runaways,” wrote the state newspaper, “are hid in this vicinity and are in the city every night. The patrol force of the city is too small…Negroes traverse the streets at all hours of the night free from hindrance.”409 The frequency of jailed runaway slaves and the fear expressed by enslaved Arkansans suggest weapons. Some historians have argued that the distinction between Seminoles and others led to discontent among slaves in Indian Territory. Littlefield and Underhill, “Slave ‘Revolt’ in the Cherokee Nation, 1842,” 126.


408 Hadden, Slave Patrols, 172; Grif Stockley, Ruled by Race: Black/White Relations in Arkansas From Slavery to the Present (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2012), 33; Franklin and Schweninger, Runaway Slaves, 156.

409 Arkansas True Democrat, November 30, 1859. Lack’s article remains the best study of urban runaway areas in the state. Lack, “Urban Slave Community: Little Rock, 1831-1862.”
that slave patrols were effective. Nonetheless, slaveowners focused their limited policing resources on townships and settlements. Freedom seekers continued to move on the margins of settlements, benefitting from concealment and sustenance, creating a consistent amount of local truancy and longer-term flight up through the end of the antebellum period.

Arkansas slaveowners developed a patrol system highly attuned to the social context of slave mobility. As immigrants settled the Arkansas Valley in greater numbers, whites shifted control of slave movements to the boundaries of local townships and counties. Slave patrols deemphasized uncultivated spaces and policed areas of slave gatherings, like slave quarters and religious gatherings. These patrol practices, along with legal statutes against vagrancy and cross-racial interactions, extended slave patrols to address the chaos of steamboats and to combat the threats of white insurrectionists. Notably absent was an understanding of enslaved people’s adaptation to the Arkansas landscape. A notable exception was the use of slave-hunting dogs to root out freedom seekers from the surrounding landscape, a highly effective though never fully developed environmental tool.

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White slaveowners developed surprisingly few controls in uncultivated spaces in the antebellum period and barely progressed to any formal regime of environmental control. Truants and long distance runaways sought the woods as their primary avenue of freedom to such an extent that historians have argued that white Arkansans associated slave runaways with wild spaces “in the woods.” In response, slaveowners pursued a successful but limited informal strategy focused on slave-hunting dogs, often identified as

410 Houston Jones, “Peculiar Institution,” 58.
bloodhounds. Bloodhounds enabled slaveholders to penetrate a variety of Arkansas Valley environments, from bottomland canebrakes to upland forests. Additionally, these creatures, bred for capturing runaways, figured prominently in stories of captured fugitives and were part of a fear-based, psychological policing of the environment.411

Specialized slave-catching dogs were a distinct subset of a growing domestic dog population in the Arkansas Valley. Dogs were a familiar presence, whether as protection on farms or part of the milieu of animals in Arkansas towns.412 Slaveowners raised slave catching dogs to track human prey. Steve Douglas described how one planter’s widow trained “bloodhounds to chase her run-a-ways.” His oral testimony offers one of the most complete descriptions of bloodhound training in Arkansas. Having bought the dogs when they were “pups,” the widow ordered her nine year old son and a black child of the same age “to train ‘em and make mean dogs. The white boy, he holds the pups and the black boy he take a run, way round and through the woods. After so long the white boy he let go the pups and off they go with they [sic] nose to the ground.” After training the dogs to chase, the widow enforced the beliefs of racial difference: “to be train right—she was makin’ nigger chasers out of ‘em…they had to have blood and that little black boy was held and the pups tasted blood right off his legs.” Associating the dogs with the taste of enslaved flesh encoded the racial association between bloodhounds and runaways.413


412 Schoolcraft, Journal of a Tour Into the Interior of Missouri and Arkansaw, 33; Featherstonhaugh, Excursion Through the Slave States, 1:16; Arkansas Gazette, April 6, 1830, January 12, 1836.

413 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 326–27; Franklin and Schweninger argue that “bloodhounds” were a catch-all term for a variety of dog breeds; however, the ubiquity of contemporary references to “bloodhounds”
Slave-hunting dogs enabled slave catchers to adapt to the region’s various environments. In the pine forests of southern Arkansas, Columbus Williams recalled that, soon after slaves ran, owners “put the dogs after them…they would catch them and bring them back.” Bloodhounds were also effective in the bottomland forests where they “chase[d] de niggers thro’ de bottom.” The Bibb family were captured by “savage blood hounds” despite traveling for days through “cane brakes, bushes, and briers.” Regardless of the landscape, the hounds were known to chase runaways up trees “like a coon or ‘possum.” Hounds’ ability to navigate a multitude of environments enabled white slave holders to have a mechanism to penetrate a variety of ecological niches.

In addition to catching individual runaways, slave dogs were a psychological deterrent for many slaves and invoked fear among potential runaways. The sound of barking dogs moving frequently through the landscape reminded inhabitants of the ongoing struggle for control. Scott Bond’s daily routine as a slave was filled with the sound of hounds chasing slaves. “When you went to bed at night,” he remembered” you could hear the blood hounds, and in the morning when you wake up, you could hear them running colored people.” Bond’s auditory routine was not isolated. In conversations with his owners, they told him the “music [bloodhounds] made was the sweetest music in the world.” In the contest over uncultivated land, the sound of hounds was a topic of explicit cross-cultural dialogue as slaveowners attempted to gain control over mobile slaves.

reveals that the cultural designation carried more relevance that breed specificity. Franklin and Schweninger, Runaway Slaves, 161.

414 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 375, 177.

415 Bibb, Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, 128.

416 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 77.
Figure 6.2 By the 1850s, bloodhounds were associated with slave-catching dogs. Their combination of tracking and the audible presence of their barking created a psychological imprint in the memories of former slaves. Illustration. Henry Bibb. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. New York: Henry Bibb, 1849. 129.

The howls of hounds became so ubiquitous that enslaved inhabitants learned to recognize distinct sounds in the process of capturing slaves. Like many freedom seekers, Boston Blackwell “heerd the hounds a-howling, getting ready for to chase after us.” Observers of runaway slaves saw the process of slave catching in action: “we saw the slaves first, and the dogs came behind chasing them…about half an hour” later. Burke Simpson claimed he knew the sound of bloodhounds well enough that he could tell when the dogs had chased, then found, and then cornered their human prey “by de way dey
would bark.” Dogs’ barking extended slaveowners’ control into the forests and reminded potential runaways of the that methods at slaveowners had at their disposal.417

However, despite bloodhounds being effective environmental and cultural tools for white slaveholders, white settlers developed no formal system to monitor the forest landscape. No advertisements for dogs generally or bloodhounds specifically appeared in Arkansas Valley newspapers. While it is possible that a lukewarm public perception of bloodhounds diminished interest in public displays of bloodhound use, in general the region actually had few forms of environmental control. There was no formal game warden or patrol. The most significant law regarding Arkansas environmental control was an 1835 “Act to encourage the killing of Wolves in Arkansas Territory,” which was enforced by county magistrates who gave bounties to hunters.418 Even laws regarding the capture of runaway slaves abandoned the 1804 language of slaves “lurking in swamps, woods, and other obscure places.”419 By 1838, statutes regarding slave runaways referred only vaguely to slaves “lying out or lurking” without any environmental reference.420 Slave catchers, therefore, had few larger structures of environmental controls within which to implement bloodhound strategies.

Bloodhounds proved highly effective as an answer to runaways’ use of the “uncultivated” regions of the Arkansas Valley. As an ecological adaptation to the region’s varied landscapes and as a psychological weight due to their constant howling, bloodhounds developed into a racialized form of landscape control. However, there were

417 Lankford, Bearing Witness, 187, 8, 177.
418 Arkansas Gazette, January 2, 1836.
419 Laws of Arkansas Territory, 523.
420 Ball, and Roane, Revised Statutes of the State of Arkansas, 713.
no larger systems of landscape surveillance that might have buoyed the bloodhound system, which remained localized and limited. As a result, the margins of fields and forests remained highly contested between freedom seekers than those who would stop them, as runaways recognized these spaces as their primary opportunity for escape.

While slaves did, in turn, develop means of evading bloodhounds, slaveowners persisted in their focus on slaves’ social connections. In fact, slaveowners in Arkansas cemented their focus on policing the social world of slaves through the language of slave advertisements in Arkansas Valley newspapers. These advertisements sought to collect slaves’ knowledge of their own former inhabitations, locations of loved ones, or migration routes into the region and use this information to hypothesize the destinations and motivations of runaway slaves.

The police geography of the Arkansas Valley was never as intentionally environmental in its conception as other spaces like Indian Territory, survey lands, national parks, or uncultivated runaway areas. However, the formation of slave patrols and the fear of insurrection recognized the complex political geography of competing cultural groups in the Arkansas Valley. While slaveowners wished to focus on the Cotton Kingdom of the Lower Mississippi Valley, their attention turned to Indian reservations, steamboat networks, and environmental changes at the edges of cultivated areas. The informal police geography, fully in place by the 1850s, emerged among the many overlapping sovereign borders of the Arkansas River Valley.
POSTSCRIPT

This dissertation highlights the forms of territorial sovereignty that Indians, Euro-Americans, and African Americans developed in the antebellum period and replicated for decades after in the expanding polity of the United States. The lasting importance of this southern borderlands is therefore as much a western historiographical question as a southern one. This dissertation does not explain the coming of the Civil War. However the contours of Civil War allegiance in the Arkansas Valley reignited the borderlands territoriality of the antebellum period. The landforms of the multi-cultural, contested West that influenced the western theater of the Civil War then persisted in the decades to follow. Even in the present period, the pattern of debates combining geopolitical sovereignty and environmental ideas persists. The patterns of the southern borderlands were a precursor to the contests repeated throughout the continent in the 19th century.

The geography of Indian Territory emerged as a direct consequence of Arkansas Cherokee debates. Treaties with the Cherokees and the Choctaws in the 1820s established the eastern boundaries of what became Indian Territory, near Fort Smith, extending south to the Red River. Between 1830 and 1838, however, federal authorities removed tens of thousands of Native Americans members of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes to the region via suspect treaty negotiations. An 1834 Trade Act had defined the region west of organized territories as “the Indian country.” The waves of coerced migration of Native American families in the 1830s would only be the beginning of the forced relocations to
what became known as “Indian Territory.” Indian nations and the federal government continued to wage battles over sovereignty within the geographical boundaries of Indian reservations for the rest of the century.421

In the 1830s, the eastern Cherokees resisted Indian Removal policy by referencing the earlier environmental debates of the Arkansas Cherokees. Cherokee leaders utilized the reports of American exploratory scientists like Major Stephen Long to shift eastern Cherokees’ sentiment against the Arkansas Valley, even though Lovely’s Purchase was universally admired in such reports. The *Cherokee Phoenix*—the eastern Cherokees’ leading newspaper—quoted the exact passage of the “Great American Desert” in which the conditions rendered “it an unfit residence for any but a nomad.” John Ross, principal Chief of the eastern Cherokee, argued that the “barren plain of the west” offer “no prospect other than degradation, dispersion, and cultural extinction of our race.” The very expedition of Stephen Long that the Arkansas Cherokee chiefs had manipulated to establish their agricultural prowess was now a tool of the eastern Cherokees to denigrate the southern borderlands.422

Cherokee writers used the debates over the fitness of the western lands for agriculture to engage discussions of scientific veracity. Editors of the *Phoenix* derided reports from the Secretary of War praising the “fertility of soil and profusion of game.”423 Cherokee writers found federal promises of the fertility of the Lovely’s Purchase landscape to be almost conspiratorial and untrue, meant to “misrepresent the Indians and

421 Everett, “On the Extreme Frontier.”
423 Cherokee Phoenix, January 7, 1829, p. 2.
mislead the public.”⁴²⁴ In other cases, they felt that federal officials imagined the Cherokees as only hunters and were thus incapable of determining appropriate landscapes for the Cherokees.

The Eastern Cherokees made their Arkansas cousins a semi-savage foil to their own society as a way of announcing the de-civilizing dangers of the western frontier. Writers resurrected the hunter ecological identity of the Arkansas Cherokees. Reports in the Cherokee Phoenix suggested that the Arkansas Cherokees were “connected to us by every tie of blood…but differed widely from this nation.” According to the writer, reunion would not work because they had “traits more peculiar to Indians in a rude and uncivilized state.” In one unfiltered libel, an editor commented, “sir, we are not Arkansas men. The chase we despise…we delight in cultivating the soil.” In effect, the eastern Cherokees were recycling the Arkansas Cherokee strategy towards the Osage by creating a case against removal that denigrated their Arkansas cousins.⁴²⁵

Despite the tragedy of Removal, Native communities exhibited astounding resiliency. Cherokee families established farms and pastures throughout the former Lovely’s Purchase. In 1859, Chief John Ross, who had led the anti-Removal faction that denigrated the Arkansas Valley landscape, declared that “we have a country…salubrious in climate, rich in soil, and abounding in the resources of mineral wealth.”⁴²⁶

Most native farmers cultivated small cotton patches for domestic use, but a few prospered by replicating Cotton Kingdom practices. The Choctaws along the Red River

⁴²⁴ Cherokee Phoenix and Indian’s Advocate, June 10, 1829, p. 2.
⁴²⁵ Cherokee Phoenix and Indian’s Advocate, September 9, 1829, p. 3. July 8, 1829, p. 2.
cultivated extensive cotton fields. By the mid 1830s, Choctaws shipped 500 bales of cotton down the Red River. Two years later, the Choctaw had constructed two cotton gins. The Choctaw planter Robert Jones owned nearly five thousand acres of land by the early 1850s and shipped seven hundred bales of cotton annually from his four plantations. The wealthiest plantation owners were mixed-race like Chickasaw Levi Colbert who owned nearly five hundred acres of cotton land in 1839 and controlled 150 enslaved lives—on par with the leading Anglo planters in the Arkansas Valley. Indeed, though most Indian inhabitants were not slave owners, Native families owned over 7,000 African Americans. These indigenous slave owners were creating a racial Cotton Kingdom west of Arkansas with Native Americans at the top of the racial hierarchy.427

Though some dispossessed Native communities had the financial means to find material success in Indian territory, the federal government wielded Indian Reservations as a colonial bludgeon for most of the 19th century. Beset by environmental changes from drought to the destruction of bison to disease to shifting fur markets, Indian nations weakened just as the federal government waged new war on the continent. After the Civil War, federal troops violently pushed Indian communities onto reservations that were often far from their traditional territories. In the southern plains, Quanah Parker led thousands of Comanche’s to resist federal incursions into the 1870s before US cavalry ambushed their village in Palo Duro Canyon near Amarillo, Texas and escorted them to present-day southwestern Oklahoma.428 Indian Reservations became a common presence on the landscape by the close of the century.


The Civil War was the most violent example of ongoing quests for sovereignty and Cotton Kingdom expansion. The continental expansion of the Cotton Kingdom and slave holder nationalism grew west of the southern borderlands to touch the Caribbean, Central America, and the desert southwest. As enmity grew into fratricide, the southern borderland region became called the Western Theater, but its characters and considerations reflected the decades of sovereign disputes between Indians, Anglo settlers, and enslaved African Americans in the Arkansas Valley.

Southern plantation owners’ belief in the economic potential and environmental limits of the Cotton Kingdom compelled a variety of expansionist techniques. The expansion model of white slave owners and enslaved farmers proved highly effective in eastern Texas. Comanches dominated the region, raiding farms and disrupting trade. Tejano Mexicans, isolated and desperate, sought settlement assistance from American farmers. Yet American empresarios like Stephen F. Austin, offered to facilitate an influx of Anglo American farmers and their human chattel. Ironically, Arkansas newspapermen tried to deter interest in Texas by exaggerating threats of floods, drought, and Indian depravity. By the 1830s, though, Austin’s colony boasted eight thousand settlers and numerous cotton plantations. However, the influx of American slave owners into northeast Mexico openly challenged Mexico’s anti-slave laws.

In mid 1830s, the disputed prompted the pro-slavery faction to go to war in revolt against the Mexican government. Between 1836 and 1845, Texas emerged as the first decidedly slaveholder republic in North America. American annexation of Texas, and subsequent war with Mexico, expanded American ownership of much of the southwest.
Like in Arkansas, the Cotton Kingdom emerged not just as an economic model, but a political, expansionist system wielded against Indigenous and, in the case of Texas, Mexican sovereignty.429

Cotton Kingdom expansion was less successful elsewhere. In southern Utah, the Mormon leader Brigham Young enlisted for cotton planters who had converted to Mormonism to experiment with cotton production. The inconsistent rainfall and lack of materials thwarted the attempts to develop “Dixie” Utah. Walter Johnson recounts more conquest-oriented “Dark Dreams” in attempts by Southern filibusterers to support the overthrow of governments in the Caribbean and Central American. Southern expansionists would then bring those nations into the orbit of the Lower Mississippi Valley. These coups did not last, though William Walker did temporarily declare himself president of Nicaragua and attempt to establish an Anglo republic of plantation owners.430

As the Cotton Kingdom lurched towards Civil War on the belief that its nationalist agenda around cotton exportation, the contours of the southern borderlands sharpened over questions of sovereignty. During the first secession convention in Arkansas, anti-secessionists won the debate. The political division was largely geographical as no fully fledged slave society had taken root in the interior highlands of the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains. The Cotton Kingdom had failed to expand much further than the lowlands, in part due to ecological presumptions and the singular interest


in the cotton trade. A second secession convention, following Fort Sumter, did send Arkansas into the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy. Yet the mountains of Arkansas remained a battleground where the national war took place on the local level between neighbors.431

Indian nations turned the Civil War into an opportunity of their own. The Confederate government needed supplies and security on their western border. Confederate diplomats offered treaties to the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee that promised land rights, self-governance and other legal promises in return for their military support. These Indian nations accepted the terms of the Confederacy in part to redefine their sovereign status. Stand Watie, a full-blooded Cherokee chief, would be the last Confederate officer to surrender to federal soldiers, marking the American Civil War as also an extension of the American Indian Wars.432

Just as Cotton Kingdom acolytes and Indian nations pursued sovereignty interests during the Civil War, so too did enslaved Arkansans. Freedom seekers abandoned plantations and farms by the thousands. These enslaved Arkansans arrived at Union lines almost as soon as the federal army arrived in the Arkansas Valley. The desperate maneuvering that had surrounded runaway slaves during the antebellum period now had the additional threat of warring armies. Just as slave mobility had prompted slave owners


432 The Civil War also engaged internal disputes that had festered for decades amongst the Cherokee. Stand Watie sided with the Confederacy well before John Ross who wanted to stay neutral. With the surrounding nations having signed treaties, and many Cherokees supporting the Confederacy, Ross reluctantly pushed the Cherokee into the Civil War on the side of the Cotton Kingdom. The end of the war and emancipation brought new questions regarding the citizenship for enslaved African Americans not only in the United States but in Indian territory as well. James Franklin, “‘Perpetual Peace and Friendship’: The Cherokee-Confederate Coalition in the American Civil War” (Dissertation Kansas State University, 2019); Walter L. Brown, A Life of Albert Pike (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 371.
to develop a police surveillance geography, fugitive slaves in Arkansas and the rest of the Confederacy pushed the federal government to accept a war policy of emancipation.433

The earliest freedom seekers arrived in Helena, Arkansas in early 1862, where the commander of the Army of the Southwest declared them emancipated. By the middle of the war, over three thousand more resided in the contraband camp at Helena and elsewhere in the Arkansas Valley. Yet, the promise of freedom was not the reality. The contraband camp soon became overcrowded and hundreds of former slaves died of sickness in the poor conditions. One Union commander even turned freedom seekers away who were employed by the army. Eliza Bogan, one of the thousands of Arkansans who escaped to Union lines, found her husband debilitated by sickness and brought him back to his owner’s plantation. Nonetheless, the Union Army did recruit from the African American refugees to fight in the Federal Army. With the promise of $8 a month, hundreds of formerly enslaved Arkansans enlisted. Some even participated in a short-lived program to lease land to black farmers. Arkansas fugitives helped to reshape the purpose of the Union Army into one of emancipation.434

In the aftermath of the Civil War, African American communities continued to dot the west. More familiar are the migrations to cities and the continuation of sharecropping farms in plantation districts. African American communities also founded black-majority freedmen’s communities. Most famous was the group who established Nicodemus in western Kansas in 1877. The community succeeded for over a decade before crop failures compelled dozens of families to abandon the project. Nonetheless,


this was the most prominent of a generation of “exodusters” recolonizing black communities after the Civil War.435

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Hot Springs Reservation was the first of a series of protected public lands that encouraged western American tourism alongside Indian expulsion. After the Civil War, increased attention from elite Southerners and Northerners and entrepreneurs helped revive congressional attention to the Valley of the Vapors. One visitor, echoing concerns of previous generations, declared, “Educated north men must take their place…not until then will the real value of the Springs and surroundings be developed.” The attention to Hot Springs coincided with federal interest in Yellowstone and Yosemite. By the end of the 19th century, the National Parks offered not only natural wonders but federal land claims in the midst of the western frontier.436

Following the Civil War, the federal government took greater active management over the Hot Springs. In 1870, Congress called for proprietors who had land claims predating the 1832 charter to pursue their claims in court. By 1876, the “Hot Springs Cases” gained nation-wide attention. The supreme court ruled that the federal government retained titles pursuant to the act of 1832 because Indian claims and the absence of certified surveys had kept the area out of private ownership. The next year, President Hayes appointed the first superintendent of the Reservation, a former Union officer named Benjamin Kelly. He immediately took on the task of creating a park landscape with promenades and a manicured forest. A federally appointed commission


recommended the federal government to cede all but 256 acres that surrounded the thermal features and Hot Springs Mountain. This reduced area would be “forever free from sale or alienation.” The negligent federal protection of the preceding decades now had legal and supervisory clarity.437

Hot Springs’ federal revival coincided with commercial development. In the mid 1870s, the “Diamond Joe” railroad line overcame the isolation that had long plagued the park, delivering visitors to the springs by locomotive. Investors built dozens of hotels and half a dozen bathhouses. The first luxury hotel, the “Arlington,” took its place near the springs. The Springs were even able to quickly recover from a devastating fire that destroyed much of the downtown. Charles Cutter, a New York librarian, published an ongoing periodical Cutter’s Guide to the Hot Springs of Arkansas, which sold advertisements, promoted bathhouses, and retold the stories of Native use of the springs. The investment that had eluded the Springs for decades was at an end. The Hot Springs were soon to become one of the most popular resorts in the United States filled with Victorian-style bathhouses and attracting guests from around the world.438

Hot Spring’s rise in fame mirrored the National Parks that began to mark the west in the last decades of the 19th century. Yellowstone became the first named “National Park” in 1872 through the combined efforts of the federal government and encouragement from the Union Pacific Railroad, who hoped to make it the premier destination on their transcontinental railroad. In early 1880s, the railroad sponsored major


construction including a hotels and a railroad line leading almost to the doorstep of the park. Other western parks, like Yosemite Valley and Glacier also enjoyed the support of railroad companies to promote the natural wonder.

The development of these parks also coincided with the removal of Indian claims. The arrival of U.S. troops in Yosemite in the early 1860s began the removal of the local inhabitants. In Yellowstone, white visitors were told that the surrounding the Nez Perce, Blackfoot, and Crow Indians were scared of the thermal features and never ventured into the park. This was farcical as each considered areas of the park within their hunting migration patterns, and the Nez Perce passed through the park during their 1877 flight for freedom. U.S. cavalry troops actively pushed native communities away from the park boundaries over the next decade. In Glacier National Park, park officials violated Indian treaties by prohibiting the Blackfoot from using park resources. Like Hot Springs in the 1820s and 30s, federal lands in the 19th century promoted Euro-American visitation alongside the exclusion of Native sovereign claims.439

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Reflecting on the multicultural communities of the Arkansas Valley and the various land forms invites historians to consider the legacy of the borderlands into the 20th century. Reservations, National Parks, and survey lands appears as forms of American organization, but to a large extent they are the legacies of disorganization. Competing communities coexisted in fractured landscape. Understanding that these landforms were inherently at odds with one another in their creation helps explain the persistent debates today. Despite assumptions of the integrity of the nation-state, public

disputes continually circulate around public lands, reservation land, state sovereignty, private property, trans-national border crossings, and police jurisdictions. Ongoing concerns over climate change, water quality, and border walls only exacerbate those debates in court of public opinion and in the legal system. The debates over citizenship, environmental use, and territorial integrity remain the principle legacies of the borderlands.
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THESES AND DISSERTATIONS


