

The Muskogean Indians

PAUL WEER, Indiana Historical Society

The Southeast aboriginal culture area extends over southeastern United States from the Atlantic Ocean to eastern Texas and from the Gulf of Mexico north to the Ohio River.¹ In 1700 the English and French found the Muskogean Indians predominant in this great area and the leading tribal groups in our present states of Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, northern Florida, and western Tennessee. One hundred sixty years earlier when De Soto made his famous march through the Southeast, he practically skirted the protohistoric boundaries of Muskogean territories. If, instead of turning to the Southwest after leaving the South Carolina mountains, De Soto had journeyed northwesterly on through to the Ohio River, then westward to the Mississippi and south along that river, much light might have been focused on the mystery still obscuring the prehistory of the Ohio River Valley. The objective of this paper is to suggest the probability that between De Soto's time (1540) and 1700 Muskogean-speaking tribes were in the Ohio Valley and were probably residents of southern Indiana.

Muskogean-speaking Indians, believed to have been a brachycephalic, hypsicephalic physical type people² and members of the Hokan-Siouan linguistic stock,³ entered the southeast area from the west long enough prior to the earliest Spanish contact (1513?) to have built permanent towns (many of them fortified) in the midst of fertile fields, producing a wide variety of agricultural products.

It is not known precisely when and from where they came, but their late traditions show that they journeyed from the "back-bone of the world," which have been interpreted to mean the Rocky Mountains. All of their early traditions, when a route was specified, indicated that they came east *via* the Red River Valley. There are also intimations that some few arrived from Mexico at a very late period.⁴

Archeologists have not reached that degree of knowledge essential to speak of Muskogean material cultures, but rather as yet, of cultures found in Muskogean territories. The Southeast area is predominantly Mississippi Pattern in its material culture manifestations. Some evidence of the presence of Woodland culture peoples, or at least of Woodland material culture influence, is found. Whether this represents pre-Muskogean groups or was intrusive is not known. Indeed, the material culture characteristics of the earliest arriving Muskogean are not known; but in the course of time they made great contributions to the high cultural attainments later characteristic of the Southeast, which

¹ Swanton, 1935, p. 373.

² Dixon, 1923.

³ Sapir, 1929, p. 139.

⁴ Adair, 1775, p. 195; Le Page Du Pratz, 1763, II, 112.

in many respects rivaled the great civilizations created in the Southwest area and in Mexico.

Archaeological research has not established an accurate estimate of Muskogean contributions to the Southeast material culture. Along with the basic need for more excavation, a principal contributing factor is that the northern boundaries of prehistoric Muskogean territories are not known. If it can be established that Muskogean, or probably to be more correct, proto-Muskogean groups were resident in the Ohio Valley and were responsible for some part of the Middle Mississippi Phase material culture found there, it will greatly aid the assignment of Muskogean traits known in the South.

An illustration of the coordination of tradition, language, and history on this subject is afforded in the case of the Alabama,⁵ a tribe which in historic days was second only to the Muskogee themselves among the upper Creeks. Creek tradition says that when the Muskogees were trying to catch up with the Alabamas during the journey to their later homes, they found themselves at one time on the banks of the Ohio near the Wabash River. The length of the time duration of this sojourn is not indicated. De Soto, during the month of April, 1541, left the Chickasaw and set out toward the Northwest and on into the present state of Arkansas for a province called Alibamo. The Alabama and their close allies, the Tuskegee and Koasati, spoke a language dialect which was much closer to the Choctaw-Chickasaw language than to the Creek. The inference is that in 1541 some Alabama bands were living in Arkansas northwest of the Chickasaws where they had been in contact with Chickasaw groups long enough to have acquired or to have continued to retain the latter's speech and that sometime after 1541 they had moved northeastward to the Ohio and from there southward to their historic seats. Sometime between 1541 and 1673 the Siouan Quapaw moved into the Arkansas territories, for there they were found by Marquette in the latter year and by La Salle in 1681.⁶

The historic territories of the Chickasaw were in western Tennessee and northern Mississippi. Traditional and historical sources indicate that some of their people were dwellers in the Ohio Valley, both in early and late times. Traditionally, the Chickasaw and Choctaw came from the West as one family. This early relationship is confirmed linguistically in the close similarity of the Chickasaw dialect to Choctaw. According to tradition, after wandering away from the Choctaw, some Chickasaw groups went to the North as far as the Ohio River where they stayed for a short time and then returned to their own people. Historically, they are known to have had a colony on the lower courses of the Tennessee River (i. e., in northwestern Kentucky), and "in comparatively late times a small body settled temporarily on the Ohio."⁷ The Chickasaw were in contact with dolichocranial groups to their north to the extent that brachycranial characteristics were in the course of time considerably altered.⁸

⁵ Swanton, 1922, pp. 191-93.

⁶ For a summary of this problem see Weer, 1937, p. 117.

⁷ Swanton, 1922, p. 419.

⁸ Swanton, 1928, No. 1, p. 677.

The word "Muskogee," from which was derived the linguistic family name, is not a Muskogean word at all; and no Creek knew its meaning. It probably came from the Algonkian tongue and meant "swamp" or "wet ground," first to be used by the Shawnee to identify a Creek tribe. The appellation "Creek" is of English origin, first used by South Carolinians to designate a tribe living on Oconee Creek, Georgia. The great Muskogean language family had no single name to distinguish as a unit the some fifty historic tribes.

As I have suggested on an earlier page, it is probably more correct to refer to prehistoric Muskogean groups believed to have been resident in the Ohio Valley as proto-Muskogean.

Swanton advanced the theory that the social and ceremonial practices of the Creeks alone⁹ were sufficient to have accounted for the great mounds of the Mississippi Valley and that the abandonment of the Ohio Valley mound area prior to white contact was evidently due to the shifting of Muskogean tribes to the South or the movement of Siouan groups southeastward and to the west or both. Bushnell, in 1934, also postulated these movements.¹⁰ Creek and Siouan traditions suggest the same. With physical and linguistic similarities as a suggestive basis future research may discover that the roots from which the Siouans developed grew in Muskogean soil and that historical differentiation between the Creeks and some of the Siouans materialized after they left the Ohio Valley. Prehistoric contacts here were of great importance and, as yet, are but little understood. Archeological investigations show conclusively that two basic material culture patterns, Mississippi and Woodland, met in the Ohio Valley and manifestations of their intermixture are found in southern and central Indiana.¹¹ The peoples who produced these two patterns must have had historical cultural traditions of diverse origins. Archeology has a suggestion to offer concerning the bearers of the Mississippi Pattern. Material culture similarities in what is technically described as the Middle Mississippi Phase of the Mississippi Pattern are found in Arkansas and in southern Indiana from the lower Wabash River as far northeast as Clark County. This proposes the probability that among those who left these manifestations in Indiana were Choctaw-speaking Muskogean Indians who in the shadowy period dividing prehistoric and protohistoric days found new homes in Georgia and Alabama, there to become historically known as members of the Muskogean Creek confederacy.

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⁹ Swanton, 1928, No. 2, p. 506.

¹⁰ Bushnell, 1934.

¹¹ Lilly, 1937, pp. 22-24; Black, 1934, pp. 192-94.

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