

Native American History

Catoosa County was once the setting for much of the history that was known as the "Cherokee Renaissance" from 1800 until the Cherokee Removal of 1838. The name Catoosa itself is a lasting tribute to the tribe that inhabited this region, and translates "Up into the hills" in the Cherokee language. It was the northwest Georgia hills that is referred to in the Cherokee drama, "Unto These Hills," performed at the Mountainside Theatre in Cherokee, N.C. This "Chickamauga District" of the original Cherokee Nation was the site of the most exciting and significant American Indian history ever recorded.

Due to its unique geological formation, there has always been an Indian village in the gap of White Oak Mountain and Taylor's Ridge in Ringgold, Catoosa County, Georgia. The gap in the mountains provided sanctuary for many years to several Southeastern tribes that preceded the Cherokee. The Napoche, Uchee, and Coosa Indians were among the first inhabitants of the region and were called the Mound Builders. Their mounds can be seen at the Etowah Mound site near present day Cartersville, GA. There is evidence of Hernando De Soto and his Spanish explorers being near present day Rome, GA at several Coosa Valley village sites. Due to the discovery of several Spanish coins along the Chickamauga Creek in Ringgold, there is evidence of Spanish habitation or trading contact with the local Indians at some point.

The descendants of the Mound Builders were the Muskogean, or Creek Indians. They built villages along the creek banks, and inhabited this region until encroaching white settlements pushed the Cherokees down from Virginia and Tennessee. As the Cherokees gradually lost their land through successive treaties, they viewed this remnant of land in lower East Tennessee and Northwest Georgia as the best of what was left of their once vast territory. There was an overlap in cultures at this point between the Creeks and Cherokees resulting from intermarriage. There was a similarity in fingerweave patterns and some styles of clothing that emerged. Due to the pure mineral springs that can still be found at Catoosa and Cherokee springs as well as the virgin forest that was once here, this land was viewed as sacred ground and was the homeland of the original nation.

The Chickamauga Indians were a band of Cherokees who broke from the main body of the tribe and were joined by Creeks, Shawnees, and others to defend the invasion of their region by those who had violated the earlier treaties made with the Cherokee. Their leader was the powerful Dragging Canoe (Tsi-Nu Con-see-ni) who waged war along the Tennessee River to hold onto this land. He built villages along the Chickamauga Creek, meaning "River of Death" in the Cherokee language, in Catoosa County for the safety of the women and children of this band while he and his warriors attempted to drive the whites as far north as Kentucky. Dragging Canoe was never defeated, but led the Chickamauga's until he fell ill and died after a war dance at Lookout Mountain town. His successor, John Watts, a half-blood Scotch/Cherokee, continued the struggle until his arms and ammunitions, supplied by the French in New Orleans, ran out. Dragging Canoe participated in the last Battle of the Revolutionary War, where he fought the Americans at the present day Nature Center along the western slopes of Lookout Mountain.

The first road engineers through this area were the buffalo. Those who later blazed a trail through the wilderness were simply following the trails the buffalo had laid out for them. Highway 41 and I-75 were built along these trails. However, the most significant road through this region was the Old Federal Road, which was completed in 1805 and ran from Athens, Georgia through Gainesville, Tate, and Jasper to below Chatsworth. Here it split with the east fork going to Knoxville and the west fork continuing to Spring Place, Varnell, down Georgia Hwy 2, and through the gap to Ringgold, then Rossville, and on to Nashville. A good remnant of the road can still be found just west of Tiger Creek school, after which it continued on and crossed Chickamauga Creek at the ford beyond Catoosa Station and went on through the gap next to the creek. It picks up along Highway 41 behind Ingles, and can be

seen again along Highway 41 between Graysville Road and Pine Grove Road where it is marked with a historical marker.

The significance of the Federal Road is that it enabled the white settlers to travel within the Cherokee Nation. The road was controlled and leased by the local Cherokee leaders James Vann, Major Ridge, Richard Taylor and others. Whites were allowed into the Nation for trade and travel purposes, but were not allowed to live there. The Scotch traders, among others, found a way around this rule by marrying Cherokee women and therefore becoming part of the Nation. This is why there were so many mixed blood families in the early Cherokee Nation who later became prominent in politics and history.

Ringgold grew into a town from the Cherokee town known as Taylor's Crossroads and was named for Richard Taylor, the most outstanding Cherokee leader to live in Catoosa County. Taylor's Ridge was named for him as well. Richard Taylor was Catoosa County's first entrepreneur, and owned an Inn and Tavern on the Old Federal Road where he also operated a tollgate, mill, and plantation. His home was called Mount Hope, and stood at the intersection of the Alabama Road and Georgia Hwy 2 where the Waffle House and Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants are now. He was the great-grandson of Nancy Ward, the Beloved Woman of the Cherokees, who held great power among the Cherokees. She was also a first cousin to Dragging Canoe, and used her power to help the settlers on many occasions. She was also known in pioneer history as the woman who fed and clothed General George Washington's army when he was in Tennessee during the Revolutionary War.

Richard Taylor helped settle this area along with Chief John Ross. Taylor represented the Chickamauga District of the original Cherokee Nation in Washington, D.C. Here he was joined by Cherokee leaders John Ross, Major Ridge, and Elias Boudinot, to petition Congress and the Senate on behalf of the Cherokee people to remain in their homeland. He was educated and a noted writer and orator. He helped start the Brainerd Mission School to educate his children. He led a contingent of local Cherokees that left on September 20, 1838 on the infamous Trail of Tears. They arrived in Oklahoma on March 24, 1839. His party consisted of 51 wagons, 358 riding horses, 897 total persons with 15 births and 55 deaths reported on the trail. Taylor died in Tahlequah, Oklahoma on June 15, 1853 and is buried in the Tahlequah Cemetery.

In April of 1984 archeologists excavated Taylor's home site before the hill was removed to build the Waffle House.

There are several articles from the Taylor site currently on display at the Stone Church Museum, and we can thank B.R. Harris and the Catoosa County Historical Society for having the foresight to have the study made. Mannequins wearing Cherokee clothing similar to that worn during this period further illustrate the display. Also available at the Stone Church is Richard Taylor's biography commissioned by his great-great granddaughter, Judith Campbell, who learned of her famous ancestor after reading Bill Clark's book, "A History in Catoosa County."

Charles Hicks was another well-known Cherokee leader who lived in Dogwood Valley in Catoosa County. His home was known as Fortville, and stood in the vicinity of where Dogwood Valley Baptist Church now stands. He and his wife, Nancy Felicitas, lived here for many years and raised eight children. Charles Hicks served as Assistant Principal Chief under Chief Pathkiller from 1817 until January 6, 1827 when Pathkiller died. Hicks then became Principal Chief for two weeks until he died January 20, 1827. While he was Assistant Chief and since Pathkiller spoke no English, Hicks interacted with the whites and served as interpreter, treasurer and sub chief. Hicks supported the educational process set up by the various missionary groups in the nation.

Emmett Starr, Cherokee historian, quotes from the memoirs of Elias Cornelius in this manner ... "Charles Hicks speaks the English language with utmost facility and reads better than one-half of the white people and writes an easy hand. For 30 years he has been an interpreter for the U. S. government. A man of integrity, temperance and intelligence." In 1813 when he was baptized he took the name "Renatus" meaning "Renewed" and was then known as Charles Renatus Hicks. He was buried at "Gods

Acre" at Spring Place Mission. Mrs. Hicks (Nancy Felicitas) and some of her family continued to live at Fortville until the Indian removal in 1838.

There was a significant mound near Ringgold Gap that was between the southern ends of Anderson Cemetery and where I-75 is now. It was described by Union officers in 1864 and seemed to be 50 to 60 feet across and 20 feet high. The mound was destroyed when I-75 was built in the early 1960s. Several Ringgold High School history classes assisted archeologists from West Georgia College in collecting artifacts from the mound that were reported to be extensive. One reports seeing a white marble alter at the site, suggesting there was a place of worship, or spiritual center at this mound site between the conjunction of the Little Chickamauga and the South Chickamauga Creeks. Artifacts retrieved from the site have been on a traveling exhibit and are now on display at the Stone Church Museum. They are illustrated by a painting of Ringgold Gap and the early village site and mound by Native American artist Alva Crowe.

Other important sites in the county are Catoosa Springs, which were used as medicine springs by the Cherokees due to the minerals and healing properties of the water. The Catoosa County community of Graysville was once known as "Opelika," and was a Cherokee village. The Cherokee ceremonial grounds were at the intersection of Temperance Hall Road and the Alabama road in Woodstation. Here the Cherokees held dances and would sing and dance for several days and nights at a time. The last dance was held only days before their removal on the "Trail of Tears."

The Cherokee culture still exists, and the Cherokee Nation as well as the Eastern Band of Cherokees in Cherokee, N.C., both recognize this area for the important role it played in Cherokee history. Later this year there will be a Cherokee cultural event and Pow-Wow sponsored by the Catoosa County Chamber of Commerce to commemorate Catoosa County's 150th Anniversary. It is supported by the Cultural Affairs Office of the Eastern Band of Cherokees and by the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, and promises to bring alive the culture and history of the Cherokees who once flourished in Catoosa County.

~By Nancy Harris Crowe