

THE CHICKASAW NATION

A Brief History of the Natchez Trace in Chickasaw Territory

Student Reference Material

PAPER ORGANIZED WITH POWERPOINT

[Slide 1] - On screen as students enter the class.

[Slide 2] - The Natchez Trace you see today is only a paved, symbolic representation of its original form when the Chickasaws lived in northeastern Mississippi, northwestern Alabama, western Tennessee and western Kentucky. The Natchez Trace was a series of old, complex trails that were used from ancient times to the 19th century. Over the years, the Natchez Trace served many interests, from prehistoric trade to traveling European settlers. The Natchez Trace led through Choctaw and Chickasaw lands, passing through Tupelo, Mississippi, on the way to Nashville, Tennessee. Chickasaws often guided and traded with settlers along the way. Around the time of the War of 1812, the Natchez Trace was used as a post and military road (Atkinson, 2004). From 1824 to the signing of the Treaty of Pontotoc Creek in 1832, use of the Natchez Trace decreased considerably due to the development of new towns and roads by the American government and expanding American settlement (Phelps 1949).

[Slide 3] - The exact age of the Natchez Trace is unknown, but this prehistoric trading path is only one of many that were present in the southeast that aided the transport of information and goods quickly over long distances. The resources do not exist to find out how early this particular road network first came into use, but sites dating back to the Paleo-Indian period (12,000-7,000 B.C.) are not uncommon in many areas, especially near the Tennessee River. Archaic (7,000-1,000 B.C.) sites are also abundant along many areas of the Trace (Mississippi Department of Archives and History: Historic Resources Inventory Database 2014). Groups of people during the Paleo-Indian and Archaic periods were primarily hunters and gatherers who followed seasonal settlement rounds, slowly moving across the landscape through different ecological zones to exploit resources at different times of the year (Anderson and Sassman, 2012; Bense, 1996).

[Slide 4] - During the Late Archaic and Woodland (1,000 A.D.-1,000 B.C.) periods, populations began to become sedentary. Conical burial mounds began to be constructed to bury higher status individuals. Horticultural techniques were also being developed at this time, and populations grew quickly. Intensive agriculture was not yet in use, but small scale family/group food plots rendered long range seasonal movement rounds less important. Pharr Mounds is a proper example of an Early and Middle Woodland mound center whose population likely used this prehistoric trade route to connect with groups to the southwest and northeast. *While people lived in and around the Pharr Mounds site, it was also a very important ceremonial center. Ritual activities took place and important leaders were buried within the mounds with exotic trade goods such as copper from around the Great Lakes, mica from the Appalachian Mountains and marine shell from the Atlantic coast and the Gulf of Mexico.*

[Slide 5] - During the Mississippian period (1,000-1,500 A.D.), populations continued to grow, intensive agriculture began and strict social stratification developed, becoming what is

called chiefdom level societies. Mounds began to be built with flat tops, referred to today as platform mounds. These platform mounds were used as structures for religious buildings and dwellings of elite citizens, while commoners lived in small hamlets in the surrounding country side. One example of a Mississippian site located near this ancient trade route is Bear Creek Mound (Anderson and Sassman, 2012; Bense, 1996; Steponaitis, 1986). *While most know of the Bear Creek site being a Mississippian mound center, archaeologists have shown that people lived in that specific place for a very long time. Evidence of occupation all the way back to the Paleo-Indian era has been found here. Even though now you only see the mound underneath the ground archaeologists were also able to show that during the Mississippian period there was also a small village surrounding it. People would use Bear Creek along with the Natchez Trace to travel, trade, hunt and share information.*

[Slide 6] - Between the late 1300s and the de Soto exploration in 1540, much of the southeast saw drastic changes in social organization. Many of the chiefdom level societies fragmented due to social unrest and disease. As groups moved across the landscape, they formed what early explorers in the 16th and 17th centuries noted as tribal societies (tribes) such as the Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw and Seminole peoples who no longer built mounds or maintained such a high level of social stratification (Ethridge, 2010). *Take a second to look at the different tribes scattered across the southeast. All of these tribes, with the exception of the Cherokees and Natchez, spoke dialects of the Muskogean language group. This tells us that at one time many of these groups spoke the same language. When people share the same language they also commonly share many cultural similarities such as social organization.*

[Slide 7] - In northeast Mississippi Chickasaw villages such as *Chokkilissa'* (Old Town) and sections of the Coonewah Ridge settlements grew along the Natchez Trace. Chickasaw villages were built high on ridge tops overlooking floodplains for protection and the ability to exploit both wetland and upland resources for food. From these locations, the Chickasaws used the Natchez Trace as a trading path and trail for exchanging information quickly. Once the Natchez Trace reached historic Chickasaw villages it branched off like the roots of a tree leading to different villages and homes of important leaders of the tribe (Atkinson, 2004). *As you can see from the map the Chickasaws were located in northeast Mississippi and their villages were centered around what is today Tupelo, Mississippi. As stated, once you entered the area of the main Chickasaw settlement, the Natchez Trace split off leading to different villages then coming back together as you exited. The Chickasaws lived in four major settlement areas: Old Town (blue), Long Town (red), Yaneka (yellow) to the south and the Coonewah settlements (green) just to the west.*

[Slide 8] - At the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries, the old Native American trading path became an avenue of commerce for European and American traders. After the French founded the city of Natchez, Mississippi, in 1716, and New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1718, traders, farmers and others known as Kaintucks would sail their goods down the Mississippi River and its tributaries to either of these cities to sell their goods and their boats,

which were useless for travel north against the strong Mississippi River current (National Park Service [NPS], 2014).

[Slide 9] - After selling their wares and boats, these traders would trek up the Natchez Trace from the Natchez District through Choctaw and Chickasaw territory, then on to their respective homes. Before returning to their homes, travelers would often stop in present-day Nashville at Fort Donelson, which was established in 1779. The forest was very dense between Natchez and Chickasaw territory. There were many side trails one could easily get lost on, and it was a good idea to have a guide to increase the chances of reaching Chickasaw territory safely (Phelps, 1949). After the Natchez were defeated by the French for revolting at Fort Rosalie in 1729, it is possible that many Natchez warriors and their families traveled northeast along the Natchez Trace into Chickasaw territory, where they were absorbed by the Chickasaws and other southeastern tribes (Atkinson, 2004).

[Slide 10] - After the American Revolution, American traders began pouring into Chickasaw territory via the upper trading path and the Natchez Trace, and settlers began to trespass on Chickasaw lands northeast of the Tennessee River. In 1800, the American government also asked for permission to use the Natchez Trace as a post road connecting Nashville to the Natchez district and to establish permanent stands within the tribes' boundaries, so shelter, food and other goods could be provided. At that time mail and other material took a long time to deliver, as it had to be shipped by river along with goods to be sold in the trade markets (Atkinson, 2004; Phelps, 1949). Having a post road with a direct line to the region would make communication faster and easier. The Chickasaw Nation did not consent to American-owned stands in their territory, stating that Chickasaw citizens within tribal boundaries should have the economic opportunity to create stands which would cater to travelers' needs. It is also important to note that settlements sprang up around many of the stands including Colbert's Ferry. These settlements provided jobs to Chickasaws, who could hunt game, grow crops and produce goods to sell to travelers. In 1801, with permission from the Chickasaws, the United States military improved much of the Natchez Trace so it could accommodate more travelers, and in 1805 the governor of the Mississippi Territory mentioned the importance of stands being placed along the Trace about a day's walk apart. By 1812, there was a stand almost every 10 miles; however, there is very little documentation about their exact locations (Phelps, 1949). Many stands along the Natchez Trace were not originally set up as such, but instead began as the homes of individuals who happened to live along the road and who would feed, supply and lodge travelers along their journey. Many stands were operated by Native Americans in their respective territories or were owned by European men who had married into the tribe (Phelps, 1949). There is little documentation about individual stands other than names, but one establishment, Colbert's Ferry, stands out more than the others.

[Slide 11] - The Treaty of Hopewell was signed in 1786 and set the boundaries of the Chickasaw Nation until the first secession treaty of 1805, but Hopewell also required a stand to be constructed along the Tennessee River to aid traders, travelers and the mail to be ferried

across the large body of water. Originally Levi Colbert, a brother of George Colbert, maintained a ferry further north at the mouth of Bear Creek, but when the military began improving the road the ferry was moved to the south (Atkinson, 2004).

[Slide 12+13] A house was built, but not completed, by the United States military for George Colbert, along with a boat. Colbert's Ferry operated from about 1800 to 1819 and is one of the most well-known stands located on the Natchez Trace, because it was one of the only places to cross the Tennessee River. George finished the home in 1805 and provided supplies and places to sleep to weary travelers (Atkinson, 2004; Phelps, 1949). The stand was primarily operated by George and two of his wives, while his third wife operated a tavern located just west of present-day Tupelo. Both sons of James Logan Colbert, along with their other brother William, were very influential members of the tribe and even as European/Chickasaw descent maintained Chickasaw affairs at different times. George was principle *minko'* or leader of the Chickasaw Nation from about 1800 to 1812 and therefore did not always maintain the stand personally. Colbert's Ferry was a very busy place leading up to the War of 1812 and the Creek Civil War (Redstick War). During this time American settlers were encroaching on Chickasaw lands east of the ferry and killing Chickasaw cattle (Atkinson, 2004). George moved back to the primary Chickasaw settlements around 1812 to help his brother William protect the villages from Creek attacks.

[Slide 14] - In 1814, James Robertson maintained 40 Chickasaw warriors along with American military at Colbert's Ferry to protect the ferry, the U.S. mail and the Natchez Trace from Creek attacks. The War of 1812 lasted from 1812 to 1815 which involved military conflict between the United States, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, its North American colonies and the Native American allies. During the War of 1812 there were two historical crossings at Colbert's Ferry. In 1814, General Andrew Jackson needed to move his army, including cavalry, from Nashville to the southwest to fight in the battle of New Orleans. While the entire army did not cross on the way to New Orleans, his cavalry did. Many Chickasaws also volunteered to fight with Andrew Jackson at New Orleans. After the battle Andrew Jackson moved his entire military back up the Natchez Trace to Nashville, crossing at Colbert's Ferry. Some sources claim that George Colbert charged up to \$75,000 for the military to cross the Tennessee River (Atkinson, 2004; Phelps, 1949).

[Slide 15] - After 1816, travel along the Natchez Trace, at least between Nashville and Chickasaw territory, declined dramatically. No longer was the Natchez Trace the only road leading into the Old Southwest. Populations were growing, resulting in the establishment of new towns and roads on land which previously belonged to Native American groups, such as the Chickasaw, Choctaw and Muscogee (Creek) (Phelps, 1949). In 1816 the Chickasaw Nation relinquished all land north and east of the Tennessee River, as it was already riddled with unwanted settlers. Again in 1818, the Chickasaw Nation ceded more land. All stands owned by Chickasaws in this area closed, and its residents moved back into Chickasaw territory. New roads were nothing new to the Chickasaw. Gains Trace, one of the earliest new roads, was built

in 1809 and connected areas north of Bear Creek on the Tennessee River to the head of the Tombigbee River, where Levi Colbert's Cotton Gin Port was developing (Phelps, 1949). While Gains Trace helped the tribe economically, other new roads had a negative impact.

[Slide 16] - As Chickasaws moved out of their previous homeland, prospecting companies made their way into the area and established the town of Florence in 1818 (Phelps, 1949). Once this town was established, the U.S. government decided that mail would no longer run along the Natchez Trace from Nashville to the Chickasaw Nation, but rather from Nashville to Columbia, Tennessee, then on to Florence, Alabama, where it would bypass Colbert's Ferry and head southwest to Natchez, Mississippi, by way of Buzzard's Roost, a stand that was owned by Levi Colbert and run by his son-in-law. Further changes came rapidly, and soon the entire Natchez Trace in Chickasaw country would be bypassed. The Jackson Military Road was approved and constructed between 1816 and 1820. This road ran from Columbia, Tennessee, to Columbus, Mississippi, and then on to Madisonville, Louisiana, located just northwest of New Orleans. Although there was still some travel along the Natchez Trace in Chickasaw country, the demand for the many stands to be constructed declined, and many closed their doors after 1821. While many of these new roads were constructed, American settlers poured into the new areas creating many new communities in Alabama and in Mississippi just to the east and south of Chickasaw Territory (Phelps, 1949). It would only take seven more years until the state of Mississippi would unjustly extend its laws over Chickasaw people, overlooking tribal law. Four years later in 1832, Chickasaws relinquished the remainder of their homeland and were forced to remove west into Indian Territory with the other southeastern tribes. Once tribal law was discarded Chickasaws could no longer control who entered their territory, which may be one of several factors which eventually led to the Chickasaws' removal (Atkinson, 2004).

[Slide 17] - The history of the Natchez Trace in Chickasaw Territory is ancient and complex. These iconic trails were used by Native Americans for the transmission of goods and information from one place to the other. During the later years, the Natchez Trace was used as a post and military road. The Chickasaws benefited economically from the high traffic by maintaining stand communities where they could hunt, fish, make goods and provide lodging for weary travelers. The number of stands in Chickasaw territory grew substantially, from one in 1797 to seventeen in 1821, before many closed their doors due to the growing population of settlers (Phelps, 1949). These settlers established new towns and roads linking their communities and navigating around what was left the Chickasaw territory. The old Natchez Trace paths and communities are commemorated today by an approximate 444 mile long paved National Park Service parkway that extends from Natchez, Mississippi, to Nashville, Tennessee, but the Natchez Trace's full heritage extends much farther through time and space than that simple roadway may suggest.

[Slide 18] – End

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