

Yemassee War of 1715

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OUR GEORGIA HISTORY

Yamasee War of 1715

Living along the southern bank of the Savannah River the Yamasee Indians had maintained good relationships with the South Carolina settlers. One of the oldest known Southeastern tribes, the Yamasee controlled much of lower Savannah River inland to the confluence of the Ocmulgee and Oconee. They were widespread but a relatively small group of Creek Indians. According to Ranjel, chronicler of deSoto's travels, the expedition visited the Yamasee town of Altamaha in 1540

As with most wars, the causes of the Yamasee War begin well before the start of the conflict. Shortly after the completion of Queen Anne's War, the Creek began to get agitated with the English traders on the border of their nation. These traders had made the Indians dependent upon the goods they supplied. Guns, for example, made it easier for the Indians to hunt, increasing the amount of goods they had to trade. The Creek were unhappy with traders who seemed to be supplementing their slave trade income by occasionally taking a Creek warrior.

Other business practices were questioned by the Creek as well. The English would get the Creek Indians intoxicated and then defraud them, cheat them in trade, and take liberties with Creek women (Rape was a concept introduced to Native Americans by the English, and later, the Americans). Members of the Creek tribe complained to South Carolina authorities, who tried to control the traders with a licensing system. The plan failed miserably, so the Creek decided to take matters into their own hands.

First, members of Creek tribes killed all the English traders. Then, on April 15, 1715, Yamasee Indians, supported by the Creek, Catawba, Appalachee, Governor of New France, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville in Mobile, and the Spanish regime in St. Augustine began to attack settlers on a broad front along the southern and western borders of South Carolina. Settlers began to flee. Some halted in Charles Town, South Carolina, but many kept going to Virginia and North Carolina.

As the Indians approached Port Royal, the entire town fled. In Charles Town, Governor Cravens, who was also a Colonel, began to establish a perimeter of irregulars and militia. The state was close to collapse; in August, 1715, South Carolina turned to the Cherokee for support.

For many years the Cherokee and Creek had been enemies, so the Cherokee were only too happy to join the war on the side of the South Carolinians. Much to the surprise of the Cherokee, however, shortly after agreeing to support the English settlers, Creek chiefs approached the Cherokee about joining the Creek in waging war. The Cherokee invited the Creek to a council where the Cherokee killed the Creek chiefs. Meanwhile, South Carolina forces had advanced from Charleston and met a large body of Indians at Salkehatchie, sometimes called "Saltcatchers."

The combination of these two events was the turning point of the war. The Creek/Yemassee thrust into South Carolina halted, and the Indians withdrew. Afraid of retaliation, Creek villages in the area relocated to the west and south and the Yemassee withdrew to the vicinity of St. Augustine, hoping for protection from their Spanish friends. Carolina raiders found the village, routed the residents and destroyed the homes. The remaining Yemassee were absorbed into the Seminole tribe.

The Yemassee War and Georgia

After the Creek withdrew the area south of the Savannah River remained free of Indians for a number of years. The Yamacraw tribe that greeted James Oglethorpe in 1733 had been nomadic, only recently settling near the trading post of John Musgrove and his Creek wife Mary.

More importantly, the government realized how tenuous their position was. The Tuscarora War had just ended on February 11, 1715 and the Yemassee War began two months later. Having had to depend on the Cherokee to support their existence was abhorrent. Pleas went across the Atlantic for support, with little response. Attempts were made to fortify the coast, including building Ft. King George near the present-day town of Darien, but these attempts would have been ineffectual in the eyes of the South Carolina government. They became staunch supporters of a colony to the South of the Savannah River.

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