

A Base, Cowardly, Inhuman Attack The Aumuculle Massacre of 1818

By Evan A. Kutzler

Curiosity drives public history.

My journey into the history of the Aumuculle or “Chehaw” Massacre began at Georgia Southwestern State University in the spring of 2018. Ashley Davis, a U.S. history student, asked, “Why is there an Andrew Jackson monument in Lee County?”¹ Asked to tell the class more about the monument, Davis revealed that it was out in the country and it had to do with a massacre of American Indians. In a commemorative landscape inundated with Confederate monuments, an Andrew Jackson memorial at a massacre site seemed out of place.

It didn’t take long to find the monument in this digital era but getting there took some effort. The granite Chehaw monument on New York Road is shaded by tall oak trees. The Americus chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution commissioned the memorial in 1912. The monument inscription confirmed the student’s memory:

Large Indian town, home of the Chehaws, a friendly agricultural people of the Creek tribe, who aided our early settlers. They contributed men, food, and horses, to subdue the hostile Seminoles. Here Andrew Jackson rested with his starving army and was given help in 1818.

Here also, in 1818, through misunderstanding, were massacred seven of this tribe by Georgia troops, for which all possible amends were made.

This monument, like all commemorative objects, involves more than one era. The events—what happened in 1818—make up one layer. The monument a century later comprises a second one. Why did the Daughters of the American Revolution use a boulder to represent the Chehaw? Why did they write this text? Less tangible but important layers include its commemoration up to the ever-shifting present. What should the place mean *today*? To *whom*?

Aumuculle (Au-muc-cul-le)

Language matters. The monument’s imprecision (“through misunderstanding”) and passive voice (“were massacred seven of this tribe”) soften historical trauma and trivialize Muscogee or “Creek” history. A halfhearted eulogy conceals more than it reveals about the violence here in 1818 and its broader context. Pulling back this shroud requires care.

The town of Aumuculle, Muscogee for “pour on me,” sat on the east bank of Muckalee Creek, a tributary of Kinchafoonee Creek and the Flint River that stretches 76 miles from Buena Vista to Albany. Then and now, white outsiders often referred to the place as Chehaw, but those with deeper knowledge of the place and its people called it Aumuculle. It was one of several satellite

villages related to a larger town called Chehaw on the Chattahoochee River, just south of present-day Fort Benning.

The residents of Aumuculle and Chehaw had not always called the Chattahoochee and Flint River valleys home. In 1540, Hernando de Soto encountered a “Chiaha” town along the French Broad River in Appalachia. By the 18th century, the Chehaw had moved south and had become involved in the deerskin trade and the loose-knit Creek Confederacy. Contact with European and African newcomers shaped and reshaped Creek life over generations. Initially culturally and linguistically diverse, these coalescent societies survived—even prospered—for much of the 18th century by adapting to the ever-shifting balance of power and influence. The Creeks controlled an important borderland between rival powers: Spanish to the South, French to the west, and British or, later, Americans to the east.

The move of some residents from Chehaw to Aumuculle Creek in the late-18th century took place amid a shifting economic and political order. Herding replaced the deerskin trade as a commercial supplement to traditional hoe agriculture, and the lower Flint River made for a good cattle range. This economic shift had cultural implications as well. In traditional Muscogee societies, women farmed and men hunted. The deerskin trade extended these traditional gender roles, but ranching complicated them. Before European contact, the dog was the only domesticated animal in Muscogee societies. For centuries, the Creek took to European horses well but avoided ranching hogs and cattle in large numbers until the decline of the deerskin trade after the American Revolution. Was herding an extension of agriculture (and hence a female activity) or of hunting (male activity)? This was an important question for a matrilineal society in which lineage—and property—passed through mothers.²

Aumuculle embodied both the old and the new when Benjamin Hawkins, Superintendent for Indian Affairs for the Southern Department, visited the village in the 1790s. Approximately 240 residents lived in households that resembled small compounds, with two to four buildings and small gardens. Many of the houses looked like log cabins. The wide, swampy floodplain that the Creeks (but not Hawkins) considered prime farmland dominated the landscape with cypress, water oak, and hickory trees. Hawkins thought the higher pine lands “poor with ponds and wire grass” and several “limestone springs.” He also reported “cattle, hogs, and horses, and a fine range for them.”³

The Aumuculle residents grew corn, rice, and potatoes “in great plenty.” Agriculture was nothing new to them. Muskogean ancestors had farmed for at least a millennium. The addition of domesticated animals and a shift toward recognition of privately-owned property led to the fencing of land. It was a cultural change for the Creek, who had always shared agricultural fields and considered it anathema to fence common land.

Hawkins's presence at Aumuculle reflected a looming shift in the political order in Creek country. Some Americans advocated removing American Indians; others, including Hawkins, argued for cultural assimilation, including western-style agriculture, and confinement to smaller territories. Both had the same result. Creek country would feed the settler’s insatiable appetite for land.

The Creek Confederacy, a loose organization of mostly autonomous towns in Georgia, Alabama, and north Florida, disagreed on a path forward by the early 19th century. In 1813, war broke out between the Upper Creeks, who opposed more concessions to the Americans, and the Lower Creeks, who had grown in economic power because of their commercial connections with the United States.

The Chehaw, including Aumuculle, sided with the Lower Creeks during the Creek Civil War (1813-1814) and with the United States during the War of 1812 (1812-1815). In August 1814, Aumuculle leaders passed word through a trader that they had seen British-allied Creek moving across the Flint River in the direction of Hartford (near Hawkinsville) and planned to stop them if they returned with horses or other evidence of a raid. They also passed on information about the construction of a fort in Florida manned by British troops, Seminoles, and self-emancipated African Americans. This was valuable information that eventually had disastrous consequences. In the summer of 1816, after the British evacuated a fort on Prospect Bluff in Florida, General Andrew Jackson sent U.S. troops and Lower Creek allies to destroy the so-called Negro Fort.⁴

The Chehaw alliance with the United States was never universal. Disagreements about how to respond to U.S. pressure divided Upper Creek and Lower Creek, and these same forces split individual communities, as people pursued personal interests. The same year that some Aumuculle men reported the Florida fort, the actions of other Chehaw raised suspicions among U.S. spies. In December 1814, Chehaw men prevented whites from pursuing fugitive slaves by saying that a nearby war party made it unsafe. The slave catchers sent this information to Benjamin Hawkins and left someone near Aumuculle “in view of watching their movements.”⁵ A few months later, Hawkins reported that there were five hundred American Indians along with 200 white and black soldiers in Florida. Hawkins identified the American Indians as Seminoles, as well as “cheauhau [from] within our limits.”⁶

The Massacre

Aumuculle’s position on the edge of Creek country became even more precarious when the First Seminole War (1817-1818) broke out. In the spring of 1818, General Andrew Jackson crossed into Spanish Florida with warriors from Lower Creek towns, including dozens of men from Aumuculle. His route led through Fort Hawkins (Macon) and Hartford before swinging southwest through Creek country and into Florida. Crossing the international line without congressional approval, Jackson began a ruthless campaign. He razed Seminole towns. He executed Upper Creek prisoners of war and two British nationals. A week after ordering these executions, Jackson learned that the Georgia militia—made up of soldiers who wanted Creek land—had destroyed Aumuculle, more than 100 miles to his rear.

Survivors of the Aumuculle massacre left no written account of the attack. White reports varied greatly, depending on whether the writer believed the Aumuculle Chehaw were faithful allies or secret enemies. Captain Obed Wright’s official account, written only three days after the attack and well before the event provoked significant backlash, offered one view of events that showed him following Governor William Rabun’s orders. Wright reported that 270 soldiers crossed the Flint River on the night of April 21-22, 1818, and marched against Aumuculle at dawn. They captured a Chehaw rancher (possibly an Aumuculle woman) and a herd of cattle. According to

Wright, one his soldiers swore that some of these animals had been stolen from his farm in Telfair County. His men then attacked the town “with *positive* orders not to injure the *women*, or *children*.” Yet in the course of the attack, shots came from inside the Aumuculle houses; therefore, Wright’s soldiers set the Creek houses ablaze. He estimated that about 40-50 died in the fight and the flames. The Georgia militia had no casualties.⁷

There were already murmurs of opposition. “Public opinion favors the belief,” the *Georgia Journal* reported, “that the town destroyed was friendly; and some of its warriors are stated to be now with the army under Gen’l Jackson.”

The existence of Aumuculle warriors in Jackson’s army cast doubt on Wright’s estimate that he killed “24 warriors,” but it did help explain the one-sided casualties. Georgia newspapers split on its coverage. While the *Georgia Journal* and many of Governor Rabun’s supporters never wavered in believing the Aumuculle attack was justified, the *Augusta Chronicle and Georgia Gazette* and the *Savannah Republican* criticized the attack. They reported Chehaw men, women, and children hiding in the swamps, coming out only for food and to try to learn what had caused the attack.⁸

Jackson believed the emerging counternarrative. Thomas Glascock, a Georgia officer returning from the Florida campaign, told Jackson about his visit to the stricken village: “On arriving there,” these soldiers discovered that “the Indians had fled in every direction, the Chehaw Town having been consumed [by fire] about four days before.” Glascock pieced together events from witnesses before the critical accounts appeared in papers. Glascock told Jackson that Capt. Wright received word that two Creek towns, Philemme and Oponce, supported the Seminoles. By this account, Wright had received orders to attack these two towns. Wright instead chose to target Aumuculle despite pleas from other officers “that there could be no doubt about the friendship of the Indians in that quarter.” Glascock inferred cowardice. “Mock patriotism burned in their breast,” Glascock wrote, and he described how Wright’s men disregarded a white flag while burning the town and killing seven men, one woman, and two children—an estimate much lower than Wright’s official report. Among the dead was a man Glascock called Chief Howard and an unnamed son.⁹

Jackson fumed. Writing to Governor Rabun, he described the event as a “base, cowardly, and inhuman attack on the old women and men of the Chehaw Village, whilst the warriors of that *village* was with me fighting the battles our *country* against the common enemy.”¹⁰ He reached out to the Chehaw with a conciliatory tone. “When I passed through your village,” Jackson wrote, “you treated me with friendship, and furnished my army with all the supplies you could spare; and your old chiefs sent their young warriors with me to fight, and put down our common enemy.” While he lamented that he could not “bring your old men and women to life,” he promised to arrest the officer responsible for the murders.

This promise failed when Wright escaped from jail before trial. Newspapers reported that he had plenty of popular support in Georgia and made his way to St. Augustine, where he planned to sail for Havana.¹¹

Jackson played a curious role in the aftermath of the Aumuculle massacre. Facing criticism for his rampage through Florida, he became involved in a bitter debate with Governor Rabun over the meaning of the Aumuculle massacre. His outrage stemmed, in part, from his belief that the Chehaw were allies. Yet it also had to do with the protocol between civil and military authorities. “You Sir as Governor of a State within my Military Division,” Jackson wrote, “have no right to give a military order whilst I am in the field.” The lasting resentment between Rabun and Jackson in the summer of 1818 may have had less to do with the lives of the Aumuculle Chehaw than whether Rabun had slighted Jackson.¹²

Jackson's outrage, to the extent it arose from the treatment of his Creek allies, would be ironic when one considers that Indian Removal policies in the 1820s and '30s led to the final abandonment of Aumuculle. The Chehaw rebuilt Aumuculle soon after the attack, aided by \$10,000 from the U.S. government “to relieve the sufferers from their distress.”¹³ Yet under pressure from white settlers, the Georgia statehouse, and the U.S. government, the Creeks relinquished the last of their Georgia lands in 1826 and 1827. As President, Jackson largely finished the job of Indian Removal.¹⁴

The last clear indication of Aumuculle's existence came from a surveyor of Lee County in December 1826, only weeks before the January 1, 1827, deadline for the Creeks to emigrate to Indian territory in Alabama. The surveyor's map captured the moment of transition: the final days of Aumuculle as a preface to the coming era of cotton plantations. Moving measuring chains and meticulously keeping notes, Stansell drew a few house symbols and inscribed “Chehaw Town” amid a grid of surveying posts and landmark trees. He also included a Creek road that linked Aumuculle to the Flint River, eight miles to the east, and Kinchafoonee Creek, eight miles to the west.¹⁵

Some Chehaw remained or—as an act of defiance—returned to Lee County. In 1827, Lee County residents petition the Governor to protect them from Creeks who were “continually on this side of the [Chattahoochee] River among us stealing & plundering of our property.” White settlers petitioned the Georgia government again in 1835 to protect them from Creeks “stealing our horses and cattle and hogs.”¹⁶ By then the United States, under Jackson's leadership, had settled on a policy of expelling American Indians from the southeast.

The Monument

It took nearly a century for Georgians to commemorate the Aumuculle Massacre. When it happened, it was an act of selective remembering. In the spring of 1911, the Americus chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution began publicizing its efforts to find and acquire part of the historic “spot where Gen. Andrew Jackson visited a tribe of friendly Creek Indians in colonial days” because it would tell “the early history of our country and its advance of civilization.”¹⁷

Sculptors finished the marker on January 1, 1912. The “natural art” of the boulder was intended to represent the Chehaw. “The boulder is of brown Georgia granite,” the *Americus Weekly*

Times-Recorder reported, “and makes a most effective monument to commemorate the virtues of a people as primitive as the rock-ribbed hills themselves.”¹⁸

In the days leading up to the unveiling, Willie Rutherford published a history of the village. She lionized Jackson as the hero of New Orleans who returned to the saddle to defend “our southern border” against the Seminole Indians and their Spanish and British allies. Nine paragraphs in, she mentioned the people of Aumuculle. “In marked contrast to the Seminoles, and contrary to the popular ideas of an Indian with a scalp in one hand and a tomahawk in the other,” she wrote, “the inhabitants of this village [sic] and its surrounding country, were a peaceable, farming people of marked industry, and friendly to the white pioneers.”¹⁹

When Rutherford wrote the first history of Chehaw, Creek towns in Georgia were outside of living memory. In their wake came the combination of fact and fantasy. Rutherford knew that the Chehaw raised crops and livestock. She seemed to know of letters written by the Chehaw children and that the town was an important part of the frontier economy. It was what she and the D.A.R. did with this information that clarified the meaning of the monument. “They were shrewd in their primitive way,” Rutherford wrote. “They were the people found by Andrew Jackson on his march to Fort Scott.” Rutherford's Chehaw played the role of the “faithful Indian” who elevated the hero Jackson and his army.²⁰

The granite boulder sat in the oak grove for months as bad weather and muddy roads delayed its unveiling until June 14, 1912. The D.A.R. chose Americus attorney John Edgar Dawson Shipp to give the keynote address. Shipp praised the work of the D.A.R. “You are engaged in the highest, noblest duty of collecting, marking, and perpetuating the true history of Chehaw and our Southland,” he told the crowd. The substance of his address struck a less celebratory tone. He emphasized the injustice committed against the Chehaw and other American Indians. He said that “our bitter cruel treatment” of them created the “blackest spot” on the United States and Georgia. For Shipp, the deaths of Chief Howard and his son symbolized Chehaw “patriotism” because they died keeping a treaty at the hands of people breaking it.²¹

The grandchildren and greatgrandchildren of white planters who settled the old Creek Country dominated the dedication ceremony. Taking place on Flag Day, American flags and patriotic bunting covered the monument. Attendees had their photograph taken in front of the granite memorial. Newspapers reported no delegation from the Muscogee Reservation in Oklahoma.

That same year, the newspaper that had celebrated the memory of Chehaw ridiculed an influx of American Indians. The headline exclaimed, “Wild Indians Swoop down on Muckalee,” and “Choctaws Invade Americus.” The newspaper described the 50-member group as being “in the gypsay [sic] business” with “fortune telling ‘queens,’ the squaws and maidens, in gaudy attire of flaming colors, going about the city telling fortunes.” Descendants of Georgians who helped take Creek land fantasized about past Creeks while discounting the living.²²

The Present and the Future

Since 2018, my U.S. history students talk about the monument each semester, placing southwest Georgia within the larger narrative of history. Many of the students come from adjoining

counties but few are familiar with the monument or the events it commemorates. Similarly, quietude marked the massacre's bicentennial in 2018. The *Albany Herald*, one of the few media outlets to take note, described the massacre as “nearly lost to history.”²³

A Native American Festival in Albany that month had a small display of artifacts collected decades ago in agricultural fields with owners' permission. These artifacts remain on display at the Lee County Administration Building. The iron and brass relics reflect the importance of Aumuculle to the frontier economy in the late-18th and early 19th centuries.²⁴

Careful historians do not claim to discover or rediscover something just because it is new to them. My journey into the Aumuculle Massacre was simply part of a cycle of historical memory in which the errors and the silences of the past are more plainly seen and heard in the present. It cannot represent the final word.

A fuller account of the history and memory of the Aumuculle would explore the ways in which time has shaped and reshaped the trauma of April 22, 1818. How do contemporary Creek remember it? How has that changed over time? In 1912, the D.A.R. called their memory of the event a definitive history. It is harder to be under that illusion today. There is much to learn about Aumuculle and the massacre that destroyed homes but did not mark the end of the town or its people.

Evan A. Kutzler is an assistant professor of history at Georgia Southwestern State University.

Endnotes

1. Ashley Davis, History 2111 Class, March 8, 2018. Name used with student's permission.
2. Ethridge, *Creek Country*, 74-65; 158-170.
3. Ethridge, *Creek Country*, 15, 58, 64-65, 75; Matthew J. Clavin, *The Battle of Negro Fort: The Rise and Fall of a Fugitive Slave Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 27; Benjamin Hawkins, *The Collected Works of Benjamin Hawkins, 1796-1810*, edited by Thomas Foster (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 64s; Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 254-59.
4. Timothy Barnard to Mr. Mumford, August 5, 1814, Telamon Cuyler Collection, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 11, Hargrett Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, University of Georgia; Clavin, *Battle of Negro Fort*, passim; Timothy Barnard to Benjamin Hawkins, November 3 1814, Cuyler Collection, Box 1, Folder 11, UGA.
5. Henry B. Wigginton to Benjamin Hawkins, December 2, 1814, Cuyler Collection, Series 1, Box 76, Folder 24.
6. Benjamin Hawkins to Governor Peter Early, February 4, 1815, Cuyler Collection, Box 76, Folder 25, UGA.
7. “Expedition against the Chehaws,” *Georgia Journal*, May 5, 1818.
8. “Copy of a Letter from Judge Strong to the Governor, Dated Hartford, 27th April 1818,” *Georgia Journal*, May 5, 1818; [Letter by Jacob Robinson], *Georgia Journal*, May 5, 1818; “Destruction of the Chehaw Village,” *Savannah Republican*, May 9, 1818; “Destruction of the Chehaw Village,” *Augusta Chronicle and Georgia Gazette*, May 9, 1818.

9. Thomas Glascock to Andrew Jackson, April 30, 1818, Papers of Andrew Jackson, Library of Congress.
10. Andrew Jackson to Governor William Rabun, May 7, 1818, in Hezekiah Niles, *Niles' Weekly Register...from September, 1818, to March, 1819* (Baltimore: Franklin Press, 1819), 38.
11. "From the South," *Georgia Journal*, September 15, 1818.
12. Hezekiah Niles, *Niles' Weekly Register...from September, 1818, to March, 1819* (Baltimore: Franklin Press, 1819), 254-255.
13. Hezekiah Niles, *Niles' Weekly Register...from March to September, 1818* (Baltimore: Franklin Press, 1818), 416
14. Christopher D. Haverman, *Rivers of Sand: Creek Indian Emigration, Relocation, and Ethnic Cleansing in the American South* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 22-23; Richard J. Hryniewicki, "The Creek Treaty of November 15, 1827," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (March 1968), 1-2.
15. Haverman, *Rivers of Sand*, 23; 154; Lee County, District 14, March 10, 1827, surveyed by William R. Stansell, Districts Plats of Survey, Survey Records, Surveyor General, RG 3-3-24, Georgia Archives.
16. "To His Excellency John Forsythe," December 5, 1827, "Lee County – Indians," File II, Reference Service, RG 4-2-46, Georgia Archives; "To Wilson Lumpkin Governor," September 3, 1835, "Lee County – Indians," File II, Reference Service, RG 4-2-46, Georgia Archives.
17. "To Mark Site of Old Chehaw Village," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, June 1, 1911.
18. "Memorial at Chehaw is Now Nearly Ready | To be Unveiled Next Year | First of Simialr Work Planned by D.A.R.," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, December 21, 1911.
19. "Chehaw: being an authoritative compilation of the facts concerning the ancient Indian village of Chehaw, in Lee County," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, June 13, 1912.
20. "Chehaw," *Americus Weekly Times Recorder*, June 13, 1912.
21. "Address at Unveiling by J.E.D. Shipp | To be Orator of Occasion | When the Chehaw Monument is Unveiling," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, February 22, 1912; "Memorial at Chehaw will be Unveiled | On Friday June 14, | Will be a Celebration of Flag Day," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, May 9, 1912.; "Mr. Shipp's Oration at Chehaw was a Most Eloquent One," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, June 27, 1912; "Unveiling Exercises Most Successful in Spite of Unsettled Weather," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, June 14, 1912; "Work of the Chapters," *The American Monthly Magazine*, 42, no 2 (February 1913), 66-67.
22. "Wild Indians Swoop down on Muckalee | Choctaws Invade Americus | Arrive too soon for Chehaw Monument Unveiling," *Americus Weekly Times-Recorder*, February 12, 1912.
23. "Chehaw Massacre Nearly Lost to History," *The Albany Herald* (Albany, Ga.), April 21, 2018; "Chehaw Massacre Remembered on Bicentennial Anniversary," WALB-TV, April 23, 2018.
24. "Relics from Chehaw Massacre Site to be Displayed at Native American Festival," *Albany Herald*, April 10, 2018.