

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY CHEROKEE ARCHIVES

IT IS common knowledge that various Indian tribes residing east of the Mississippi attempted to preserve their several histories in the eighteenth century. The method usually employed was to entrust various designated persons with the task of memorizing important transactions. These men were expected to produce the matters placed in their care whenever desired. When wampum strings and belts came into general use as mnemonic aids in the delivery of oral messages between these Indians, the establishment of archives became inevitable, since tribal historians could stimulate their memories by means of the wampum. The need for saving the strings and belts of the white and purple beads for ready reference was recognized by many nations, notably by the Iroquois; and a hut or structure of some sort was chosen as an archival deposit.¹ However, it is not generally known that the Cherokee actually preserved documents in their national archives before the American Revolution.

The Cherokee were less barbarous than their Indian neighbors in the eighteenth century. Their archives, located at Chote, the "mother town" and council place of the nation, on the Little Tennessee River a short distance from the site of old Fort Loudoun, were established before 1750,² perhaps much earlier. By 1763 the Cherokee realized the wisdom of safekeeping the letters and other documents sent or given to them by the British, for they had lost more than one dispute to the British because the whites were able to produce writings to support their contentions. Oconostota, otherwise known as the Great Warrior, their most powerful chief during the period

¹ On the use of wampum see Frederick Webb Hodge, ed., *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico*, Smithsonian Institute, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 30, Pt. II (Washington, 1912), 904-909. The famous James Adair relates that the Cherokee also preserved records of events by carving and painting "hieroglyphics" upon the stems of their pipes. Samuel C. Williams, ed., *Adair's History of the Southern Indians* (Johnson City, Tenn., 1930), 455. Adair also noted (p. 350-351) that Attakullakulla, the Little Carpenter, preserved letters from the South Carolina government in a bundle, often showing them to traders to demonstrate the perfidy of that government and commenting that they ought to have been burned in the old year's fire—giving an interesting turn to an archival principle now widely discussed. Northern tribes put records in the shape of red and black "hieroglyphics" on trees in the forests. Plowden C. J. Weston, ed., *Documents Connected with the History of South Carolina* (London, 1856), 227.

² See E. B. O'Callaghan, ed., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*. . . (Albany, 1856-1861), VIII, 41-42.

1759-1782,³ was perhaps the first of the Cherokee to place great value upon the talking papers, for he was all too well acquainted with the perfidy of the palefaces. He could never have forgotten that he traveled to Charleston in 1759 in an effort to maintain peace with the British and that his reward was seizure and imprisonment as a hostage. Certainly the Cherokee archives were in his care during the American Revolution.

Preserved in the Cherokee archives were wampum strings and belts, bronze medals given to prominent chiefs by "King George," and papers on Cherokee history dated as early as 1763 and as late as 1778. Included in the papers were messages (or "talks") to the Cherokee by Indian Superintendent John Stuart, Lord Dunmore, Patrick Henry, and other British and American officials; a copy of one important treaty and an abstract of another; and a map of the proposed colony of Vandalia sent to Oconnostotah by Stuart. One curious item was a formal certificate attesting the election of Oconnostotah to membership in the St. Andrews Club of Charleston on November 30, 1773.⁵ The most extraordinary document was a letter from Stuart to the Great Warrior of June, 1773, in which the superintendent suggested that the chief persuade a British trader to read the letter to him.⁶ No description of the depository has been found, but it was probably Oconnostotah's own hut or the council chamber of the nation. In any case, arrangements to protect the records were not completely inadequate, since part of them are still in existence and in good condition.

Alas, Oconnostotah and his followers, though able to defend their archives from the weather, were unable to ward off seizure by the palefaces. When the Revolution broke out, the Cherokee

³ There is a brief sketch of this remarkable Indian, correct except for one or two details, in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. His name is given therein as Oconostota, but the form used above was most commonly used by his English contemporaries.

⁴ Medals were widely used by the British, French, and Spanish as tokens of authority among tribal leaders. Small medals were sometimes distributed to all the tribe's warriors as decorative symbols of loyalty. In addition, the southern English colonies gave parchment commissions comparable to letters patent which were recognition of the rank of tribal leaders. The Indians preserved these well and when going to war included them among the objects carried in the war chest.

⁵ At the time Oconnostotah was Stuart's guest at Charleston. Stuart was president of the club, and arranged for the election.

⁶ No Cherokee at that time could read English. Communication between British officials and the southern Indians was commonly carried on by writing. Traders and officers in the wilderness translated messages to the Indians and also served as scribes for them. Chiefs and warriors affixed their signatures when necessary by making their marks.

espoused the cause of "King George," and they were a serious menace on the frontiers of the southern states as late as 1780. Toward the close of that year, however, Colonel Arthur Campbell and Lieutenant Colonel John Sevier invaded the Cherokee country at the head of seven hundred militiamen from the backwoods of Virginia and North Carolina. In a preliminary skirmish with the Cherokee on the Broad River of North Carolina on December 16, a detachment led by Sevier defeated seventy Cherokee, and captured "all their baggage &c; in which were some of Clinton's proclamations and other documents expressive of their hostile designs against us." But these papers, which apparently have disappeared, were not included in the national archives. On December 22 the whole American force advanced into the very heart of the Cherokee country, sweeping aside the feeble opposition of the Indians. On December 28, they captured and burnt Chote itself. Ouconnostotah managed to elude the American riflemen, but abandoned the records of his nation in the hurry of his flight. Wrote Campbell to Thomas Jefferson, then governor of Virginia, on January 15, 1781, "We found in Okanas-toters baggage, which he left behind in his fright, various manuscripts, copies of treaties, commissions, letters and other archives of the nation. . . ."

Fortunately for the historian, a considerable part of these records ultimately found their way into the Division of Manuscripts of the Library of Congress. Jefferson forwarded a copy of Campbell's letter to John Hanson, president of the Continental Congress.⁸ In the hope that the papers seized by the militiamen would contain useful information, Hanson requested that they be sent on to Philadelphia. Jefferson relayed this request to Campbell on May 23. Campbell was unable immediately to forward all the papers, for part of them had passed into the possession of the North Carolina officers. After taking copies of certain documents which aroused his interest, Campbell sent the originals in his possession to Jefferson on June 20.⁹ He also promised to try to obtain the remainder from the North Carolinians for Hanson, but evidence that he was successful is lacking.

⁷ W. P. Palmer, S. McRae, and W. H. Fleurnoy, eds., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers, 1652-1869* (Richmond, 1875), I, 434-437.

⁸ H. R. McIlwaine, ed., *Official Letters of the Governors of the State of Virginia* (Richmond, 1928), II, 351.

⁹ Campbell to Jefferson, June 4, 1781, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vii, Library of Congress. Campbell to Jefferson, June 20, 1781, *Papers of the Continental Congress*, No. 71, Vol. II, Lib. Cong.

But those which he sent to Jefferson were forwarded by the governor to Hanson on December 20,¹⁰ and became part of the Papers of the Continental Congress. They cover pp. 143-222 of No. 71, Vol. 11, in that series. Appropriately enough, they have received the title, "Archives of the Cherokees." A list of these documents follows.¹¹

1. 1775, Jan. 16, Alex[ande]r Cameron to the Great Warrior Attakullakulla Willinanan and the other Head Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation. A.D.S. 2pp. f°. (pp. 143-144.)

2. 1775, Mar. 23, Talk, Lord Dunmore to the Little Carpenter and the Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation of Indians. D.S. 4pp. f°. (pp. 145-148.)

3. 1763, July 4, "His Majesty's Instructions to all the Governors of his Provinces in America." Printed broadside, sealed, and signed by John Stuart, 1p. f°. (p. 150.)

4. 1774, July 7, Alex[ande]r Cameron to "Friends and Brothers" [of the Cherokee Nation]. A.D.S. 2pp. f°. (pp. 153-154.)

5. 1773, June 3, Talk to the Cherokees. D. 3pp. f°. (pp. 157-159.)

6. 1773, June 1, "Abstract of the Treaty of Cession to His Majesty of Certain Lands for the Payment of the Debts due by the Creek & Cherokee Indians to their Traders at a Congress of the Chiefs of both Nations . . ." D.S. (by John Stuart, etc.) 1p. f°. (p. 161.)

7. 1773, Mar. 30, Alex[ande]r Cameron to Ouconnastotah and the Ruling Chiefs of the Over hill Cherokees. A.D.S. 3pp. f°. (pp. 165-167.)

8. 1771, Mar. 13, Alex[ande]r Cameron to All whom it may concern. (Passport of the "Great Warrior of Chote.") A.D.S. 1p. f°. (p. 169.)

9. 1772, Feb. 5, Alex[ande]r Cameron to "Friends and Brothers" [of the Cherokee Nation]. A.D.S. 4pp. f°. (pp. 173-176.)

10. 1764, Jan. 14, John Stuart to "the head Beloved Man and principal Warriors of the Cherokee Nation at Chote." A.D.S. 2pp. 4°. (pp. 177-178.)

11. 1778, July 5, Edw[ard] Wilkinson to The Great Warrior Occonnistota at Chote. A.D.S. 2pp. 4°. (pp. 181-182.)

¹⁰ Jefferson to Hanson, Dec. 20, 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, No. 71, Vol. 11, Lib. Cong.

¹¹ I am indebted for this list and for generous assistance in pursuing the history of these papers to Dr. Thomas P. Martin of the Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

12. 1775, Apr. 12, W[illia]m Preston to Ocanastota the little Carpenter, Judge Friend, and the other Chiefs of the warlike Nation of the Cherokees. D.S. 2pp. f°. (pp. 185-186.)

13. 1777, Jan. 24, David Taitt to Aconostota at Chote, A.D.S. 4pp. f°. (pp. 189-192.)

14. [June, 1773], John Stuart to Oukonnestotah Great War Chief of the Cherokee Nation. A.D.S. 2pp. f°. (pp. 193-194.)

15. [June, 1773, John Stuart], Map of "New Province." 1p. f°. (pp. 197-200.)

16. 1777, Feb. 6, John Stuart to the Warrior of Chote Ouconnastoté. A.D.S. 3pp. f°. (pp. 201-203.)

17. 1773, Nov. 30, Certificate of Ouconnastotah's membership in St. Andrew's Club (of Charles-Town, South Carolina). Printed form, filled in. 1p. 16°. Signed by John Stuart and James Brisbane. (p. 205.)

18. 1777, Mar. 3, P[atrack] Henry to Ouconostotah and the other Chiefs of the Cherokee Nation. Copy of D. 2pp. f°. (pp. 207-208.)

19. 1777, Nov. 15, P[atrack] Henry to Brother Ouconostotah. D.S. 1p. f°. (p. 209.)

20. Undated, P[atrack] Henry to Brother Ouconostotah. D.S. 3pp. 4°. (pp. 213-215.)

21. 1763, June 30, John Stuart to the Principal Warriors and the Governing beloved Headmen of the Cherokee Nation. D.S. 2pp. f°. (pp. 217-218.)

22. 1777, July 20, Articles of a treaty of peace between the Commissioners of Virginia and the Chiefs of that part of the Cherokee Nation called the Overhill Indians. D.S. 1p. large f°. (p. 221.)

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