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The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent

Interpreting a Continent: Voices from Colonial America (with John DuVal)

Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution

Independence

LOST

Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution

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Payamataha the Warrior

The man who came to be known as Payamataha, meaning *war leader* or *war prophet*, grew up in the fortified Chickasaw towns during this era of escalating warfare. Chickasaw boys had nicknames and would acquire adult names only once they showed their character and achievements. As a child, the boy who would become Payamataha saw his mother and aunts keep a watchful eye for enemies riding across the plain as they farmed or collected drinking water from wells near their town. Like most Chickasaw children, he would have enjoyed bear bacon, the annual crop of strawberries, and another Chickasaw favorite, a milkshake of hickory nut milk and sweet potatoes. He learned to play stickball (a game similar to lacrosse) on his town's ballfield. As he grew older, he learned to hunt. Like other boys, he made his own deer decoy by carefully carving out the interior of a deer's head, stretching the dried skin back over the frontal bone, and scooping out the interior cartilage of the horns so that the decoy would be light enough to carry easily and to maneuver like a puppet on his left hand, in imitation of a live deer's motions. Once close enough to the unsuspecting deer, a hidden partner would aim and shoot.⁷

The young Payamataha showed no sign of his future as a peacemaker. He earned his war titles, filled his amulet bag with scalps of his fallen enemies, and received white arrows to wear in his black hair, signifying his battle honors. By the time he retired as a warrior, he reportedly had killed over forty men on his own. On one spring night in the late 1740s during the wars against the French, he led Chickasaw and Creek warriors to cypress bark canoes parked along the east bank of the Mississippi. Under cover of darkness, they paddled across the great river. At the first light of day, the warriors left their canoes and quietly sneaked to the edge of the small French Arkansas Post. To the sound of Chickasaw women singing their usual songs of encourage-



George Catlin, *Ball-play of the Choctaw*, 1840s. (Smithsonian American Art Museum)

ment, they attacked the post with arrows. In the melee, grapeshot from a French gun wounded Payamataha. According to James Adair, an Irish trader living with the Chickasaws who heard the story on their return, Payamataha's men thought he would die, and in their rage they killed their French prisoners and "overspread the French settlements, to a great distance, like a dreadful whirlwind, destroying every thing before them." Payamataha survived to tell the story back in Chickasaw country.⁸

Hatred of the French kept the war chief Payamataha firmly allied with the British. Once, on the road to sell captives in Charleston, he and his men fell in with a traveling party of Creeks, one of whom told the Chickasaws that a good number of Creeks had decided that the British were the region's biggest problem. The Creek man pointed out that British colonists encroached on Indian lands far more than French people. Recalling the bloody Chickasaw wars against the French, Payamataha exploded in anger. Had it not been for English help, Payamataha said, "the artful and covetous French, by the weight

of presents and the skill of their forked tongues, would before now, have set you to war against each other, in the very same manner they have done by the Choctaw." It was true that the Choctaws were embroiled in a civil war, caused in part by arguments over whether to fight against or ally with the French. Payamataha promised that the Chickasaws "are born and bred in a state of war with" the French.⁹

Chickasaw war against the French continued through the Seven Years' War. When Upper Creeks advised the Chickasaws that all Indians "should be united and stand together" against the British, Payamataha responded that the Chickasaw-British friendship "was steady and invariable." The Chickasaws "would not be idle lookers on; the cause of the English should be theirs, in opposition to French, Cherokee, and all other enemies," which could certainly include Creeks.¹⁰

In the 1740s and 1750s, Payamataha met with British officials at Charleston and sent official diplomatic messages to London. Although his name is not recorded, the Chickasaw leader who traveled to England and met with King George II may have been Payamataha. In a letter to the king in 1756, Payamataha and other Chickasaw headmen and warriors proclaimed that "we look upon your enemies as ours and your friends as our friends. The day shall never come while sun shines and water runs that we will join any other nation but the English."¹¹

Just a few years later, though, something happened that was almost as astonishing as the sun ceasing to shine or the water drying up: France abandoned its claims to the North American continent.

Payamataha the Diplomat

In the summer of 1763, rumors arrived in Chickasaw country that the French had surrendered, ending the Seven Years' War. The rumors were true, and the British would take over the French posts east of the Mississippi, while the Spanish would occupy those west of the Mississippi plus New Orleans at the river's mouth. Payamataha would need to decide how to deal with the new Spanish officials who would come to the Mississippi Valley.

By this time, Payamataha had risen to the position of Chickasaw headman in charge of war and diplomacy, a role Chickasaws described as "head leading warrior of the nation, to treat with all nations." Slave-raiding and warfare had become so dominant among the Chickasaws by the early eighteenth century that even the civil or "peace chiefs" at times got caught up in the violence, forgot their role, and "turned warrior" too. Yet Payamataha, despite being in the office called "head leading warrior," decided to end Chickasaw warring. He figured that if the Chickasaws wanted to avoid further devastating war and population loss, the time to change had come. With the French empire gone from North America, perhaps the Chickasaws could turn war-paths back into trading paths and make peace with all Europeans and Indians.¹²

As the Chickasaws' chief diplomat to other nations, Payamataha strove to maintain Chickasaw independence through a pragmatic course of peaceful coexistence. The Chickasaw population had declined by more than half from 1700 to the end of the Seven Years' War. More war, even if victorious, would further erode the Chickasaw population. Late in 1758, Payamataha began meeting with Choctaw leaders from the towns closest to the Chickasaws to discuss ending their decades of war. Payamataha made the peace offer attractive by directing British goods to his new Choctaw friends. In May 1759, the Chickasaws accepted an official Choctaw peace delegation. The Choctaw-Chickasaw peace became one of the most successful diplomatic initiatives in history, turning decades of war into a permanent peace.¹³

It is impossible to know what went on in most Chickasaw councils, much less in Payamataha's head; what we do know is that in the 1760s and 1770s he led the Chickasaws in systematically making peace with a startling array of old enemies: Choctaws to the south, Cherokees and Catawbias to the east, Creeks to the southeast, and Quapaws to the west across the Mississippi River. As Choctaw leader Chulustamastabe later explained to the British, "There were formerly great discord & enmity subsisting between the Chickasaw & Choctaw Nations, which I hope are now all removed & that friendship & peace

will be established.”¹⁴ Chickasaw women made diplomacy possible by hosting the negotiations and preparing the feasts. Had most women opposed his peacemaking efforts, he would have failed.

Payamataha was a spiritual as well as a diplomatic leader, roles that were inseparable to the Chickasaws. Choctaws referred to Payamataha as “a witch” or “an oracle.” Payamataha’s power came in part from the spiritual world, and his exhortation to make peace was based on a spiritual calling to avoid war.¹⁵

In congresses of Indian nations in Augusta, Georgia, in 1763 and Mobile, West Florida, in 1765, Payamataha contrasted his position with that of other Indians. He told British Superintendent of Indian Affairs John Stuart that he wanted “not to imitate other Indian nations” that try to be totally independent. Speaking through an interpreter, Payamataha declared that the Chickasaws knew they “cannot do without the white people” and that “it is the same case with all the red people.”¹⁶ In accentuating Chickasaw dependence, Payamataha was purposefully contrasting Chickasaw foreign policy with that of Indian Nativists.

Beginning in the 1730s among Indian refugees in the Ohio Valley, Nativist prophets preached that all Indians had a history and culture in common with one another and different from Africans and Europeans. According to Nativists, Indians should unify in military opposition to Europeans, particularly the British. Immediately following the Seven Years’ War, the Delaware prophet Neolin and the Ottawa war leader Pontiac led people to war under the ideology of Nativism. Today it is hard to see the idea that Indians had a common past and a common future as radical, but rigidly race-based antebellum slavery, forced Indian removals of the 1830s, and scientific racism had not yet hardened beliefs about racial difference. Even today most Indians see their particular tribal citizenship or community as at least as important as their American Indian identity, and a pan-tribal identity was hard for most Indians even to imagine two centuries ago.¹⁷

Payamataha agreed with Nativists that Indians should not fight one another, but he disagreed that the solution was to fight Europeans. Payamataha’s movement focused on getting along with everyone no matter their history. This position was less risky than in the Ohio Val-

ley because British settlers had not gotten as far west as Chickasaw lands. Payamataha still followed his ancestors’ assumptions that the world was divided not into a few “races” but into thousands of different peoples—the big divide was between Chickasaws and all non-Chickasaws, not between Indians and non-Indians.¹⁸

Payamataha also portrayed himself as leading other Indians—particularly former French allies—to peace with the British. British officials recognized that Payamataha’s peacemaking complemented their mission to promote a stable empire, and British rhetoric emphasized security and opportunity for Indians if they chose not to stand alone. Knowing that land was the key issue for Indians bordering British colonies, British officials repeatedly assured Indians that “no land can be settled without your consent.”¹⁹

Despite the British assumption of their own centrality, confirming Chickasaw peace with the Choctaws, Cherokees, and Creeks was more important to Payamataha at Augusta in 1763 and Mobile in 1765. Lingering fears of violence are evident in the fact that Chickasaws worried about sending a delegation across Creek country to get to Augusta. But at Augusta, Payamataha and Upper Creek headman Emistisiguo worked on Chickasaw-Creek relations. Emistisiguo even asked the Chickasaws for their approval before the Creeks would agree to sell the Georgians a bit of land between the Savannah and Ogeechee rivers, a precondition that foreshadowed both continuing Chickasaw-Creek peace and cooperation across Indian nations regarding land sales and preservation.

At the 1765 Mobile congress, Payamataha confirmed his personal connection to the British, attesting that “it is well known I never deserted the British interest and I never will.” White was the symbolic color of peace (signifying the absence of blood) among southeastern Indians, and Payamataha played with the multiple meanings of *white* in his assurance that “though I am a Red Man my heart is white from my connections with and the benefits I have received from the white people, I almost look upon myself as one of them.” Then he turned his attention to the Choctaw delegation, whom he addressed as “my younger brothers.” “Let what is past be buried in oblivion,” he offered, “and let us only now think of what is to come.”²⁰ Choctaw Chief Chu-

lustamastabe agreed that "Payamataha is much [my] superior, but [I am] equally well inclined to hear good talks."²¹

Making Peace

Payamataha encouraged the British belief that the Chickasaws were their staunchest ally and that he was working solely for British interests, but in reality Payamataha's model for Chickasaw independence and stability in the region was to expand connections to as many European and Indian neighbors as possible. Chickasaws had no desire to create a new European enemy out of the Spanish just after celebrating the departure of the French. Instead, Payamataha defied British expectations and established Chickasaw alliance and trade with Spanish Louisiana.²²

In the past, Chickasaw enmity against the French and against Indians allied with the French had been mutually reinforcing. Now, Payamataha's peace efforts with Europeans assisted his peacemaking with Indians and vice versa. In 1765, the Chickasaws asked British officials in the Illinois country to provide the goods that would allow them to make peace with people who had been allied with the French. The following May, the Chickasaws made peace with the Kaskaskias, the Michigameas, and other Illinois peoples, although that peace proved more fragile than the others that Payamataha was forging.²³

One of the Chickasaws' most important new alliances was with the Quapaws, who could help the Chickasaws make peace with Spain and with Illinois Indians. Living west of the Mississippi near its confluence with the Arkansas River, the Quapaws had quickly established good relations with the Spanish after 1763. In the spring of 1770, Quapaw chiefs introduced Payamataha to the Spanish commandant at Arkansas Post. Payamataha accepted a Spanish flag and medal, signifying, misleadingly, to the Spanish that he had abandoned his British alliance in favor of a Spanish one. The Spanish commandant in turn provided food, brandy, and gifts, which helped to seal the nascent Chickasaw-Quapaw peace.²⁴

In return, Payamataha assisted the Quapaws in diplomacy with the British and the Choctaws. In March 1771, a delegation of Quapaws went to Natchez and Pensacola declaring their new friendship with Payamataha and the Chickasaws and their desire for alliance with the British and the Choctaws. British officials specifically asked Payamataha not to bring the Quapaws to any more congresses for fear of antagonizing the Spanish. Nonetheless, Payamataha escorted several Quapaw representatives to a 1772 Mobile congress and presented the Quapaws' eagle feather calumet for the British to smoke, declaring, "this Calumet was given me by the Quapaw Chief . . . in token of friendship." At that congress, he also brokered peace between the Quapaws and the Choctaws and even threatened the Choctaws that the Chickasaws would fight them if they did not make peace with the Quapaws. The Choctaws agreed to peace, and the three-way agreement helped to strengthen all of its parts.²⁵

Because the British ended Pontiac's War by compromising with Nativists, Chickasaw and Nativist strategies could align. In 1772, Nativist messages circulated through the south, urging that if "the English, France and Spain are at war[,] all the red people is to be at peace." Shawnees in the Ohio Valley sent a wampum belt—an elaborate message written in beads—that was white on each end with a small black piece in the middle. They explained that "the black in the middle signified the Chickasaw nation, the white on each side the Choctaws and Creeks, and that they wanted them to be all of one mind and of one color." Certainly Payamataha agreed.²⁶

Although Payamataha's successful diplomacy with Europeans and other Indians helped him to gain Chickasaw support for peace, he did not rule his people. The Chickasaws' principal chief was a younger man named Tascapatapo, usually called Mingo Houma (Red King). At the 1772 congress, Mingo Houma tried to explain to the British that he was "the King of my Nation and Payamataha is my warrior."²⁷ The Chickasaws referred to Mingo Houma as their "king" and explained that the word *mingo* meant *king*. Nonetheless, the fact that Payamataha represented the Chickasaws in foreign relations confused Europeans. They could have paralleled Mingo Houma with King

George and Payamataha with the Earl of Hillsborough's role as secretary of state for the colonies, but Europeans tended to assume that whichever Chickasaw met with them must be the most important.²⁸

Like most southeastern Indians, Chickasaw leaders established and maintained their positions through obligations of interdependence, including a leader's redistribution of goods. Many of Payamataha's speeches to the British concerned goods. At the 1772 congress in Mobile, Payamataha reminded British Superintendent John Stuart that at the last congress they had agreed on fixed prices and tariffs and that Stuart "gave me a yard to carry with me as a standard by which measure of all goods sold in our nation was to be regulated."²⁹ Payamataha and Stuart had a common interest in controlling trade to enhance their own influence. The British victory over the French had sparked an influx of unlicensed British traders, who undermined both Stuart and Payamataha by trading directly with other Chickasaws, including Principal Chief Mingo Houma. At Payamataha's urging, Stuart repeatedly reminded both Britons and Chickasaws that all trade was supposed to go through Payamataha.³⁰

Toward the Revolution?

By the early 1770s, Payamataha had succeeded in making the Chickasaws more interdependent with their neighbors, especially other Indians. Peace was paying off. Chickasaws had moved out from Big Town and had spread back over Chickasaw lands in smaller towns and farms. They no longer lived within fortifications, in part because they felt more secure but also as a sign to former enemies that they had changed their ways. With the safety of peace and the return of Chickasaws who had fled war, the Chickasaw population grew from its low point of around sixteen hundred to more than two thousand and rising by the mid-1770s. They could allow their horses to enjoy the grasses growing outside their towns without fear that they would be carried off in an enemy raid. The hunters ranged far, a hundred miles east to the Tennessee River, north to the Ohio River, and south to the hunting grounds they now shared with the Choctaws. Payama-

taha took advantage of his prominence among the Chickasaws and the British to profit from trade and even to establish his own cattle ranch near the British trading post in Chickasaw country.³¹

After these diplomatic successes, troubles within the British empire were far from Chickasaw minds. The future promised a continuation of Payamataha's diplomacy with the Chickasaws' growing collection of European and Native allies. Instead, the rebellion within the British empire would eventually expose Payamataha's contradictory promises and imperil the networks that he had built.