

STUDENT HANDOUT – Cherokee and British Relations

Introduction:

Hernando De Soto's expedition may have crossed Cherokee lands in 1540. But the Cherokee didn't have much contact with Europeans until the 1700s. This was partly because Cherokees lived in isolated valleys in the Appalachian Mountains.

Then the Cherokee began a close relationship with the British. They traded deerskins for firearms, ammunition, and other trade goods. The firearms proved important to the Cherokee. They used them to successfully drive out other tribes. They expanded their territory and moved into what is now East Tennessee. This meant they could hunt even more deer.

The East Tennessee Cherokee towns were later known as the Overhill Towns. They were located along the Hiwassee River and the Little Tennessee River. Cherokees continued to live in East Tennessee until 1838. Then they were forced to move to Oklahoma. (Some hid in the mountains and still live in North Carolina. Others moved back later and live in Tennessee today.)

Through trade, the Cherokee and British forged a strong alliance. The Cherokee were dependent upon British trade goods. And the British needed the Cherokee as a defense against French attacks.

In 1730, six Cherokee men were taken back to England. The leader of the group was a Cherokee from Tennessee named Attakullakulla. They met with King George II and signed a treaty with England. The treaty brought the Cherokee people under the control and protection of the English. On returning home, they remained committed to the treaty. And they did what they could to help the English.

Not all Cherokees agreed with them, however. A Cherokee warrior named Oconastota hated the English. He believed that the English had deliberately spread smallpox to kill them. (A series of smallpox epidemics occurred between 1729 and 1753. About half of the 50,000 Cherokees alive in 1729 died. But there is no evidence that the English deliberately spread the disease to the Cherokees.)

The Fort Loudoun Tragedy:

The war between England and France in North America began in 1754. It was later known as the French and Indian War. England called on the Cherokee to fight on their side under the terms of the treaty of 1730.

The Cherokee agreed to fight with the British against the French in Virginia. But they wanted protection for the villages left without warriors to defend them. The British agreed to construct a fort in what is now Tennessee. It was completed in July 1757 and was named Fort Loudoun.

In 1758, some Cherokees were returning home after fighting with the British. They were ambushed by a group of Virginia settlers. The settlers killed 20 of them. Under Cherokee custom, when someone was killed, his killer was executed by the victim's clan. If the killer could not be found, someone else from the killer's clan was executed.

Supposedly the Cherokee asked about the clans to which the settlers belonged. They were told that all white people were one clan. Since the Cherokee could not find the killers, they attacked and killed other white people they found in various settlements. To the Indians, they were merely enacting revenge according to their custom. But the settlers believed in the British law of individual responsibility. To them it was murder.

Chief Oconastota led a peace delegation to Charlestown, South Carolina, in 1759. But the governor of the area put the delegation in chains. They were marched to Fort Prince George. The governor offered the freedom of the peace delegation in exchange for the

Cherokee warriors who had killed the settlers.

Attakullakulla went to the fort. He was able to negotiate Oconastota's release. But other members of the peace delegation were killed by soldiers. An outraged Oconastota began attacking settlers and traders. This resulted in open war between the English and the Cherokee.

Armed British forces invaded Cherokee land. But they were turned back. The Cherokees, led by Ostenaco, captured Fort Loudoun in August 1760. They killed more than two dozen soldiers who surrendered.

In 1761, the British army moved into Cherokee lands with more than 2,600 soldiers. They burned 15 Cherokee towns and destroyed many crops. The Cherokees were driven into the mountains without food.

The Cherokee, under Attakullakulla, again asked for peace. They met with the British at Long Island (where Kingsport is now located). A treaty was agreed upon and the war between the British and Cherokee came to an end. However peace did not continue between the Cherokee and the settlers who were eager to move into frontier lands.

In 1762, another group of Cherokee leaders went to London. They met with King George III. They asked him to keep settlers off their land. So, the Proclamation of 1763 made it illegal for colonists to settle west of "the Proclamation Line". This line went along the present border between Tennessee and North Carolina. But there was no way to enforce it. And it was too late to stop the flow of settlers.

