History on Hiwassee Island

Hiwassee Island was the second-largest land mass on the Tennessee River at 781 acres until the Tennessee Valley Authority flooded the area in the 1940s. This project was completed in order to create Chickamauga Lake as a part of the dam system on the Tennessee River, and gave Hiwassee Island a new total land area of about 400 acres. The island was partially excavated by the Works Progress Administration from 1937-1939. A village with earthen mounds and a manmade trench-style water feature, measuring approximately 350 feet in length by 75 feet in width was uncovered on the island.

The final group of Native Americans to inhabit the island was a small group of Cherokee led by Chief John Jolly, or Olooloteskee. Chief Jolly was reportedly the foster father of Sam Houston, who lived on Hiwassee for a brief time beginning in 1809 and later married the niece of the chief. The association to the Cherokee leader resulted in the name Jolly’s Island, which was subsequently ceded to the United States as part of the Calhoun Treaty of 1819. While this Cherokee group left the island in 1818, sixteen other tribes have connections to the land.
A River Boundary Between Two Nations

The Hiwassee Purchase of 1819 ceded Cherokee land between the Little Tennessee and Hiwassee rivers to the United States. That same year, in the area known as "Walker’s Ferry," the town of Calhoun was laid out on the north side of the Hiwassee on one of two reserves granted to influential Cherokee leader John Walker, Jr., by the 1819 treaty. The town was named in recognition of Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, who negotiated the agreement for the federal government. The town stood where earlier missions, businesses, and a ferry had operated. McMinn County was established by the State of Tennessee on November 13, 1819, and Calhoun was designated as the county seat.

From 1819 to the Treaty of New Echota in 1835, the Hiwassee River was a dividing line between the Cherokee Nation and the United States. The 1835 treaty ended what had been tense yet cooperative relationships between the two nations. Over the next three years, the federal government completed its plans and turned the south bank of the river into Fort Cass, a massive emigrating depot where Cherokee were incarcerated before their forced removal to Indian Territory in 1838.
Return Jonathan Meigs was a Revolutionary War veteran who administered the federal government’s trade and diplomatic relations with the Cherokee for more than twenty years. Prior to his role as an Indian agent, Meigs served as a territorial official in Ohio. He arrived on the Tennessee frontier for service at Fort Southwest Point (present-day Kingston) in 1801. Meigs acted as both the Cherokee agent and as a military agent for the U.S. War Department until federal troops were removed in 1813.

During this time, he directed the relocation of the Cherokee Agency to a new location, known as the Hiwassee Garrison, near the confluence of the Tennessee and Hiwassee rivers. He carried out his duties at that location until 1813. He then moved the agency offices upriver and finally to present-day Charleston by 1817. The Cherokee respected Meigs, but grew frustrated by his inability to stop illegal settlement on Cherokee land. Meigs operated the Cherokee Agency until his death in 1823 and is buried at Garrison Cemetery in Rhea County.

(Left) Meigs actively supported white missionaries in their efforts to create schools on Cherokee land, such as the Brainerd Mission in present-day Chattanooga.

(Above) Return Jonathan Meigs, Sr. (1740-1823)

Courtesy of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Special Collections.
Lewis Ross was a wealthy businessman who moved to this area in about 1820 after acquiring large tracts of land along the Hiwassee River. Like his brother, Principal Chief John Ross, Lewis was of European and Cherokee descent. The Ross brothers’ European ancestry through paternal lines granted them the privileges and opportunities afforded to wealthy Euro-American males of the time, while Cherokee ancestry through their mother’s line sustained kinship and social connections within Cherokee society. The Rosses’ ability to move fluidly throughout both societies enabled much of their success in acquiring influence and wealth.

In 1836, appraisers valued Lewis Ross's property in present-day Charleston at nearly $25,000, which included a house, farm buildings, and orchards. He also enslaved several African Americans who likely built his house and farm buildings and helped run his businesses. After the federal government allowed Chief John Ross to oversee removal of the remaining Cherokees in the summer of 1838, Lewis became responsible for supplying food and other necessities to the detachments. Lewis Ross and his family reached the West in 1839.
On September 1, 1834, Company F of the 4th U.S. Infantry arrived at the Cherokee Agency in present-day Charleston and established Camp Cass, later known as Fort Cass. At first, the company utilized existing buildings in the area for its operations, including the sub-agent's house, with officers frequently staying at the home of Lewis Ross. Beginning in 1836, a number of buildings were constructed to support removal operations, including storehouses and cribs, and later stables, offices, and a bakery with bread ovens. Indian Agent Colonel Hugh Montgomery's former home was even used as a storehouse and magazine, before it was converted to a hospital. On November 2, 1836, Lieutenant Chilib Smith Howe, assistant commissary and acting quartermaster, was ordered to erect “a substantial log magazine” to hold all of the ammunition at the post “surrounded by a single row of pickets at least twelve feet high above the ground, with a substantial blockhouse at the opposite angles.” The fortification described, known as Fort Cass and named for Secretary of War Lewis Cass, was located near the bank of the Hiwassee River in Charleston. During removal, Fort Cass and its numerous associated buildings and internment camps served as the largest of the three emigration depots used for Cherokee removal.
African American History on the Hiwassee

People of African descent have a long history in the area of present-day Charleston. Though some African Americans married Cherokee individuals and raised families in the Cherokee Nation before removal to Indian Territory, many more were enslaved by wealthy Cherokee, such as the Lewis Ross family. As a result, an untold number of African Americans traveled alongside the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears.

As enslaved African Americans in the Cherokee Nation were forced out with their Cherokee enslavers, others moved into the area with Euro-American settlers. Before the outbreak of the Civil War, less than ten percent of Bradley County’s population was African American, the vast majority of which was enslaved. After emancipation, newly freed people formed schools and churches that served as places of community strength and resilience. The congregation at the Watson AME Zion Church in Charleston, for example, dates back to the 1880s and still thrives as an important community institution. In the early 1920s, schools for African American children in the Charleston area were consolidated when the community built the Charleston School with help from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, a northern-based philanthropic organization that worked with African American communities to build modern schools for their children. The Fund also helped build two other schools in Bradley County, St. Elmo and College Hill in Cleveland.

(Above) The Watson Chapel AME Zion is located just blocks away at the corner of Wool and Market streets. The sanctuary pictured here dates back to the 1920s. The congregation added a wing to the south of the building in the 1980s.

(Courtesy of Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University.)

(Above) Slave quarters at the historic Mee House in Charleston.

(Courtesy of Cleveland Bradley County Public Library History Branch.)

(Left) Many African American farmers in the area owned the land they farmed, including Ben Moore, a formerly enslaved person from Alabama who owned a farm near Cleveland. Here, the family of Bell and Ben Moore (far left, respectively) pose with a photograph of a deceased family member.

(Courtesy of Cleveland Bradley County Public Library History Branch.)
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