A Propensity to Truck, Barter, and Exchange:

The Indian Trade in Colonial Florida

By

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Florida in the late eighteenth century was inhabited by diverse groups of people, the Spanish, British, Americans, Africans, Creek and Seminole Indians. Each lived and worked across and within the boundaries of different social, political, and economic systems. Panton, Leslie, and Company served as a commercial link between them. A historian of the company succinctly stated, “In the annals of Spanish Borderlands history, no other mercantile operation generated so much important social, political, psychological, legal, and economic activity.”¹ The company’s business records document the activity of Spanish colonial officials in St. Augustine and Pensacola, British merchants in the Bahamas, American politicians in Georgia, enslaved Africans in Florida, Creek Indians throughout the Southeast, and Seminole Indians across East and West Florida. Panton, Leslie, and Company outlined the livelihoods of people moving between Florida and Creek Country.

Scholars of the emerging market economy in eighteenth century Southeast Borderlands use Panton, Leslie, and Company to illustrate the Creek economy in Spanish Florida and for a broader perspective, the whole of Creek Country. These records demonstrate how the Creek economy changed during the eighteenth century into the early nineteenth. Creeks embraced the market economy of the Atlantic world through the selling of deerskins. This trade was controlled through European imperial powers by their commercial agents like Panton, Leslie, and Company. Later the emerging mestizo influence over Creek economics became the center of native authority. Mestizo authority prompted backlash from traditionalists that devolved into violence, the Redstick War. Within this narrative of Creek Country, there is little room for outliers.

A close examination of the Panton, Leslie, and Company records from the British Colonial Office and the Spanish archives revealed Creeks pursuing an economy separate from the traditionalists or the mestizos. Around the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century

traditionalist Creeks began to resist the European model led by Mestizos. This is the dominant Creek economic narrative and while both these groups were vying for control of Creek Country, there were other groups that attempted something different. Between 1789 and 1803 Lower Creeks followed the British loyalist William Augustus Bowles and rebelled against the Spanish monopoly of Panton, Leslie, and Company. They attempted to establish Creek ports along the Florida Gulf Coast for the purpose of their own free trade in the Atlantic economy. Bowles’s rebellion indicates an alternative to the traditional or “new order” Creek economics. Creeks followed Bowles’ to negotiate another position in the emerging Atlantic market economy. Understanding how Bowles and the Creek rebellion fits into the history of Florida and the Creek people begins with the native people of the Southeast.

Southeastern Indians lived in a region often referred to as Creek Country. The term Creek described diverse natives living in present day Florida, Alabama, and Georgia. The Creeks are most often divided into two groups, the Upper and Lower Creeks. Upper Creeks lived in the areas of present day Alabama and consisted of approximately 40 towns, most speaking the Muskogean-related Alabama and Kosati dialects. Lower Creeks lived in the present day areas of Georgia and Florida consisting of approximately twenty towns, many speaking Hitchiti but also included speakers of Muskogean and Yuchi. In the late eighteenth century an offshoot of the Creek emerged, the Seminole tribe in Florida. Seminoles were composed of Lower Creeks, mestizos, and runaway African slaves. The Creek

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referred to this group as dissident group outside of their political control. Despite the variations across Creek Country there were similarities.

Traditional economics and governance were common to the peoples of Creek Country. Sedentary agriculture and hunting dominated the economy. Farming and deer hunting occurred on common tribal grounds. Communal property extended beyond tribal lands and included a system of codified sharing or reciprocity. While private property existed, Creek culture encouraged sharing with other members of the tribe, especially in times of famine or other economic hardships. Creeks organized into towns as a political unit. Unlike Europeans, Creek towns were dominated by matrilineal lines. Inheritance and political authority rested with women. Vital to that authority were prestige items as symbols of power. Traditionally this included precious metals or brightly colored objects. However, European items quickly replaced those made by natives, and their use actually predated the arrival of Europeans to the region.

Beginning with Spanish colonial governance in the sixteenth century through British rule in the eighteenth century, Europeans maintained native loyalty through gifting and access to these prestige items. This process became known as the Indian trade.

Throughout the Colonial and Early Republic periods, Europeans maintained an active role in the Indian Trade, specifically and more academically referred to as the Creek frontier exchange economy. Native loyalties were maintained through gifts to Creek leaders, such as cloth, shirts, beads, cutlery, and weapons. (Guns and munitions featured in the trade but were often limited or prohibited by colonial authority depending on circumstance and necessity.)

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6 Cameron B. Wesson. *Households and Hegemony: Early Creek Prestige Goods, Symbolic Capital, and Social Power* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008) A possible explanation is Spanish items were traded among natives from Mexico to the Southeast.
Foodstuffs also featured prominently in the Indian trade. Food commodities included rum, salt, cornmeal, and meats. These items were usually not for consumption but instead used as medium of exchange between Natives and Europeans. Creeks also traded their labor within this system. Men worked as messengers and blacksmiths, while women worked in domestic jobs, cloth making and prostitution.\(^7\) Natives traded foodstuffs and their labor for prestige items. Increased availability to these items undermined traditional forms of leadership and Native emphasis on private property began to replace communal ideas. In Florida and the Southeast, this trade was dominated by Europeans for their own motives.

Two economic models created by Europeans guide the Creek economy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The first developed under the Spanish was a stability model. Europeans connected the Creek to the greater Atlantic economy but controlled the access to maintain Creek loyalties and prevent Natives from defecting to their Imperial rivals. Prestige items are used as gifts to maintain the cooperation of Creek leadership. The Indian Trade throughout Native territory was used to prevent the general population from turning to other imperial powers. This system was employed throughout Spanish rule in Florida. British governments employed the stability model during times of conflict. British Indian Agent John Stuart effectively used this model during the American Revolution to prevent the Creeks from joining the cause of the rebel colonies.\(^8\) The other model developed during British rule was a ‘for profit’ model. Policies of free trade allowed British merchants to venture into Creek Country to sell goods in exchange for deerskins. As previously mentioned, natives embraced the deerskin trade and the supply of deerskins to Europe increased dramatically. This model allowed Creeks to enter the market economy but exclusively through the terms dictated by British traders. Both

\(^7\) Robbie Ethridge. *Creek Country* Chapter 9

the stability and ‘for profit’ model were controlled by Europeans. In both systems Creeks were engaged in the Atlantic market economy but not on their own exclusive terms. This trade was dominated by Indian Traders.

The most prominent Indian traders who operated in South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida at the end of the American Revolution was the British trading firm of Panton, Leslie, and Company. When the Spanish regained control of Florida in 1783, the company negotiated an advantageous trade position in East and West Florida. William Panton and John Leslie began their business in the Indian trade in South Carolina and Georgia in 1775 just prior to the start of the American Revolution. East Florida Governor Patrick Tonyn appointed William Panton’s trading firm as the primary merchant to manage the Indian trade in late December 1775. Panton, Leslie, and the other partners in the firm were all British Loyalists. However, the American Revolution made it difficult for British merchants to remain in business. As the Revolution progressed, most of the firm’s partners relocated to East Florida to avoid arrest as Tories, traitors to the patriot cause. For the duration of the war, William Panton supplied both the Indians and the British with a variety of products including food, cloth, weapons, and munitions. During the closing months of the war, Panton joined his operation with John Leslie

9 Clinton Hough. *Florida Entaglements: The 1791 William Augustus Bowles Rebellion*. The following portions of the Panton, Leslie, and Company history are taken and adapted from my MA thesis.


12 Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Panton, Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847*, 39. Panton provided more than just goods to the British in East Florida; he also provided intelligence on forts in Havana, Spanish warships, and troop movements.
to form the Panton, Leslie, and Company.\textsuperscript{13} By the end of the Revolution, the two men had been supplying the Indian trade on behalf of the British for nearly eight years. Not wanting to abandon their business, they made the decision to remain in Florida following the colony’s transfer to Spain.

Spanish officials needed to maintain the Indian trade to ensure the support of the natives in East and West Florida. During the transfer process, Patrick Tonyn made overtures to the Spanish government on behalf of Panton, Leslie, and Company. He argued that the company’s presence was necessary for the well-being of the Indians in order to prevent them from trading with the nascent United States.\textsuperscript{14} One of the firm’s members, Thomas Forbes, met with the Spanish Ambassador in London to extoll the firm’s assets in East Florida, specifically the Indian demand for English-made goods and the firm’s existing infrastructure and network to export deerskins back to England. Both Tonyn and Forbes stressed to the Spanish Crown the important role of Panton, Leslie, and Company in maintaining Creek loyalty. The reward came in 1783 when Bernardo de Gálvez, Spanish governor of Louisiana, granted Panton, Leslie, and Company a temporary license to trade in Florida. However, the agreement included some caveats, including a requirement to begin selling Spanish-made goods to the Indians.\textsuperscript{15} While the license allowed the firm to continue operations, it was not permanent and was hardly favorable to the firm’s existing British trade connections. William Panton desired an exclusive trading relationship with the natives, similar to the one enjoyed under the British.

Following the British withdrawal from Florida, Panton began a long process to regain a de facto monopoly in the Indian trade. In East Florida, the new Spanish Governor, Vicente

\textsuperscript{13} Coker and Watson, \textit{Indian Traders}, 45.


Manuel de Zéspedes, acknowledged the greatest concern of his administration was to maintain Indian loyalty. Panton, Leslie, and Company provided the needed Indian gifts on credit to the Spanish government. Impressed by the men, Zéspedes agreed to advocate for their permanent license to conduct the Indian trade on Spain’s behalf in East Florida. Additionally, he allowed them to use the firm’s British connections in Nassau and the Bahamas to provide the needed goods. In exchange for the license, the company agreed to be loyal to the Spanish Crown and only use English goods when absolutely necessary, and only in the Indian trade. Zéspedes drafted a memorial to Spain’s King Carlos III detailing the agreement. Further, he emphasized Panton’s relationship with the mestizo Creek chief, Alexander McGillivray. Panton’s relationship with the Creek leader began prior to the war in Charleston, and McGillivray became a powerful ally in conducting business with the southeastern Indians. The arrangement under Zéspedes in East Florida was extremely favorable to Panton’s company; unfortunately, West Florida proved to be much more complicated and required the aid of McGillivray once again. In the late eighteenth century Creek mestizos, like McGillivray, created a new economic system for Creek Country but it is decidedly European.

Alexander McGillivray grew up in a Creek community with his Creek mother and with his Scottish father in Charleston, where he received a European education. After the war, he became a prominent owner of several plantations and numerous slaves. Several scholars, including Saunt, Braund, and DuVal, identify McGillivray as a part of a Creek transition toward a plantation agriculture and increased slave ownership. He represented this shift because he owned large tracts of land in Creek territory in Florida and Georgia and traded with both Spanish

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17 McGillivray is ever present in Creek scholarship and is the subject of numerous studies regarding the Creek. Each scholar mentioned included the idea McGillivray represents the shift away from semi-nomadic agriculture and hunting, toward sedentary plantation agriculture and property ownership.
and American merchants. His mixed cultural background and education made it easy for him to speak on behalf of the Creeks in a way Europeans understood. The Spanish, British, and American officials believed he spoke on behalf of all the Creek. He formed and led the Creek National Council, a group that conducted diplomacy with both Spain and the United States.\textsuperscript{18}

Aside from his dealings with imperial governments, McGillivray also worked with the numerous Indian traders who operated among the Creeks, specifically William Panton. The men most likely met before the Revolution during their time in Charleston.\textsuperscript{19} Following the war, the Spanish East Florida governor emphasized the relationship Panton held with McGillivray in his endorsement of Panton’s license to conduct the Indian trade on behalf of Spain.

Establishing a trade agreement in West Florida was difficult for Panton, Leslie, and Company. As part of their arrangement in East Florida, the company negotiated a passport to trade at the fort on the St. Marks River on Florida’s west coast. The agreement gave the firm an entry to West Florida, but it was a tenuous position because Spain’s royal officials in Madrid transferred St. Marks to West Florida. Panton’s agreement was with the East Florida governor, potentially negating the passport to trade at the St. Marks River. Adding to Panton’s difficulty, West Florida Governor Esteban Rodríguez Miró desired to place the Indian trade in the control of Spanish merchants. Fortunately, Alexander McGillivray convinced Miró of the threat posed by American traders to the Indians in West Florida. Unofficially, Panton, Leslie, and Company made McGillivray a silent partner in their company. In exchange, McGillivray promised Panton Creek cooperation and threatened the Spanish government with Indian rebellion if they did not

\textsuperscript{18} Saunt, \textit{A New Order of Things}, 38-63. There is a prodigious amount of primary source documents created by and about Alexander McGillivray. This evidence has led to his title as the “Greatest Creek Chief,” curious given he was only half Creek, which demonstrates the fluid nature of Creek identity.

\textsuperscript{19} Coker and Watson, \textit{Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Panton, Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847}, 65-66. Panton was older than McGillivray, but his position as clerk and more importantly, a Scotsman, would have led to encounters between Panton and fellow Scotsman, Lachlan McGillivray, Alexander’s father.
grant favorable business terms for the firm. Panton, Leslie, and Company persuaded Miró to allow the firm a temporary license to trade in West Florida. However, he also gave licenses to another British trading firm, Mather, Strother, and Company. Spain’s reluctance to include non-Spanish merchants in the Indian trade was not the only challenge facing the Indians and Panton, Leslie, and Company. The United States posed an increasing threat to Spain, the Indians, and the company.

United States’s land claims in the Southeast destabilized the Indian population and threatened Spain’s influence over the Indians in East and West Florida. Between 1785 and 1787, the governments of Georgia and North Carolina made extremely aggressive land claims in the Southeast, including parts of Florida. In response, McGillivray mobilized a force of Creek Indians to resist the Georgian claims to their land and demanded gunpowder and weapons from Spain. Spanish officials in Florida, eager to stay out of the conflict, initially refused McGillivray’s request, a decision that effectively halted Spanish trade with the Creek. McGillivray attempted to trade directly with British merchants in Nassau through the port on the St. Mark’s River. He asserted that the British gave the Creek control of the St. Marks River and therefore its use as a free port was part of Creek claims honored during West Florida’s transfer to Spain. Without such concessions, McGillivray further threatened that the Creek might have to sign a peace settlement with the United States. Miró was concerned about unrestricted British trade and the loss of Creek support. Panton, alarmed by the possibility that other Nassau merchants would circumvent his own relationship with the Creek, urged Miró to resume the Indian trade and support the Creek. Miró consented and agreed to provide munitions. The West Florida

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22 Coker and Watson, *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands: Panton, Leslie & Company and John Forbes & Company, 1783-1847*, 117. Miró claimed the munitions were to allow the Creek to defend themselves from bears (Eighteenth century plausible deniability).
governor contracted Panton, Leslie, and Company to deliver gunpowder and arms to the Creek. As a result, Miró conceded the necessity of maintaining peaceful trade ties with the Creek. In a 1788 memorial to the Crown, he supported Panton, Leslie, and Company’s favorable trade status. Their position in the Indian trade was fragile, but Panton and company established what became a de facto monopoly in the Florida Indian trade.

Panton, Leslie, and Company immense and lengthy operations created an incredible amount of documents located in archives across the world. A bulk of the company’s records were microfilmed by the University of West Florida, also home to the author of the only work entirely dedicated to the company, William Coker. *Indian Traders of the Southeastern Spanish Borderlands*, published in 1985, is a comprehensive work detailing the company’s entire history from its inception under Spanish rule in 1783 through its end in the newly created US state of Florida in 1847. The work credits the company’s success to “loyalty to purse rather than flag.”

In practice this success was maintained through bribery in the forms of gifts and profit sharing with Spanish officials and native leaders. Fitting with the company’s purpose to maintain Native loyalties to Spain, the company’s early history is deeply connected to the mestizo, Alexander McGillivray. As previously mentioned, McGillivray played a key role in securing the company’s trading privileges in Florida. While *Indian Traders* detailed this relationship, it finds little need to focus on actual natives. Indians appear throughout the work but, only four pages are solely dedicated to the various Indian groups in the Indian trade. The work is overwhelmingly Eurocentric: European traders, European imperial powers, or natives of mixed European heritage. There is remarkably little voice given to Natives in an economic system designed to cater to Native needs.

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Panton, Leslie, and Company’s operations extended from its warehouses in Nassau, Bahamas, west to New Orleans. The company’s primary trading post in East Florida was located at St. Augustine and in West Florida at San Marcos de Apalache. Goods from Great Britain arrived in Nassau to be distributed across the firm’s Florida trading posts. In the opposite direction, Creek deerskins were bought and shipped back to Europe. At the height of the deerskin trade in the late eighteenth century, Panton, Leslie, and Company was a major supplier of deerskins to Europe and by 1790 they supplied half of all the deerskins sold in London.\(^{24}\) In the eighteenth century deerskins were the major export from Creek Country to the greater Atlantic Economy.

Deerskins were the main commodity traded by the Creeks and represented a change to traditional economics. The Deerskin trade was extremely valuable to the Southern economy in the late colonial era. Deer hunting and the selling of skins was a traditional activity modified to suit the commercial market.\(^ {25}\) In this sense hunters actually used the market economy to their advantage making them innovators controlling their own economic future. Between 1715 and 1770 the total value of exported deerskins increased from 10,000 pounds sterling to 57,750. While these numbers suggest steady growth, the price of deerskins actually declined following 1748 and the yearly volume of deerskins actually reached a low point by 1767.\(^ {26}\) One possible conclusion to draw from this data is that Southeastern Indians, including the Creek, responded to the market and switched to other economic activities following the decline in deerskin prices. This is a demonstration of Indian agency in the Atlantic economy. The switch in Native economic activities...


activity is supported by Braund and Saunt’s works on the Creek in Florida, Georgia and Alabama.

Creek country was heavily influenced by the Europeans. This influence extended beyond political boundaries through mixed marriages and the mixed blood, mestizo children of those relationships. Mestizos played an important role in Creek society in the late eighteenth century. Braund argued it was the mestizo who solidified the relationships between the Creek and the United States, explicitly stating it resulted “in a cultural and economic storm over which they had no control.”27 Mestizos became the dominant voice in Creek Country and the pure Creek folkways began to disappear. Saunt used the Creek mestizo chief Alexander McGillivray as the perfect example of the shift in the Creek economy and governance. He represented a change from the traditional economy of subsistence agriculture, hunting and matrilineal governance to plantation agriculture and patriarchal leadership.28 McGillivray owned large amounts of land and slaves. Further he helped form the Creek National Council, a form of government over all of Creek Country that superseded the smaller Creek towns and their traditional matriarchal leadership. McGillivray and other mestizo Creeks dominated the council, setting the course of Creek Country. Saunt referred to this change in Creek Country as “the new order of things,” a quote used by US Indian Agent Benjamin Hawkins to describe the shift. In practice this meant increased focus on wealth acquisition, private property and national government. Saunt and Braund both credit the emergence of more European economic and government systems to the influence of mestizo Creek leaders. These changes occurred over a thirty year period following the end of the American Revolution and resulted in internecine violence.

27 Kathryn Braund. Deerskins & Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685–1815, 185.
Mestizo influence created a division between the “new order” and traditional Creeks that resulted in the Redstick War between 1813 to 1814. The Creek National Council centered around the towns of Coweta, Kashita, and Tuckabatche. These towns and their leaders were part of the shift in Creek society towards more European economic practices. More traditional Creeks lived outside this core geographic area. Creeks living on the periphery, primarily Lower Creek towns, identified with a growing pan-Indian movement led by Tecumseh. This movement called for a return to native folkways. Conflicts soon emerged over private property that the Creek Council labeled crimes. What began as a limited series of perceived crimes by traditionalists against their more modern kinsmen devolved into a Creek civil war. The “criminals” used the red stick of justice as the symbol for their cause against the change in Creek society. The Redstick War lasted for two years and created a division in Creek Country that was exploited by Americans. The US government chose to intervene on behalf of the “civilized” Creeks, attacked the Redsticks, and ultimately created the terms to end the conflict. The ensuing treaty ceded the Southern half of Creek Country to the United States government.

The Redstick War is evidence of a challenge to the “new order of things” but within the historical narratives of the Creeks this uniquely native voice is often missing or relegated to a lesser role in Creek affairs. The dominant narrative of historians such as Saunt and Braund cast the mestizo Creeks as the leading voice in governance and economics. Traditional Creek towns are present but superseded by more European notions of political organization, like the Creek National Council, even the concept of a “Creek Country.” Beyond politics, Europeans in this narrative are also the driving force in Creek economics. Creeks react to and cooperate with Europeans, and the evidence previously mentioned supports these conclusions. The

29 Saunt, A New Order of Things, 251. These towns were located in present day Georgia and Alabama

monopolies of Indian Traders like Panton, Leslie, and Company demonstrate an aligned interest between Creeks and Europeans. These monopolies were even supported by Creek leadership who favored the restriction of trade to men who were personally known to the Creek.\textsuperscript{31} However, Indian Traders are ultimately evidence of European control of the Creek economy even if it is with Creek support.

Original Creek sources are limited, forcing historians to examine the record left by Europeans to discover their voices hidden within the record. Finding the Creek perspective in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century is challenging. Creek Mestizos are one voice in the politics and economics but they are not uniquely Creek. They still represent European ideas and interests. Alexander McGillivray and his Creek supporters embraced plantation agriculture, slave ownership, private property, and national governments, all European in origin. Saunt and Braund’s arguments are well researched and it’s hard to dispute Mestizos led Creek Country both economically and politically in the late eighteenth century. The ensuing Redstick War demonstrated a traditional voice but it was a reaction to European ideas. These narrative do not account for any outliers, individuals that are not mestizo or traditionalists. Creeks are either controlled by Europeans, cooperating with Europeans, or resisting Europeans. Inside these economic metrics there is no room for a uniquely Creek economic way.

Focused on the history of Florida and the Panton, Leslie, and Company there is a unique outlier from the dominant narratives of Creek economics, William Augustus Bowles. Bowles was a British officer during the American Revolution turned adventurer in West Florida in the post-war years. While serving with the British army in West Florida, he lived among the Creek, married a Lower Creek woman and had children.\textsuperscript{32} Bowles claimed it was at this time he was

\textsuperscript{31} Kathryn Braund. \textit{Deerskins & Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815}, 49.

united to the Creek people. After the war while giving an interview in London, Bowles described his time among the Creek as “a situation so flattering to the independence natural in the heart of man” and his relationship as “doubly united to them, both from inclination, and the ties of blood; and his children were living pledges of… fidelity.” Bowles’s claims are one-sided as there is little to corroborate how the Creek felt about him. However, they serve to illustrate the image Bowles wished to convey to the public. During this same time Bowles claimed the Lower Creek village he lived in made him a citizen. The Creek and other Indian tribes adopted Europeans as members of the town or tribe as an honorific to facilitate trade or other negotiations. Citizenship was usually a means to an end for the Creek. In this manner, Bowles’s citizenship could simply be a result of his marriage to a Creek woman or as means to bind the British for the town’s own purposes. When the Spanish invaded Mobile, he raised a Creek war party and aided the British defense. After the war he accepted a land grant in the Bahamas as part of his officer’s pension. While in Nassau he became friendly with the local merchants looking to find a new way to enter the Florida Indian trade following the recent transfer of Florida back to Spain. Among those British traders was William Panton, where he established warehouses for his company’s future monopoly in Florida. Others traders saw an opportunity in Bowles. Miller and Bonamy

33 Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles, 13. During Bowles’ time in London in 1791, he became a minor celebrity and gave an interview which was later published in various newspapers in London.

34 Theda Perdue “Mixed Blood” Indians: Racial Construction in the Early South (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003) 72. Each Creek village incorporated foreigners as necessitated by their individual needs and purposes. Some were made citizens, entirely integrated into the village and received its full protection. Others held a preferential or respected status, one that signified their relationship to the village, and this status could change as it fit the needs of the village.


36 Wright, William Augustus Bowles, 17. Bowles’s land grant was for five hundred acres on the Island of Eleuthera.
were just one of the Nassau merchants eager to access the Florida Indian Trade. Bowles made an easy ally due to his connections among the Lower Creek in West Florida.

Bowles and the Miller and Bonamy Company tried to supply the Creek in East and West Florida three separate times in 1788, 1792, and most successfully between 1800 and 1803. The initial plan in 1788 was hastily organized, fell apart within just two months, and it never developed into lasting trade between the Creek and Nassau. Bowles's second attempt in 1792 was significantly better planned and executed although it too ultimately ended in failure. He was arrested by the Spanish and sent to Spain for trial. It is during the second attempt Bowles clearly articulated his intentions and provided evidence of Creek economic agency free from the established imperial powers, mestizos, or traditional Creeks.

Bowles's letters between 1789 and 1793 consistently advocated for independent Creek trade in the Atlantic. During a visit to London in 1791, Bowles met with the British home secretary William Windham Grenville and lobbied the British government to acknowledge the Creek Free State of Muskogee in West Florida. While full diplomatic recognition of a sovereign Creek State was never achieved, Grenville granted vessels flying a Creek flag permission to enter the port of Nassau to trade freely. While in London, Bowles also met with the Spanish ambassador to continue his advocacy for Creek free trade privileges. Bowles's plans met with no Spanish approval as it circumvented Spain's control of the Creek economy through Panton,

37 Bowles landed on the Indian River south of St. Augustine where he attempted to convince the Indians they encountered to trade horses for cloth, but few proved able, as they did not have horses they were willing to trade or anything of value to trade for Bowles's merchandise. Bowles became frustrated and blamed the nearby Panton, Leslie, and Company operations for his inability to trade with the native Indians. While he wavered, Spanish officials at St. Augustine received intelligence of Bowles's plan and dispatched soldiers to arrest him and his followers. After hearing reports that Spanish soldiers approached, most of Bowles's men deserted and eventually surrendered to the Spanish garrison at St. Augustine. Bowles fled to West Florida without men or supplies.

38 Letter from Bowles to Lord Grenville, Adelphi, January 7, 1791, Archivo General de Indias, PC, leg. 2372.

39 Din, War on the Gulf Coast, 34-36; Wright, William Augustus Bowles, 48–53.
Leslie, and Company. Unsurprisingly, the Spanish minister denied Bowles’s requests.\textsuperscript{40} Despite the failure, Bowles continued to lobby the Spanish government on behalf of the Creek.

While returning to Nassau from London in 1791, Bowles’s plan to free the Creek from Spanish economic control continued to evolve. In a letter to Spanish King Carlos III, he declared the independence of the Creek State. Most importantly in economic terms for the Creek, the declaration demanded free use of several hundred miles of the Florida coastline, “the benefit of navigation of their seas,” and two free ports, one in Apalachicola and the other at Cape Florida.\textsuperscript{41} These ports and navigation rights would allow the Creek to trade freely with any nation, independent of the Spanish, Panton, Leslie, and Company, or any other Indian Trader. Upon returning to Nassau in the summer of 1791, Bowles almost immediately set sail for the West Coast of Florida under the Creek Muskogee flag.

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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Muskogee_Flag_August_1802.jpg}
\caption{Muskogee Flag (August 15, 1802), \textit{Archivo General de Indias, MP-Banderas, 13BIS}.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{40} Letter from Marqués del Campo to Floridablanca, London, April 15, 1791, \textit{Archivo Histórico Nacional}, Est., leg. 3889bis, exped. 10, no. 8. All three meetings are detailed in this letter in addition to Campo’s reaction to Bowles’s request and an appraisal of Bowles.

\textsuperscript{41} “Letter from William Augustus Bowles to King Carlos IV” (April 15, 1791), \textit{Archivo General de Simancas}: Est, Leg,8148. This letter was in effect a Declaration of Independence for the Creek state of Muscogee. Numerous copies exist in the Spanish Archives, but the original is housed in the General Archive of Simancas.
Bowles’s 1792 to 1793 operation ended in failure. Muskogee never came into being and Bowles was captured by the Spanish. Two parts of this operation help to ascertain Creek motivations outside of the traditional narrative of Creek economics: the amount of Creek support Bowles held and the attack on the Panton, Leslie, and Company’s store on the Wakulla River. Following Bowles’s arrival on the West Coast he met with tribal chiefs in Coweta, the heart of Creek Country. He denounced Mestizos like McGillivray and the Panton, Leslie, and Company. He asked for support in the form of men to aid him building the free ports at the mouth of the Apalachicola River. Bowles request was well received however, a few towns remained loyal to McGillivray and walked out. Despite those few towns, Bowles left Coweta with numerous Creek supporters. Reports vary on how many actually were with him on the coast when the Spanish encountered him, the numbers range from two hundred and fifty to one thousand.\(^{42}\) The other part of this operation that demonstrated the Creek willingness to create a unique Creek economic system was the attack on the Panton, Leslie, and Company store on the Wakulla River. Bowles and his supporters sacked the store for supplies and used them to begin building Creek port facilities. Bowles’s letter to the various Spanish officials in 1789 clearly indicate his own animosity towards Panton, Leslie, and Company.\(^{43}\) The actual attack supported by the Creek is evidence of their own desire to break from the monopoly held by Spain through the Company. Both the presence of Creeks with Bowles and the attack against Panton, Leslie, and Company indicate support of a Creek plan for trade outside of the current narrative of Creek economics. Shortly after the attack, Bowles was captured and shipped back to Spain for trial. In

\(^{42}\) “Diary of events from the departure from New Orleans on the commission the Governor charged me with,” hereafter abbreviated as Hevia Diary, February 15–18, 1792, AGS, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50. Bowles to Hevia, no. 5, “From my camp,” February 22, 1792, and Hevia to Bowles, San Marcos de Apalache, February 24, 1792; Hevia Diary, February 25, 1792, both attached to Hevia Diary, in Archivo General de Simancas, GM, leg. 6916, exped. 50.

\(^{43}\) Bowles to Floridablanca, 30 August 1789, C.O. 23/ 15/ 251. See also Bowles to the Governor of St. Augustine, 21 August 1789, C.O. 23/ 15/ 247– 48; Bowles to the Governor of Havana, 21 August 1789, C.O. 23/ 15/ 244– 46.
October 1792, the court received the summary of a “talk” by the Creek chiefs at Coweta. They implored the King of Spain to release Bowles, adding that they wished to “hold the Spaniards by one hand and the English in the other.” The chiefs requests went unanswered but, Bowles returned six years later in a more successful operation.

Between 1793 and 1799, Bowles stood trial in Cadiz and was imprisoned in the Philippines, as he posed a threat to Spanish rule in Florida. In 1796, Bowles engineered his escape from the Philippines in a feat of daring when he jumped off a Spanish ship transporting him back to Spain while off the coast of Africa and he swam to shore. He managed to secure passage on a ship bound to London, where in 1798 he found another ship to take him back to Florida. In late 1799, Bowles reappeared on the Florida Gulf Coast, gathered support from the Lower Creek and Seminoles, and captured the Spanish Fort de San Marcos. During the next three years Bowles and his Native supporters battled against the Spanish for control of the fort and the surrounding coast. British merchants brought trade goods and weapons from Nassau to support Bowles. In exchange the Natives traded deerskins directly to Nassau. The trade never reached a stable level as Spanish patrol vessels attempted to prevent British merchants from reaching Bowles and his Native supporters. As in the 1792 operation, Bowles’s show of support from Natives (this time sustained for a three year period) demonstrated a Native commitment to finding another option for their economic future, a rebellion against the “new order.”

Bowles’s exploits in Florida are chronicled in a recent work by historian Gilbert Din. This detailed biography of Bowles relies on Spanish sources to understand Bowles’s time in Florida between 1791 and 1803. Din’s use of Spanish sources leads him to conclude Bowles was a “malicious interloper” and a self-serving man who destabilized Spanish Florida. Din portrays Bowles as a man whose interests are British and who served the British Empire at the expense

44 “To his Catholic Majesty of Spain, A Talk from the Kings, Chiefs, & Warriors of the Creek Nation,” dated October 24, 1792. Estado 3889bis, expediente 10, no. 56.
45 Din, War on the Gulf Coast, 55-76.
of the Creeks, not as a leader of the Creeks. This work covers Bowles’s entire time in Florida and the Gulf Coast from the American Revolution through Bowles’s final arrest in 1803. His analysis of Bowles rests on three factors: Nassau merchants’ ambition to recover the Indian trade; Indian desire for access to cheap English goods; and the general enmity between Spain and Great Britain in the late eighteenth century. In this narrative Bowles’s Rebellion was a negative force that undermined legitimate Creek authorities. Din depicted the Floridas, and the entire Gulf coast region, in a state of flux, as Great Britain, France, and Spain transferred control of the region amongst themselves. Bowles took advantage of this situation for his own financial benefit and that of his British allies in Nassau. Bowles’s actions to create an independent Creek state ultimately failed, and began the process of more powerful forces entering Florida and competing with an imperial Spain in decline. Regardless of Bowles’s status as a Creek leader or not, Din’s narrative focused on Bowles as disruptive influence to the existing economic situation. Instead it can be interpreted as another economic option. Bowles’s sustained Creek support for over ten years indicates native leaders searched for new ways to profit from the situation separate from mestizos and the “new order” of subservience to imperial powers or the traditionalists like the Redsticks. Placed in this context, Bowles’s and the Creeks are caught in a highly contested Borderland space.

Creeks found an economic an ally in Bowles. Together they represented a unique endeavor in the Atlantic and Borderlands economy. David Narrett explored the changing economic practice in the borderlands through the practices of adventurism and intrigue. Adventurers were people, such as Bowles, independently engaged in commercial endeavors or ventures. Intrigues were the imperial and native agendas they carried out. The idea of adventure and intrigue is particularly applicable in Bowles’s plans for Florida. Bowles intended

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47 Kathryn Braund. Deerskins & Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 56.

to promote a business venture, establishing free trade between the Lower Creeks in Florida and Nassau’s merchants. Narrett characterized Bowles as a British adventurer because of his actions on behalf of British merchant interests in Nassau. This view does not fully account for Creek support. In essence, Bowles was not just an English adventurer but also a Creek adventurer. Bowles's interview from London in 1790 and his letters while imprisoned in Spain reiterate his loyalties to the Creek and to the British Crown. His economic plan was not purely for the benefit of British merchants, but also to gain a more favorable trade situation for the Creek. Creeks acted through Bowles and visa-versa and neither story is easy to place in the existing historiography about Bowles or the Creeks.

Bowles Rebellion in Florida between 1788 and 1803 does not fit within the existing narrative of the mestizo led Creek economy. The leading view from Braund and Saunt depict a struggle within Creek society. European educated mestizos like Alexander Mcgillivray demonstrate a change in the Creek way of life from traditional agriculture and hunting towards larger scale plantation agriculture and slave ownership. These conclusions are difficult to dispute. Panton, Leslie, and Company (and its successor the John Forbes Company) maintained Spanish, and then United States, control of Florida Native access to international trade through their alliances with mestizo Creeks. Beyond Florida, the ultimate victory of the Upper Creeks and the “new order of things” over the traditionalist Redsticks and Lower Creek in the Redstick War proves the mestizo led Creek dominated the economic and political life of Creek Country. However, this struggle does not tell the whole story. Bowles Rebellion is evidence of Florida Natives, mostly Lower Creeks and Seminoles, attempt to create an alternate economy of free trade within the Atlantic, free from the restrictions of imperial power or their agents, mestizo or European. Bowles actions do not fit neatly into the narrative and deserve a second look to better understand the economics of Creek Country.

49 Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles, 13; Letter from Bowles to Aranda, Cádiz, dated June 18, 1792, Archivo Historico Nacional, Consejo 21067, No 507. Bowles is consistent in his assertions that his actions are on behalf of the Creeks throughout the archival record.
While it’s tempting to look at the events surrounding Bowles as a clear show of Creek support, it is still flawed; Bowles was British. He was backed by British merchants from Nassau. He sought British and Spanish government support for his proposed independent Creek state. In this regard, Bowles is another example of European attempts to control the Creek. The value in studying Bowles and finding other examples is because it does not fit into the traditional versus modernist Creek narrative. It demonstrated the variations the Creek people took as they tried to negotiate the emerging market economy. There was no unified path for the Creek. Men like Alexander McGillivray found cooperation with Europeans as the most successful path for him and his followers. Redsticks embraced traditional Creek ways and chose to violently resist the change. Bowles and his supporters attempted to create a path free of both groups, another “new order.”
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