

Dragging Canoe

Tsiyu Gansini (ᎠᎵᎦ ᎶᎠᎵᎦ), "He is dragging his canoe", known to whites as **Dragging Canoe**, (c. 1738 – March 1, 1792) was a Cherokee war chief who led a band of Cherokee against colonists and United States settlers. Beginning during the American Revolution, his forces were sometimes joined by Upper Muskogee, Chickasaw, Shawnee, and Indians from other tribes/nations, along with British Loyalists, French and Spanish agents. The series of conflicts, lasting for a decade after the American Revolutionary War, were known as Chickamauga Wars. Dragging Canoe became the pre-eminent war leader among the Indians of the Southeast of his time. He served as principal chief of the Lower Cherokee from 1777 until his death in 1792, when he was succeeded by his pick, John Watts.

Biography

He was the son of *Attakullakulla* ("Little Carpenter" in English), who was born to the Nipissing and captured and adopted as an infant by the Cherokee, making him one of the tribe. His mother was *Nionne Ollie*, born to the Natchez and adopted as a captive by Oconostota's household.^[1]

They lived with the Overhill Cherokee on the Little Tennessee River. Dragging Canoe survived smallpox at a young age, which left his face marked. According to Cherokee legend, his name is derived from an incident in his early childhood. He tried to prove his readiness for war by carrying a canoe, but could only drag it.

War chief of the Cherokee

Dragging Canoe first took part in battle during the Anglo-Cherokee War (1759–1761). In its aftermath, he was recognized as one of the strongest opponents to encroachment by settlers from the British colonies onto American Indian, especially Cherokee, land. Eventually he became the chief of Great Island Town (*Amoyeli Egwa* in Cherokee, written Mialaquo by the British) on the Little Tennessee River.

When the Cherokee opted to join in the fighting of the American Revolution on the side of the British, Dragging Canoe was at the head of one of the major attacks. After the colonial militias' destruction of the Cherokee Middle (Hill), Valley, and Lower Towns, his father and Oconostota wanted to sue for peace. Refusing to give up, Dragging Canoe led a band of the Overhill Cherokee out of the towns.

They migrated to the area surrounding Chickamauga River (South Chickamauga Creek) in the present-day Chattanooga area, where they established eleven towns in 1777, including the one later referred to as "Old Chickamauga Town." It was across the river from where John McDonald had a trading post. From their location, they were called the Chickamauga by frontiersmen, who later called them the Lower Cherokee.

In 1782 their towns were destroyed again. The band moved further down the Tennessee River, establishing the "Five Lower Towns" below the obstructions of the Tennessee River Gorge: Running Water (now Whiteside), Nickajack (near the cave of the same name), Long Island (on the Tennessee River), Crow Town (at the mouth of Crow Creek), and Lookout Mountain Town (at the site of the current Trenton, Georgia). From his base at Running Water, Dragging Canoe led attacks on white settlements all over the American Southeast, especially against the colonists on the Holston, Watauga, and Nolichucky rivers in East Tennessee. He also attacked the Cumberland River settlements in Middle Tennessee (after 1780), and raided into Kentucky and Virginia as well. His brothers Little Owl, the Badger, and Turtle-at-Home fought with his forces.

Death

Dragging Canoe died March 1, 1792, from exhaustion or an apparent heart attack after dancing all night celebrating the recent conclusion of alliance with the Muskogee and the Choctaw. He did not succeed in reaching such an agreement with the Chickasaw. They were also celebrating a recent victory by a Chickamauga war band on the Cumberland River settlements.

Legacy

He is considered by many to be the most significant Native Americans leader of the Southeast. Some historians consider him a role model for the younger Tecumseh, who was a member of a band of Shawnee living with the Chickamauga/Lower Cherokee and taking part in their wars. He picked John Watts, also known as Young Tassel, as his successor as war chief.

References

[1] Klink and Talman, *The Journal of Major John Norton*, p. 42

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