

Tribal Grant Preserves Chickasaw Village Site

By Richard Green

Mississippi Ridgetop Historically Significant

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Last May, the Chickasaw Nation provided a grant to the Archaeological Conservancy, a private, non-profit organization, to purchase approximately 35 acres of ridge-top land in southwestern Lee County, Mississippi. The tract of land encompasses much of the remainder of a historically significant 18th century Chickasaw village site, Tchichatala, and the remains of many ancestral Chickasaws buried there. They will continue to rest undisturbed, through the grant agreement signed by the Conservancy and Chickasaw Nation. The following is an account of how this collaborative agreement was accomplished, some historical information about Tchichatala (chi-cha-ta-la) and future plans.

The Beasleys

In 1963, John Ray and Lottye Betts Beasley moved their family and their entire house, filled with all their possessions, from Tupelo, Mississippi, to a farm a few miles out of town on Highway 6 near the Lee and Pontotoc county line.

They put down their house in place by a forest of cedar and hardwood trees that runs along a ridge. Walking along the ridgetop through the forest, the Beasleys could see through clearings a valley far below and Coonewah Creek, which paralleled the ridge for miles to the north and south.

They didn't know it at the time, but this magnificent view to the east and south had been for the Chickasaws living there 250 years before, an important and excellent vantage point from which to spot approaching enemies, especially the Choctaw.

It wasn't long before John Ray started seeing evidence of the earlier occupation. In many places, it was just a matter of looking down. Even on a short walk, he could see a scattering of potsherds. He occasionally found glass trade beads, pieces of badly rusted metal and ornaments.

When he plowed his fields, even a greater abundance of material turned up. This included hoes, axes, gun barrels, coins, many more glass beads, and disturbingly, pieces of bone that in some cases were clearly human. After awhile, it seemed obvious that Chickasaws had lived on this land that he had named Cedarscape.

John Ray knew that if he got a metal detector and a shovel, he would undoubtedly find many more artifacts, including an assortment of European trade goods. But, he had seen the human bones and assumed that he would also hit graves. So, he decided that he would not dig for artifacts, nor would he permit others to do so.

Over the years, John Ray and Lottye Betts learned more about the Chickasaw occupation in the Tupelo area. More recently, they had learned from their neighbor up Coonewah Ridge, Steve Cook, that at least a portion of their property had been a Chickasaw village that the French had called Tchichatala (or some variation of the spelling).

In 1980, Cook and two other artifact collectors, Julian Riley and Buddy Palmer, wrote a paper fixing known historic Chickasaw village names to sites in the greater Tupelo area. Last year, Cook began producing an expanded and improved version of the paper largely based on a trade bead-dating system he has devised.

Earlier this year, the Beasleys decided it was time to move to a smaller place. They knew that the easiest and most profitable way to divest themselves of Cedarscape would be to sell the land to housing developers. An up-scale housing division already had been built adjacent to Cedarscape. They realized, however, that such development would unearth if not destroy remnants of the buried village of Tchichatala, including some human remains.

The Village Materializes

About this time, Cook and Riley were using magnetometers on Cook's land--thought by them to be the Chickasaw village, Falacheco (fala-chek-oh)--to trace segments of burned daub. Chickasaws used daub (clay) in the construction of their buildings; the daub may have been burned when Choctaws, according to a French account, attacked the villages. Cook and Riley made the tracings of underground daub visible by sticking surveyor's flags in the ground at short intervals. The result was depictions of what appeared to be walls of numerous circular-shaped winter houses, other structures and fort walls. (The application of this technology has not yet been tested for reliability, but the sizes and shapes are remarkably similar to those described by English trader James Adair and various French reporters.)

Cook found the same patterns on and near the ridge at Cedarscape. The implanted flags left an imprint of that part of the village. It was one thing to speculate about a Chickasaw village but quite another to see outlines of the houses and fortified walls.

The Beasleys had a dilemma. They wanted to sell Cedarscape but not to developers, and who else would want this prime real estate but developers?

Preservation Initiatives

Governor Bill Anoatubby's active interest in protecting and preserving tribal village sites in the Tupelo area dates to 1994. At the time, the tribe knew almost nothing about village locations and it had little or no ability to buy land or influence Mississippians.

Nevertheless, the governor sent tribal representatives to Tupelo to begin talking and drumming up interest. Later, a village site was accidentally unearthed during expansion of a medical center in Tupelo, and the tribe was called to consult during the excavation and was allowed to rebury the remains and funerary objects near the original site.

Afterwards, the tribe got occasional calls from Mississippians reporting desecrations of Chickasaw graves or warnings of the impending destruction of sites due to land development.

Gov. Anoatubby supported a tribal initiative to convene a first-ever meeting in Tupelo of persons representing all interest groups who theoretically could collaborate in saving village sites. These included Chickasaw representatives, local officials, landowners and archaeologists. Also invited were artifact collectors, who were key because they had the broadest knowledge of the locations of intact or mostly intact sites.

The participants agreed that preserving village sites was a worthy goal, but saving them would require someone to buy the land intended to be preserved. Who would it be? And even if someone stepped forward, which site had priority?

The meeting adjourned with no commitments except to continue to meet on an as-needed basis. Months passed. Then, one of the participants of the meeting, Jessica Crawford, contacted me to ask if Gov. Anoatubby would be willing to entertain a proposal to help her employer, the Archaeological Conservancy, purchase some tracts of land in the Tupelo area that encompassed important Chickasaw village sites.

Anoatubby knew that the Conservancy had an excellent reputation. It had been acquiring and preserving the best of this nation's archaeological sites since its founding as a non-profit organization in 1980. So, he convened a meeting in his office last December. Crawford and her supervisor, Alan Gruber, presented a proposal that listed three tracts of land in the Tupelo area that were known to be village sites and to be for sale.

The Conservancy did not prioritize the tracts except to note that one landowner, the Beasleys, were anxious to move and wanted to sell their land to the Conservancy, which they knew would preserve the land. The focus of the meeting turned to Cedarscape/Tchichatala.

A Brief History

No one could say how old the village was, but the earliest European trade beads found there date to about 1685, according to Cook. Trader James Adair listed it as Shatara--one of five villages arrayed along a 10-mile long ridgetop as of 1720. "In rapid speech the first syllable of chisa' tends to disappear, which accounts for its occasionally heard as Shatala, wrote Professor John Dyson in Mississippi Archaeology article on Chickasaw village names.

In 1708, an abundance of plum trees or bushes were noted near the villages along the ridgetop. A century later, a surveyor noted that the land was a prairie of gray clay and fossil shells. If a forest had existed, the villagers had harvested the trees for housing, defense and cooking.

After 1720, increasing Choctaw attacks apparently caused the residents to abandon three of these villages within five years. Since Tchichatala was the last to go, about 1734-35, it is likely that the village contained persuasive French sympathizers. The fact that France and the Choctaws were allies, saved Tchichatala from the worst attacks until French bounties for Chickasaw scalps became so attractive that the Choctaw could no longer restrain themselves.

The villagers took the name, Tchichatala, with them. Two French maps of the Chickasaw villages, one drawn in 1733 and one in 1737, clearly show that Tchichatala had changed locations.

The people moved a few miles to the northeast, to consolidate for defensive purposes with other villages within a settlement known as Old Town. The people remained within Old Town until the 1780s, when, according to Cook, some Chickasaws returned to the site on Coonewah ridge. Some were probably descendants of the original residents. They remained there until about 1800 when Chickasaws began leaving the villages to work widely dispersed family farms.

Chickasaw Grant

After the historical perspective was discussed, Gov. Anoatubby told the small group assembled in his office that he felt a strong obligation to preserve Chickasaw village sites. In the case of Tchichatala, he and Chickasaw Enterprises CEO Brian Campbell discussed providing a grant for the preservation of this land. And he left no doubt that he believed all details would be worked out satisfactorily by the Conservancy and his staff.

With the Chickasaw grant, the Conservancy purchased nearly 35 acres from the Beasleys in May. The agreement also included the Beasleys' 2,800 square house (which they will leave partially furnished), a fully furnished guesthouse, and a variety of barns and sheds. The land also contains two ponds.

As of early June, the Conservancy and Chickasaw Nation are jointly working out general guidelines for management of the property. For example, selected, carefully scrutinized research projects may be conducted at Tchichatala, but no burials may be disturbed. Preservation efforts also will involve several varieties of endangered native plants. In addition, plants that were important to 18th century Chickasaws will be preserved or re-introduced to the site.

Future Plans

Within the next year, the Beasleys will be moving out of their house and into one that they are constructing on adjacent land. From there, John Ray and Lottye Betts will continue to patrol their former property to keep out trespassers. The property will be fenced and a locked gate erected at the entrance. Meanwhile, some tribal officials will be periodically spending time at Tchichatala in preparation for an exciting new development.

Explicitly stated in the agreements between the Conservancy and the Chickasaw Nation is the option for the tribe to lease the property in perpetuity for a nominal annual fee. That would enable the tribe, says Gov. Anoatubby, to develop a retreat and educational center for visiting Chickasaw

citizens. "What a tremendous experience for Chickasaws to walk upon the land of our ancestors," he said. "Chickasaws will see where and learn how our people lived 300 years ago."

There could be Chickasaw language classes. Think of that, the Chickasaw language spoken by our people on that ridgetop once again."

Standing at Tchichatala recently, Kirk Perry, tribal administrator of Heritage Preservation, said "good feelings" swept over him as he thought of peace clans and warrior clans and "imagined attacking Choctaws coming over the ridges" visible before him. "No description of the place can do it justice. You have to experience it for yourself."

Gov. Anoatubby: "For many Chickasaws, I am sure the experience at Tchichatala will be deeply meaningful. There, they will see and learn things about our past that will stay with them forever."

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