

The Massacre of American Indian Allies, 1818

Introduction

On April 23, 1818, Captain Obed Wright of the Georgia militia ordered an attack on a Chehaw village, which resulted in the slaughter of several American Indians. In a letter written a week after the attack, Brigadier General Thomas Glascock reported it to his superior officer, General Andrew Jackson. Glascock's account of the Chehaw affair is important not only for its description of how 230 militiamen killed "seven men . . . one woman and two Children" but also for how it shaped Jackson's response to the massacre.

The event shocked and angered Jackson because the Chehaw, a faction of the larger nation of Creek Indians, were then American allies in the First Seminole War. Just a month before Wright's attack, General Jackson's weary soldiers had sojourned in the Chehaw village while traveling from Tennessee to Florida. The local chief, known as "Major Howard" among the whites, fed and provisioned the men. Subsequently, many Chehaw warriors joined Jackson's troops to help pursue the Seminoles. Glascock was in fact seeking out their hospitality when he learned of the massacre by Wright's men: "I sent on Brig Robinson . . . to [pro]cure Beef[.] on his arriving there the Indians had fled in every direction[,] the Chehaw Town having consumed about four days before by a party of men . . . under a Capt Wright."

As Glascock explained, Wright had learned of a skirmish between white settlers and two Creek tribes—the Hopaunees and the Philemmees—and "immediately sent or went to the Governor and obtained orders" to raze their towns. Instead of attacking the marauding Hopaunees and Philemmees, however, Wright's men attacked a Chehaw village that was not responsible for the reported violence against the settlers. There is no definitive account the massacre, but historians agree that Wright burned the village and, as Glascock recounted in his letter to Jackson, viciously murdered innocent men, women, and children.

Glascock narrated Wright's terrible misjudgments in obtaining and following his orders from the governor. After capturing a young Chehaw, Wright did not oblige his request to "bring any of the Chiefs for the Capt to talk with." Instead, Wright "ordered the Cavalry rushed forward and commenced the massacre even after the firing and murdering commenced maj Howard . . . came out from his House with a white flag in front of the line. it was not respected . . . he fell and was Bayoneted."

Jackson viewed the incident as shamefully disloyal and extremely dangerous, with the potential to turn the friendly Chehaws, who Glascock described as "at a loss to know the cause of this displeasure of the white People," into enemies. Soon after he received Glascock's account of the massacre, Jackson wrote to the William Rabun, the governor of Georgia, calling Wright a

The Massacre of American Indian Allies, 1818

“cowardly monster in human shape” and demanding that “Capt. Wright must be prosecuted and punished for this outrageous murder.” Secretary of State John Quincy Adams followed up with another letter to Governor Rabun, telling him that “The President of the United States has directed that Captain Obed Wright should be prosecuted for the murder of friendly Indians.”

Wright was eventually arrested by one of Jackson’s agents but broke parole and escaped to Spanish Florida before he could be tried. Wright was never heard from again, and no one was ever held responsible for the massacre of the Chehaws.

EXCERPT

Thomas Glascock to Andrew Jackson, April 30, 1818

. . . mock patriotism burned in their Breasts they crossed the River that Night and pushed for the Town when arriving near there an Indian was discovered grazing some Cattle he was made a prisoner by Sergt James, that the Indian immediately proposed to go with the Interpreter and bring any of the Chiefs for the Capt to talk with, it was not attended to an advance was ordered the Cavalry rushed forward and commenced the massacre even after the firing and murder commenced maj Howard an old Chief . . . came out from his House [w]ith a white flag in front of the line. it was not respected. an order for a general fire was given, and nearly 400 guns were fired at him before one took effect he fell and was Bayoneted. his son was also killed. these are the circumstances relative to the transaction. seven men were killed one woman and two Children . . .

EXCERPT

Andrew Jackson to Governor William Rabun, May 7, 1818

. . . But it is still more strange that their could exist within the U.States a cowardly monster in human shape, that could violate the sanctity of a flag when borne by any person, but more particularly when in the hands of a superannuated Indian chief worn down with age. Such base cowardice and murderous conduct as this mans action affords has not its paralel in history, and shall meet with its merited punishment.

. . . this being an open and violent infringement of the treaty with the creek Indians Capt. Wright must be prosecuted and punished for this outrageous murder, & I have ordered him to be arrested and confined in irons until the pleasure of the President of the United States is known upon the subject. If he has left Hartford before my order reaches him, I call upon you as Governor of Georgia to aid in carrying into effect my orders for his arrest and confinement, which I trust will be afforded, and Capt. Wright brought to condign punishment for this unprecedented murder.

The Massacre of American Indian Allies, 1818

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. “The Fog of War” is a phrase often used today to describe conditions that permit horrible mistakes in war. Explain why this modern term might apply to the massacre perpetrated upon the Chehaw villagers described in these letters.
2. Using information from the letters, describe how this incident illustrates the complex and troubled relationship that existed between whites and American Indians in the early nineteenth century.
3. To what extent can we question the motives behind Jackson’s expressions of horror at this massacre of innocents?
4. Briefly describe Jackson’s role in the First Seminole War that preceded this incident.

The Massacre of American Indian Allies, 1818

Image

Post Early 30 April 1818

Sir

I have the pleasure to inform You that my command has safely reached this place having suffered some delay for the want of meat. The Gods have proved equally propitious to us on our return as on our advance at Muckassee. Some of my men were nearly out of corn and searching about some old houses that had not been consumed to see if they could make any discovery, in entering one of them to their great astonishment and surprise they came across the man who was lost from Captain Watkins' company on the 2^d day of April. At first from his statement that he was taken with a sort of cramp and was unable to move and became senseless. When he recovered he became completely bewildered and never could reach the camp. He therefore concluded it was prudent to secret himself in some Swamp and after wandering about for some time, came across a parcel of corn on which he subsisted until we found him. He was very much reduced and apparently perfectly wild. On that night Gray took a trail pursued it about a mile and a half came to a small hut which fortunately contained 30 or 40 bushels of corn and some potatoes and peas which enabled us to reach the Flint River opposite Shehaw Village, when arriving within 30 miles I sent on Maj Robinson with a detachment of 20 men to inform Buf on his arriving that the Indians had fled every direction the Shehaw Town having consumed

Thomas Glascock to Andrew Jackson, April 30, 1818. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00782.11.03)

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Thomas Glascock to Andrew Jackson, April 30, 1818. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00782.11.03)

Fort Early 30 April 1818

Sir

I have the pleasure to inform you that my command has safely reached this place having suffered some [little] for the want of meat the Gods have proved equally propitious to us on our return as on our advance at [?ee]kasuskic some of my [men] were nearly out of corn and searching about some old houses that had not been consumed to see if they could make any discovery in entering one of them to their great astonishment and surprise they came a cross the man who was lost from Captain [Patkins] Company on the 2^d day of April. it appears from his statement that he was taken with a sort of cramp and was unable to move and became senseless. when he recovered he became completely bewildered and never could reach the Camp. he therefore concluded it was prudent to secret himself in some Swamp and after wandering about for some time came across a parcel of Corn on which he subsisted until we found him - he was very much reduced and apparently perfectly wild on that Night Gray struck a trail pursued it about a mile and a half came to a small hut which fortunately contained 50 or 60 bushels of Corn and some potatoes and peas which enabled us to reach the [Flint] opposite Chehaw Village, when arriving within 30 miles, I sent on Brig Robinson with a detachment of 20 men to procure Beef on his arriving there the Indians had fled in every direction the Chehaw Town having consumed [2] about four days before by a party of men consisting of 230 under a Capt Wright now in command of Hartford it appears that after he assumed the Command of that place he obtained the Certificates of several men on the frontier that the Chehaw Indians were engaged in a skirmish on the big bend he immediately sent or went to the Governor and obtained orders to destroy the Towns of [Philemme] and [Oponce], two Companies of Cavalry were immediately ordered out and placed under his command, and on the 22^d he reached this place, he ordered Capt Bothwell to furnish him with 25 or 30 men to accompany him having been authorised to do so by the Governor, the order was complied with Capt Bothwell told him that he could not accompany him, himself disapproved the plan and informed Capt Wright that there could be no doubt of the friendship of the Indians in that quarter and stated that [Oponce] brought in a public House that had been lost that day, this [illegible] nothing, mock patriotism burned in their Breasts they

The Massacre of American Indian Allies, 1818

crossed the River that Night and pushed for the Town when arriving near there an Indian was discovered grasing some Cattle he was made a prisoner by Serg^t James, that the Indian immediately proposed to go with the Interpreter and bring any of the Chiefs for the Cap^t to talk with, it was not attended to an advance was ordered the Cavalry rushed forward and commenced the massacre even after the firing and murder commenced maj Howard an old Chief who persisted [3] on with considerable Corn came out from his House with a white flag in front of the line. it was not respected. an order for a general fire was given, and nearly 400 guns were fired at him before one took effect he fell and was Bayoneted. his son was also killed. these are the circumstances relative to the transaction. seven men were killed one woman and two Children, since then three of my command who were left at Fort Scott obtained a furlough and on their way to this place one of them was shot in endeavoring to get a Canoe across the [Flint] I have sent on an express to the Officer commanding Fort Scott approving him of the affair and one to Adj^t Porter to place him on his guard on my arrival opposite Chehaw I sent a runner to get some of them in I succeeded in doing so they are all at a loss to know the cause of this displeasure of the white People. Wolf has gone to the Agent to have it ensured until we obtained from them a sufficient supply of beef to last to Hartford at which place I am informed there is a plentiful supply of provision.

I have the honor to be

very Respectfully

Yours

Maj Genl Andrew Jackson

Thos Glascock

Brig Genl G M

The Massacre of American Indian Allies, 1818

Image

The much desired Pensacola 7 miles northwest of Fort Jackson
 May 7th 1818
 Sir,
 I have this moment received by express the letter of Genl. Glascock, a copy of which
 is enclosed, detailing the brutal, cowardly and inhuman attacks, and the all manner and
 kind of the Creek Villages, whilst the families of that village were with me
 fighting the battles of our country against the common enemy, and at a time too
 when undoubted testimony has been obtained and was in my possession and
 also, in the possession of General Glascock, of their innocence of the charge of
 killing Seige & the other Georgia at Creek Lake.
 That a Governor of a State should affirm the
 rights to make war against our American allies in perfect peace with any under
 the protection of the United States, is affirming a responsibility, that I trust
 you will be able to excuse to the Government of the United States, to which
 you will have to answer, and through which I have so recently passed, promising
 the agent that remained at home my protection and taking the warriors
 with me on the campaign is as unaccountable as strange. But it is
 still more strange that this could exist within the borders of a civilized
 nation in human shape, that could violate the sanctity of a flag when
 borne by any person, but more particularly when in the hands of
 a superannuated Indian chief worn down with age - such base
 cowardice and murderous conduct as this transaction affords has
 met its parallel in history, and shall meet with its merited punishment.
 You Sir as Governor of a State within my Military
 Division have no right to give a Military order whilst I am in the field,
 and this being an open and violent infringement of the treaty with the
 Creek Indians, Capt. Seige must be prosecuted and punished for this
 outrageous murder, & I have ordered him to be arrested and confined in

Andrew Jackson to Governor William Rabun, May 7, 1818. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00782.11.01)

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the march toward Pensacolla, 7 miles outside of Fort Gadsden

May 7th 1818

Sir,

I have this moment, received by express the letter of Genl. Glascock, a copy of which is enclosed, detailing the base, cowardly and inhuman attack on the old women and men of the Chehaw Villages, whilst the warriors of that village was with [us] fighting the battles of our country against the common enemy, and at a time too when undoubted testimony had been obtained and was in my possession and also, in the possession of General Glascock, of their innocence of the charge of killing Leigh & the other Georgian at Cedar Creek.

That a Governor of a state should assume the rights to make war against an Indian tribe in perfect peace with and under the protection of the United States; is assuming a responsibility, that I trust you will be able to excuse to the government of the United States, to which you will have to answer, and through which I had so recently passed, promising the aged that remained at home my protection and taking the warriors with me as the campaign is as unaccountable as strange – But it is still more strange that their could exist within the U.States as cowardly monster in human shape, that could violate the sanctity of a flag when borne by any person, but more particularly when in the hands of a superannuated Indian chief worn down with age. Such base cowardice and murderous conduct as this mans action affords has not its paralel in history, and shall meet with its merited punishment.

You Sir as Governor of a State within my Military Division have no right to give a military order whilst I am in the field, and this being an open and violent infringement of the treaty with the creek Indians Capt. Wright must be prosecuted and punished for this outrageous murder, & I have ordered him to be arrested and confined in [2] irons until the pleasure of the President of the United States is known upon the subject. If he has left Hartford before my order reaches him, I call upon you as Governor of Georgia to aid in carrying into effect my orders for his arrest and confinement, which I trust will be afforded, and Capt. Wright brought to condign punishment for this unprecedented murder – It is strange that this hero had not followed the trail of the murderers of your citizens, it would have lead to Mickasooky, where we found the

The Massacre of American Indian Allies, 1818

bleeding scalps of your Citizens, but there might have been more danger in this; than, attacking a village containing a few superannuated women and men, and a few young women without arms or protectors – This act will to the last ages fix a stain upon the character of Georgia –

I have the honor to be with
due respect. [Comander]

Andrew Jackson

Major Genl Comdg

His Excellency.

William Rabun

Gov. State of Georgia