

After the World Ended

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The world was ending, and that was not hyperbole for the Apalachees. In the early months of 1704 Apalachees watched their homes, lands, people, and everything else that they had known and held with any degree of certainty, vanish before their very eyes. At the dawn of the eighteenth century thousands of Apalachees lived in what is now the north-western parts of Florida; this populous Native nation controlled a territory praised for its beauty and bounty.¹ Apalachees were the main suppliers of grain and food to the Spanish towns in Florida. This rich, powerful, well-connected Native nation had a prominent place in the American South. Until they no longer did.

The violence against Apalachees shocked the region. It was not the type of attacks that was surprising; after all, slave raids were nothing new. Indian groups armed and supplied by English traders from South Carolina had threatened the stability of the region for over fifty years. But the relentlessness, brutality, and scope of these 1704 attacks was new. Apalachees were left struggling to explain the chaos upending their lives. What was happening? When was it going to stop? When would normality return? What would that normality look like? Spanish officials had no answers; they were at a loss themselves and failed to make any coherent plan to combat the situation.

For years Apalachees had tried to warn Spanish officials that this threat was imminent. They watched as slave raids destabilized the safety and wellbeing of their neighboring Native nations. But since slavery was something happening “over there” and not directly affecting the main Apalachee towns, there were almost no measures in place when the first wave of attacks hit in the first months of 1704.² Apalachee no longer felt safe. Attacks could and did happen at any time. There was not enough food and venturing out too far to secure resources and supplies could have devastating consequences. Hundreds of people lost their lives trying to defend their communities, thousands found themselves displaced and over three thousand were enslaved.³ Entire towns disappeared from the map.

After the 1704 attacks, most Apalachees had little choice but to leave their homelands. Spanish officials proved equally overwhelmed and instead of strengthening their towns in the area, they simply burned them and moved away. If Apalachee could not be safe, then it simply could not be. The story of Apalachee in 1704 is one of devastation and loss, but also one of incredible resilience. It is this strange combination that brings us to today.

Apalachees survived their societal collapse only to be forgotten. But their history is more relevant today than ever.⁴ Apalachees lived with, adapted to, and fought against a reality most would consider untenable. And they did so for centuries. It is easy to see Apalachees as the victims—the poor unfortunate victims of a compounding series of events. But over and over again Apalachees have defied that categorization. They found solutions and ways to survive when (and where) Europeans could not. They produced their own histories when colonial narratives posited Apalachees as gone.⁵ They lived when official accounts insisted that they were dead. Why does this matter? What does the destruction of Native towns in 1704 help us understand about today?

The first lesson is about contingency. It is easy to see big forces, such as a global pandemic, slavery, or colonialism as overwhelming and unstoppable. But human actions, even small ones, have consequences. Apalachees offer living proof. As slave raiders claimed their towns, Apalachees did not just watch in horror as their world ended. They fought back. They relocated. They fled, hid, and sought refuge with allies and even with foes. Their multifaceted approaches ensured more than their survival during a particularly horrific time in the eighteenth century; their capacity and ingenuity allowed them to continue fighting for their rights and recognition in the present day. Apalachee survival reminds us not to foreclose a story, and not to create a teleology of defeat and fear before the fighting is done. Apalachees argued that their struggle was far from over, regardless of what colonial sources asserted. Their history still had a present and a future; recognizing this contingency flips a narrative of loss into one of endurance.⁶

The second is about the power of the everyday. At the dawn of the eighteenth century Apalachees were quite literally fighting for their very lives; their ability to keep their families safe or their livelihoods intact seemed most precarious. Yet even in the depths of a destruction so profound that it often defied description, Apalachee spoke and wrote about the trivial and mundane. Apalachees mention everything from farming tools to items of clothing; they spoke of their children and other family members; they mentioned the weather, the crops, their neighbors, their friends, their rivals, and anything in between. In the face of uncertainty and violence, Apalachees kept their lives going.

These trivial details are easy to miss because the violence that consumed Apalachee also consumed the primary documents about them. Everyday requests and comments seem silly as slave raids upended their towns, but they show a Native world still working. In spite of all the odds Apalachees were trying to give meaning to their lives. Efforts to find normalcy in unusual

and trying times matter. They give a voice to the different, even mundane ways people tried, and still try, to make sense of their changing lives. Apalachees turned their everyday into an extraordinary power; their relations, stories, fears, denials, and hopes allowed them to weather the impossible.

The world seems to be coming undone right now. But Native history shows us that there is a precedent to the world ending. And perhaps more importantly, Native history teaches us that there is a precedent for how to survive this end. Native people have been telling us for centuries. Are we listening?

NOTES

¹ For the best overview of Apalachee, see John H. Hann, *Apalachee: The Land between the Rivers*. (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988). For more recent work, Patrick Lee Johnson, "Apalachee Agency on the Gulf Coast Frontier" (The University of West Florida, M.A. Thesis, 2012) and Aubrey Lauersdorf, PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020.

² Jennifer Baszile, "Apalachee Testimony in Florida, a View of Slavery from the Spanish Archives." In *Indian Slavery in Colonial America*, edited by Alan Galloway. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 185-206.

³ For slave raiding in the North American Southeast, see Alan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade, the Rise of the English Empire in the American South 1670-1717*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴ Cutcha Risling Baldy, "On Telling Native people to just 'get over it,'" Blog Post. December 11, 2013. <http://www.cutcharislingbaldy.com/blog/on-telling-native-people-to-just-get-over-it-or-why-i-teach-about-the-walking-dead-in-my-native-studies-classes-spoiler-alert>

⁵ Tony Horwitz, "Apalachee Tribe, Missing for Centuries, Comes Out of Hiding," Wall Street Journal. Bonnie McEwan, "Apalachee and Neighboring Groups", in *The Handbook of North American Indians*, edited by Raymond D. Fogelson, Vol. 14. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution 2004), 669–676.

⁶ Manuel Solana to Governor Zúñiga y Cerda, June 10, 1704. AGI SD 858. Hann Collection. [Childers Docs Binder 1-10]. P.K. Yonge Library, University of Florida, Gainesville. (PKY hereafter).