

# Fort Toulouse of the Alabamas and the eighteenth-century Indian trade

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European survival in the south-eastern United States during the early years of the eighteenth century depended upon the adroitness of Europeans in handling the Indians. Skilfully established relationships with Indians usually evolved into lasting trade agreements, the bases of which were the exchange of cheap European manufactured goods for the extension of European land rights and/or furs. Unavoidable and increasing hostilities between France and Great Britain, both of them in keen competition for the region (competition which spanned a half-century in the south-eastern United States, and centuries in Europe), finally erupted into war in 1756. The resolution of this conflict decided which power would own most of North America.

The fighting between Britain and France, known as the French and Indian War in America and the Seven Years War in Europe, was as bitter as any in North American history. Prior to the belligerency, however, each European power attempted to gain Indian support. Indian alliance was needed for frontier survival, effective execution of foreign policy, profit from trade and from the exploitation of natural resources, and guarantees that European settlement would be free of Indian terror.

It is therefore astonishing to discover that both France and Great Britain had numerous altercations with the Indians over trade goods and trade practices. Too often European greed took priority over foreign policy. In many instances, particularly during the early years of the eighteenth century, European officials never fully comprehended the critical importance of satisfying Indian desire for things European. The failure to establish and enforce fair trade regulations in dealing with the Indians seems to have been the result of governmental inability to comprehend fully the critical role that the Indians played in successful colonization of the south-eastern United States.

The Yamasee War, for example, was a concerted uprising of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Cherokee Nations against the British, who were moving their frontier west and south from the Carolinas. The reasons for the Yamasee War uprising can be summarized as displeasure with poor quality British trade goods and unfair British trade practices. Poor trade relations, which cheated the Indians, led in this instance to bloodshed (Crane 1956: 162-86).

The French also had problems with the Indians. Lacking the subtleties of British diplomacy, the French often confronted the Indians with ultimatums. The results were more or less devastating to French colonial policy during the early years of the eighteenth century. Fort Louis de la Mobile (founded in 1702 and now Mobile, Alabama) had been attacked by Creek Indians shortly after its foundation, and hostilities continued

until 1715 when, during the Yamasee War, the Creeks sought French help against the British. Throughout the period of Indian antagonism towards the French (i.e. 1702-15) the French made little effort to pacify the Indians, particularly the hostile Creeks. Jean Baptiste Lemoine de Bienville, younger brother of the founder of Mobile, once offered a gun, five pounds of powder, and a ball for every Alabama scalp brought him. (Alabamasee were the southernmost group of Creek Indians.) Not until the outbreak of the Yamasee War, however, did Bienville, and presumably his superiors, see the critical importance of Franco-Indian alliances (Thomas 1960: 145).

Encroaching British traders and settlers usually moved overland with pack trains by way of the famous Lower Path, an ancient trail which led from Charles Towne on the South Carolina coast to, and through, the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations to the Mississippi River. The ease with which the British were able to pass overland through lands claimed by France alarmed the French Government in Paris. If French settlements within the Louisiana colony were to be secure against British expansion, the eastern flank bordering the Appalachian mountains had to be protected. (The entire range of the Appalachian mountains was disputed territory claimed by both France and Britain.) The decision to secure the eastern flank of Louisiana came from the French Council of Marine in the form of an order to build a 'fortress' at the headwaters of the Alabama River, high upon the peninsula between the converging Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers (in present day Elmore county, just north of Montgomery). Officially named Fort Toulouse, the French colonials knew the post as 'Fort des Alibamons,' while the British simply called it the Alabama Fort or Post (Thomas 1960: 151).

Because the French finally realized that Indian alliance could hold the key to successful colonization of the south-eastern United States, Fort Toulouse was not conceived as the usual military outpost. Its planners envisaged a French enclave deep within the wilderness, the major function of which would be to pacify Creek Indians through trade. Once the Creeks became friendly, inland waterways to the north, west and perhaps the east, could be made safe for French trade and settlement. Fort Toulouse had the additional duties of reporting upon British activities in the area and of providing good offices to warring Indian groups. But the *raison d'être* of Fort Toulouse was Indian trade, serving as a French embassy sustained by the profit motive. Shortly after the last of the log stockade walls of the post were completed, Creek Indians established several villages 'within a musket shot' of the garrison in order to trade, and remained there for the next half-century (Thomas 1960: 152).

With the exception of occasional finds of artefacts, all traces of Fort Toulouse had vanished by recent times. Numerous tales concerning its location, shape and contents survive within Alabama folklore, but it has been clear for years that architectural remains, if they survived, could only be found by archaeological field work. Between October and December 1972, and at the time of writing in April 1973, controlled excavations continue upon the site of Fort Toulouse. The major purpose of the archaeological investigation is to locate architecture of the French occupation of 1717-63. Discoveries to date are impressive: palisade wall ditches into which the stockade wall was placed for both the 1717 and the 1751 French forts, the latter a rebuilt and relocated structure replacing the original fort after it had been partially washed away by the surging waters of the Coosa River; four diamond-shaped bastions and surrounding dry-moats of the

1751 fort; possible 'lean-to' structures built by the Indians along the outside stockade walls; remains of a nineteenth-century American fort named in honour of Andrew Jackson.

Laboratory study has made possible the separation of the French and American components of Fort Toulouse, including differences between French and American construction methods. The French component or occupation deposit of Fort Toulouse, although often disturbed and mixed with that of later American levels, contains items which probably were intended for the Indian trade. French trade items, shipped almost 300 miles upstream on the Alabama River by flatboat from Mobile between the years 1717 to 1763, are the subject of this article. Not only can French trade pieces recovered from Fort Toulouse be identified and described, but they can be compared in kind to items listed in French colonial records for the post. Because many of the trade items recovered from Fort Toulouse appear to be of inferior quality, even when judged by standards of the day, comment will be made when a particular object appears to have been manufactured with intent to defraud the Indians.

French colonial records list the following trade items as having been shipped and stored within the *garde magasin* of Fort Toulouse: guns, powder, balls, flints, belts, shoes, earrings, ribbon, linen for flags or banners, vermilion, shirts, breeches, blankets of white wool, cloth, trinkets (glass beads, brass bells etc.), needles, razors, scissors, mirrors, hatchets, axes, knives, hoes, kettles, salt, whisky, brandy, rum, and no doubt other items of which no record survives (Thomas 1929: 32; 1960: 172-4).

Trade items coveted most by the Indians were guns. Among the artefacts recovered at Fort Toulouse were a large number of French gun parts, many probably made specifically for the Indian trade. Lock plates, frizzens, butt plates, various brass side plates, gun worms, numerous gun flints, bullet moulds, carrying-strap buckles, a tompon or tampion (insert for covering a gun muzzle when the gun is not in use: see Shier 1972: 79-80), and rifle barrels (one fragmentary specimen smashed flat) are among the identifiable gun parts found during the archaeological investigations. Recognizable gun models, represented by identifiable parts, include only the 1717 Charleville flintlock musket (Hamilton 1960: figs 6 and 7).

An enigmatic brass side plate, similar in shape both to the nineteenth-century serpent side plates used exclusively for Indian trade (Hamilton 1960: 135 and fig. 49) and to the brass side plates used on the British Brown Bess flintlock until c. 1775 (Noël Hume 1972: 215-16 and fig. 70), may represent a prototype for the later serpent side plates. Eighteenth-century brass or copper serpent forms are known from the Upper Iowa River in north-eastern Iowa (Wedel 1959: 72). The Fort Toulouse specimen, if a serpent form, may be one of the earliest of its kind yet found; it was recovered from within a footing ditch presumed to be that of a building abandoned after the devastating 1751 flood of the Coosa River.

French and British records contain numerous references to European abuse towards the Indians, and trade practices were often among them. Most authorities on Indian trade guns agree, for example, that guns given to the Indians were generally of poor quality. Hamilton, while making this point, understates the situation when he writes that 'on the whole', Indian trade 'guns were of inferior quality; the barrels being particularly subject to criticism' (1960: 122). An unidentifiable barrel fragment from Fort

Toulouse was smashed flat, perhaps to serve another function, but possibly because the thin iron of which it is made exploded during firing. Wall thickness is only about 5-6 mm., flimsy enough to warn off any would-be marksman!

Although a few British gun flints have been found at Fort Toulouse, French gun flints are most common. British gun flints are distinguished by their prism-like form, square heels, and black or grey colour. Gun flints, more so than identifiable gun parts, are excellent chronological markers for Fort Toulouse. French types were imported into North America, presumably by the millions, between 1675 and 1750; the latter date marks the beginning of the importation of British types (Hamilton 1960: 40-79; Quimby 1966: 75; Noël Hume 1972: 219-21 and fig. 71). Not until the outbreak of the war of 1812, however, were British gun flints imported into North America on a massive scale.

Because of the disturbed nature of both the French and American components at Fort Toulouse, as well as the later American preference for French gun flints, there is no absolute way to determine whether the gun flints found were used by the French or by the Americans. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the French preferred to use their own flints, flints that their British enemy conceded to be the better of the two types. Doubtless many of the French gun flints recovered during the 1972-3 excavations were intended for the Indian trade. A thorough surface survey of the rapidly disappearing Creek Indian town sites would, if French-type flints were found, clarify the point. British gun flints, though still of secondary preference after French types, were most probably used by the Tennessee militiamen of Andrew Jackson stationed at Fort Toulouse over half a century after French abandonment.

Among other trade goods greatly valued by the Creek Indians were glass beads. Although surprisingly uncommon in the excavations of Fort Toulouse, thousands were brought to the fort site by visitors while excavations were in progress. These private bead collections were made up of surface finds from nearby Creek town sites along the terraces of the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Alabama Rivers. One of the richest of the Creek town sites is Coosada, Alabama, the name derived from the earlier Creek village. By combining bead collections from Indian town sites with beads from the 1972-3 excavations, all of which surely came from within stores of the *garde magasin* of Fort Toulouse between 1717-63, an adequate sample was acquired for analysis.

Chronology of glass beads for the lower Mississippi River Valley has been established for the Fatherland site in Natchez, Mississippi, where, between 1700 and 1730, there was intensive contact between the French at Fort Rosalie (modern Natchez, Mississippi) and the Natchez Indians (Neitzel 1965: 7-9). Glass beads from the Fatherland site can be considered indicative of bead styles traded by the French to the Indians throughout the early eighteenth century. Comparison of beads from the Fatherland site with French beads of the same period from the Great Lakes region indicates that beads were identical for both areas (Quimby 1942: 545-6, figs 1-18). Recent research has demonstrated that styles of beads represented at the Fatherland site continued to be traded to the Indians in other parts of North America until the collapse of the French colonial empire in 1763 (Quimby 1966: 85-6 and fig. 17). Beads from Fort Toulouse, as well as from nearby Creek town sites, are identical to those described for the French occupation of North America between 1670 and 1763.

Bead types most commonly found in combined collections from Creek town sites and the excavations of Fort Toulouse are monochrome spheroid and elongate spheroid styles, as well as egg-shaped wire-wound forms; colours are light blue, dark blue and white. Less common are various polychrome forms. Innumerable small (so-called seed) beads were also recovered and are no doubt those woven by the Indians into ornamental patterns on clothing and other adornments. Whether intentional or not, the white egg-shaped wire-wound beads seem to have been made very poorly. Some are extremely friable. More than one specimen disintegrated upon handling during examination, a factor hardly attributable to soil conditions.

Additional trinkets were recovered from the site of Fort Toulouse and nearby Creek Indian town sites. Brass bells, identical to those that the French were trading to the Natchez Indians, are included in private collections (Neitzel 1965: 51 and fig. 14, f, j). Known as 'hawk bells', these small brass items were apparently traded along with glass beads, brass tinkling cones, brass C-shaped bracelets, and sheet brass (cut by the Indians into a variety of shapes, including arrow-heads). The extremely poor quality of brass and copper kettles, which could only be used once or twice before they fell to pieces, indicates that the kettle manufacturer in France afforded little regard to the Indians for whom his products were made. French Indian agents, probably from Fort Orleans along the Missouri River in what now is the central part of the state of Missouri, traded identical kettles to the historic Missouri Indians during the period 1727-63 (Chapman 1959: 54 and 63). The quality of metal in the kettles traded to the Missouris was no better than that traded to the Creeks in the south-eastern United States, and quite possibly came from the same manufacturer in France.

Other metal trade items included tools, many of which replaced the less efficient, indigenous chipped and ground stone types developed by the Creeks and their ancestors. Iron axes to fell trees, and iron hoes to break ground for the horticultural maize and squash fields of the Indians, were in great demand. Within historic Indian cultures elsewhere in the eastern and midwestern United States, trade items were of such importance that they were buried with their dead owners (Neitzel 1965: 43 and fig. 14w). Creek Indians apparently had the custom of burying large amounts of trade goods with their dead. Jean Bernard Bossu, while travelling through Creek country during the mid-eighteenth century, observed that Creek burials included, aside from Indian manufactures, muskets, powder, bullets, hatchets, mirrors and vermilion (Bossu 1771: 257).

A number of jew's harps, not unlike those known from the lower Mississippi Valley (Quimby 1966: 65 and fig. 12), were found at Fort Toulouse. Although no documentation exists concerning the occurrence of jew's harps in association with Creek town sites or burials, it seems a fair assumption that these were traded to the Indians.

Great quantities of broken china, particularly French faience ware, were found in the Fort Toulouse excavations. Known as Delft ware in England, faience is technically a French earthenware with a distinctive blue decoration over white glaze (Cotter 1968: 8). No Creek burials from central Alabama have been reported upon, and it is therefore not known whether faience was actually traded. However, Neitzel found a number of faience ware specimens as grave furniture with Natchez burials, and it is probable that identical earthenware was traded to the Creeks (Neitzel 1965: figs 8B, 16A and D).



Broken bottles are highly indicative not only of the consumption of their liquid contents but of chronology. All identifiable French bottles from Fort Toulouse date between 1717-63. Gin bottles, easily recognizable because of their rectangular bodies and square bases (Quimby 1966: 74), are present at Fort Toulouse. Other bottle fragments, including one with an appliqué strip of glass encircling the neck some 4.0 to 5.0 mm. below the lip, probably had a part in the Indian trade. Dating to c. 1750 (Noël Hume 1972: 71 and fig. 16), this bottle fragment with the appliqué strip probably contained wine or rum. Not only were rum and other alcoholic beverages traded to the Indians, but alcohol was served on many occasions when the Indians and Europeans met together for deliberations (for example, see Howard and Rea 1965: 43).

Because of its enormous size, excavations at Fort Toulouse will continue for a number of years; new evidences of the Indian trade undoubtedly will be forthcoming.

The Creek Indians, after the crushing defeat of France in 1763, had to adjust to the British victors. Some Creek Indians chose to follow the defeated French west of the Mississippi River. Others attempted to establish new symbiotic trade relationships with the British. Less than a generation later, Europeans were pushed out of the south-eastern United States altogether, Indians were forcibly resettled west of the Mississippi River by way of the 'trail of tears' (an episode in American history difficult to equal for its brutality), and the south-eastern United States Indian trade ceased forever.

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### Abstract

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#### Fort Toulouse of the Alabamas and the eighteenth-century Indian trade

French colonization of Indian territory in the south-eastern United States during the eighteenth century included the building of both fortresses and trading posts. Fort Toulouse in central Alabama, one of the most important garrisons for the implementation of French policy in the region, was in actuality an early French embassy to the Creek Indian Nation. Archaeological explorations of Fort Toulouse in 1972 and 1973 revealed in kind and quality the items which the French utilized for the Indian trade. In some instances the poor quality of trade goods suggests that French frontiersmen (and perhaps European manufacturers), the middlemen between the Crown and the Creek Indian chiefs, were inadequate choices for the implementation of French foreign policy through trade.