Chickasaws in the Library of Congress

After several years of cycling through phases of research, writing, and revising, I finally completed a draft last fall of a book-length manuscript about the Chickasaw people, covering prehistory to 1763. Originally, I intended the volume to end in 1837, with the beginning of the Chickasaw Removal era. But as the manuscript grew and grew, I decided it would be better to have two volumes of reasonable size than one big tome whose bulk might scare off potential readers.

So in the last few months, I began assembling my research plan, notes, and source material for the second volume, from 1763 to 1837. My first major section will cover the time period from 1763 to 1783, the two decades during which the Chickasaws' long-time trading partner and ally was Great Britain.

The second section will span the early years of the tribe's—or more accurately, its factions'—relations with the competing Spanish and Americans. Also included will be the war with the Creeks under their charismatic leader Alexander McGillivray and the last years of full-blood leadership, ending with the death of Chief Piomingo in 1799.

The final section will cover the rise of the Colbert brothers' leadership and deal with the tribe's response to the initial version of American manifest destiny. Central to this is America's Indian policy for deviously obtaining incremental land cessions that set the stage for the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and more specifically, Chickasaw Removal beginning in 1837.

I lay this plan out here publicly because I am hoping some of you will help keep me on track with periodic contact about my work and its status. I have a tendency to go off on tangents. In turn, I'll contact some Chickasaws who have helped with previous feedback, be it support or useful criticism.

Having collected Chickasaw-related source material for many years, I have accumulated plastic tubs of documents and articles, and a few books, all of which I will use in producing this next manuscript. It's a good start, but I couldn't hope to complete the manuscript with what I had on hand.

As I surveyed this material, I realized I was quite light on the first period, 1763–1783. These were years when Britain initially had little competition for the Indian trade among the Southeastern tribes. That might have continued for years except that the American colonies were becoming deeply dissatisfied with their lack of representation in the British Empire. Later, the colonies would rebel and ultimately expel the British lion from North America.

Fortunately, I knew from prior research at the Library of Congress (LOC) that its Manuscript Division had microfilmed an enormous amount of documents related to Britain's American colonies. I

had photocopied some Chickasaw-related documents in the past, but the number available prior to 1750 was disappointingly small. A South Carolina archivist once mentioned that he understood periodic fires in the London repositories had consumed a large amount of the correspondence related to the Indian trade before 1750.

What about my new area of interest, between 1763 and 1783? Hints were discovered at the University of Oklahoma's main library in a slim 1946 volume by Grace Gardner Griffin. It listed British colonial documents relating to American history that were stored in the Manuscript Division. These were classified variously, some by the colony's name, others by Board of Trade or unfathomable names such as Plantations General. It was in this latter category that I found "Indian affairs, trade, etc., 1760–1784," volumes 65 to 82.

The span of years was almost perfect. I asked a LOC reference librarian for more specific information but was told, "We don't know much about those records. I can't tell you the last time someone asked for them. You'll just have to come up here and see for yourself."

Self-serve is the *modus operandi* at most archives and libraries I've done business with in recent years. Because of tight budgets and shortages of experienced and knowledgeable staff, most reference assistants can only confirm the presence of a collection and whether that collection has a published index. If you are lucky, you might find something about the source's reliability. Archi-

Photo by author.

The Library of Congress buildings hold some of the 18th century British records involving Britain's colonial relationship with the Chickasaws.

vists familiar with the contents of a collection are a huge, but increasingly unexpected, bonus to the researcher.

The LOC's Manuscript Division is not in the magnificent, Baroque, copper-domed Thomas Jefferson Building across 1st Street from the Capitol and next to the Supreme Court Building. The manuscript collections are housed in a small portion of the immense (2 million square foot) modern monolith called the James Madison Memorial Building, which is located across Independence Street from the Jefferson Building and catty-corner to the Library's third building, the aged, Soviet-looking John Adams Building.

Most of the original documents are only available to researchers on microfilm, and the quality of the images and the handwriting therein ranges from acceptable to migraine-inducing hopeless. One researcher who apparently had been looking at bad microfilm for a few minutes (it resembled a snowy white-out with traces of wind-blown debris) began loudly beseeching a curator to let him see the original documents. The curator politely turned down his request, saying he could discern most of the documents.

As an experienced microfilm reader and fatalist, I assumed I'd be seeing poor quality film. Instead, the objects of my research interest, volumes 65 to 82, were stored in legal-sized, heavy cardboard boxes of a faded red hue, one or two volumes per box.

Each volume contained up to hundreds of sheets of legal-size paper bundled together with ancient red ribbon. These were not photocopies of the original correspondence but transcripts of the originals written by people with beautiful, flawless penmanship.

I was very happy to see that I could read the pages almost as fast as if they had been typed. Suspicious of too much of a good thing, I asked a curator if all of the volumes were like this, and he said, yes, he thought so. He proved to be correct and reading this correspondence in this lovingly purified state saved untold hours of eyeball and brain strain associated with degraded originals on microfilm.

My appreciation for what I practically considered to be a lost art form separates me from the crusty, skeptical purists, who doubtless would reject the transcripts in favor of scrutinizing the microfilmed originals themselves. I trusted the transcriptionist's honesty and judgment because I figured anyone