

Native American Experiences During the Reconstruction Era

This collaborative ethnohistorical research project is led by Emory University's Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies, in partnership with several Tribal Nations, the National Association of Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, and the National Park Service. This project uplifts Reconstruction Era histories of Indigenous persistence (1861-1900) across the postbellum Southeast—particularly in Virginia, Florida, and Mississippi. Many narratives of Reconstruction overlook how the federal government simultaneously worked to dismantle Indigenous nations in order to consolidate its own power and hold over Indigenous land. Yet, Native nations persisted.

With the guiding interpretive theme of *"Indigenous Persistence in every zipcode,"* we explore Indigenous experiences pre and post-Civil War, including, but not limited to, education and Indigenous labor. These topics and others played an important role in shaping the lives of Indigenous people in the Southeast. Guided by extensive archival research and the insight of Tribal partners, this project will produce a number of educational resources, such as an ethnohistorical research report, an interpretive guide, and digital interpretive media for various National Park Service sites, primarily those within the Reconstruction Era National Historic Network.

A Web of Indigenous Persistence:

In the Southeast, Indigenous peoples have had long histories of mobility, and during Reconstruction, they were often hiding in plain sight. Their mobility can sometimes obscure the presence of Indigenous peoples in the late nineteenth century historic record, but that does not mean that they were not active participants in this era. Through our research, we have witnessed a web of places where Indigenous people persisted.

(1) In Tsenacommacah (Tidewater Virginia)—the ancestral homelands of several Powhatan tribes including the Pamunkey, Chickahominy, and Mattaponi—our team honed in on two national park sites: Petersburg National Battlefield and Fort Monroe National Monument. We examine how Indigenous peoples of Virginia and other states navigated and participated in the Civil War; advocated for recognition of their tribal identities and nationhood; and sustained their communities through their intimate knowledge of the Chesapeake and strategic participation in the market economy.

(2) In the homelands of the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes (Florida), we've focused on the Reconstruction Era at Castillo de San Marcos National Monument and Fort Pickens—Gulf Islands National Seashore, where the U.S. imprisoned Comanche, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and other Indigenous people between the years of 1875-1878 and 1886-1887. We analyze Indigenous persistence by focusing on their participation in the tourist industry as Indigenous artists, dancers, and craftsmen—and how these histories set the stage for early-twentieth century tourism surrounding the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes.

(3) On Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez lands, our team follows the history of Mississippi Choctaw sharecropping through the Reconstruction Era in regions surrounding three national park sites: The Natchez Trace Parkway, Vicksburg National Battlefield, and the Natchez National Historical Park. Our research team focuses on the obscured history of sharecropping among the Mississippi Choctaw people, who were forced to navigate the dispossession of their homelands amidst a racialized labor system.

Looking to the future - Plans for the coming months:

In the next year, our team will complete our research and draft an interpretive plan for review by both Tribal Nations and the NPS. Based on that feedback, we will create media that engages visitors both virtually and in-person at NPS sites.