



Also Moving East: The Coushatta People Come to Texas

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(July 1, 2022) Texas' history of relations and treatment of Indian peoples is, at best, checkered. When Spanish, Mexican, and European-American migrants moved to Texas, tension and conflict often flared with contact between Native Americans and the new interlopers. Even when the two cultures worked out some sort of communal arrangement, indigenous peoples usually came out on the short end and eventually lost most of their land. Such is the story of the past, one that we all must confront and somehow reconcile.

Contemporary Texans, no doubt influenced by film and popular culture, tend to equate Indians within their state with the more visible Comanche, Apache, Kiowa, and other plains cultures. They forget that Texas was also the home of southern Mississippian Native peoples who came to the state from their homes in the east and practiced a very different lifestyle than the nomadic plains tribes. One of those was the Coushattas (Kousatis), who came to the state from their lands in Alabama and Louisiana.

After the English acquired the Louisiana Territory from the French in 1763, the Coushatta left their homes along the Alabama River and established villages in Louisiana. One of the largest Coushatta settlements was along the east bank of the Sabine, and from there they began to drift into Spanish Texas in the 1780s. Spanish officials in the Nacogdoches District welcomed the Coushatta and hoped they would become a friendly trade and population source within the wild and difficult to govern northern province. In fact, the Coushatta blazed a number of trade and transportation trails from the Piney woods to the coastal plains, and served the Spanish authorities as sentinels and scouts, informing colonial officials of any illegal or nefarious activity in the area. The Coushatta had seemingly found a welcome home.

The Coushatta presence in Texas grew larger through the early nineteenth century, and they established a number of villages along the Trinity River and throughout the Big Thicket. They continued to live peacefully in Mexican Texas even as their new home filled with settlers moving to Texas from the United States. During

the Texas Revolution, refugees from the “Runaway Scrape” fleeing Santa Anna’s pursuing army found refuge, food, and shelter with the Coughatta. When that war ended Mexico hatched a number of suspected schemes to encourage Indian war with the Texans in the hope of once again taking possession of the lost province, but the Coughatta resisted such efforts and managed to maintain peaceful relations with the Texans.

Not that it would do them any good. Texas/Indian relations underwent great turmoil and a series of conflicts between 1836 and 1840 as white Texans sought to drive some Native Americans from their land and conquer others who stood in the way of expansion to the west. The Coughatta became caught in the middle of such a fight. Comanche raiders, seeking horses and other stock, but also hoping to deal a blow to people who they viewed as white allies, raided and pillaged Coughatta villages and outposts throughout East Texas. The Coughatta defeated one large Comanche party at Long King’s Village on the Trinity in 1839, but ultimately lost most of their land on a different battlefield—within the halls and rooms of the Texas Congress.

Ostensibly as a reward for their loyalty, the Republic’s Congress granted the Coughatta two leagues of land for permanent occupancy in 1840, but surveyors never marked the land, they filed no notes, and white settlers who already occupied the land refused to move. The Coughatta villages and settlements began to disintegrate, and the Indians went through a leaderless and aimless period. In 1855 the Texas legislature granted the tribe 640 acres (a piddling remnant of the original promise) in Polk County, but once again they could not effectively secure title. Eventually conditions forced the Coughatta to take up residence with their kinsman the Alabamas on another grant in Polk County in 1859, a people who had tried to remain loyal and peaceful through tumultuous times compelled to scrap out a living as forgotten migrants to the place they came to call home. Today, they and the Alabamas occupy that same small amount of their original home, but they continue to have to battle with the state of Texas—this time over the presence of casino gaming within their reservation boundaries. The state seeks to deny them a viable way to prosper with one of the few avenues they have left to do so. Perhaps a concession could be that Texas compensate them from the hundreds of thousands of acres they essentially stole from a people who, just as so many others had done, freely chose Texas as a place to live.

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