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Kevin T. Barksdale

Marshall University, barksdale@marshall.edu

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Appalachia's Borderland Brokers: The Intersection of Kinship, Diplomacy, and Trade on the Transmontane Backcountry, 1600-1800

This paper and accompanying historical argument builds upon the presentation I made at last year's Ohio Valley History Conference held at Western Kentucky University. In that presentation, I argued that preindustrial Appalachia was a complex and dynamic borderland region in which disparate Amerindian groups and Euroamericans engaged in a wide-range of cultural, political, economic, and familial interactions. I challenged the Turnerian frontier model that characterized the North American backcountry as a steadily retreating "fall line" separating the savagery of Amerindian existence and the epidemic civility of Anglo-America.¹ On the Turnerian frontier, Anglo-American culture washed over the Appalachian and Native American backcountry in a wave of forced acculturation rendering resistance futile and communities and cultures transformed; or in Frederick Jackson Turner's own words, "Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American."² Building upon Herbert Eugene Bolton's "borderland model" and the work of "new Western and new Indian historians" such as Stephen Aron, James F. Brooks, David Weber, and Richard White, I presented a competing interpretation of the Appalachian backcountry. I argued that instead of a region thrust into chaos and confusion by forced Euroamerican acculturation, land hunger, and imperial warfare; Appalachia was a complicated "mixing zone," a "middle ground" in which Amerindian and Euroamerican nations not only warred, but accommodated, negotiated, and cooperated. Within these southern mountain ranges and valleys: *métis* families were born, transnational and trans-ethnic diplomatic and economic alliances were formed, and

¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History."

² *Ibid.*

cultural amalgamations took shape.³ Preindustrial Appalachia truly was, in the words of historian James F. Brooks, one of North America's first "zones of diffuse and complex exchanges between cultures."⁴

When applied to Appalachia and its surrounding environs, the borderland model allows historians to construct a much more complex and ultimately realistic montane past. In this presentation, I want to move beyond simply offering examples that illustrate the existence of the trans-Appalachian borderland and examine the inner-workings and dynamics involved in fostering and maintaining these backcountry linkages. It may seem obvious, but at the core of these borderland connections stood individuals and families who served as the connective sinew linking native people to Euroamericans, native people to native people, and even Euroamericans to Euroamericans. These "borderland brokers'" abilities to transcend their tribal, ethnic, cultural, and national identities allowed for the creation of these transnational and trans-cultural bonds. Who were these individuals and kinship groups that were able to skillfully straddle competing societies, cultures, and worlds? How were these borderland brokers able to recast their own identities and what were the consequences of these borderland linkages on their own lives? Finally, how did the connections facilitated by these borderland intermediaries transform the trans-Appalachian backcountry? In order to answer these questions, I am going to focus on several of Appalachia's most active and skilled borderland brokers and their part in creating the Appalachian Borderland.

Appalachia's borderland brokers represent a diverse group of men, women, and families, but exhibit several shared characteristics. The single most important shared skill of a borderland intermediary was the ability to live "in between [at least] two worlds."⁵ Many of these individuals were born into mixed

³ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴ James H. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 36-7.

⁵ Brian C. Hosmer, "Reflections on Indian Cultural 'Brokers:' Reginald Oshkosh, Mitchell Oshkaneniew and the Politics of Menominee Lumbering," *Ethnohistory* 44:3 (Summer 1997): 493; James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 27-28.

families and mixed-communities created by marriages and unions between Euroamerican and Amerindians, such as *métis* brokers like Upper Creek leader Alexander McGillivray (born to a wealthy Scottish Georgia trader Lachlan and a Creek princess Sehoj Marchand, herself the offspring of a French fur trader and female member of the Creek Wind Clan) and Cherokee “Beloved Woman” Nancy Ward (born into a prominent Overhill Cherokee family but whose father was probably a British colonial officer).⁶ Many Euroamerican and Amerindian borderland brokers formed mixed-blood families and transnational connections through intermarriage. The marriage of Nancy Ward to Irish trader Bryant Ward produced several influential *métis* Cherokee offspring and one of the Ward children, Betsy, eventually married Virginia (and later United States) Indian Agent Joseph Martin, himself an important intermediary in the Appalachian backcountry.⁷ Other borderland brokers relied upon their political and cultural savvy to bridge the gap between separate nations. Men like North Carolina congressman and United States Indian Agent Dr. James White managed to foster negotiations between Spanish colonial officials in Louisiana and American western political leaders in the upper Tennessee Valley.⁸ Kentucky politician and Revolutionary War Brigadier-General James Wilkinson also managed to forge transnational political and economic connections between Kentuckians and Spain.⁹ Amerindian leaders such as Chickamauga Cherokee leader Dragging Canoe, Lower Shawnee chief Cornstalk, and Upper

⁶ Amos J. Wright, Jr. *The McGillivray and McIntosh Traders on the Southwest Frontier, 1716-1815* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2007), 217-223; Linda Langley, “The Tribal Identity of Alexander McGillivray: A Review of the Tribal and Ethnographic Data,” *Louisiana History* 46:2 (2005): 231-239; Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 67-72; Grace Steele Woodward, *The Cherokees* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 86-87.

⁷ Clara Sue Kidwell, “Indian Women as Cultural Mediators,” *Ethnohistory* 39:2 (Spring 1992): 102-104; Norma Tucker, “Nancy Ward: Ghighau of the Cherokee,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 53:2 (1969): 192-194.

⁸ Kevin T. Barksdale, “The Spanish Conspiracy on the Trans-Appalachian Borderlands, 1786-1789,” *Journal of Appalachian History*: forthcoming; A.P. Whitaker, “The Spanish Intrigue in the Old Southwest: An Episode 1788-1789,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12: 155-176.

⁹ James E. Savage, “Spaniards, Scoundrels, and Statesmen: General James Wilkinson and the Spanish Conspiracy, 1787-1790,” *The Hanover Historical Review* 6 http://history.hanover.edu/hhr/98/hhr98_1.html (accessed September 10, 2008).

Creek chief Alexander McGillivray established pan-Indian and trans-national alliances that transcended tribal differences and national identities in order to resist Anglo-American western encroachment.¹⁰

During the 17th and 18th centuries, Appalachia's geographic and strategic location within North America and diverse Indian and Euroamerican populations placed the region's inhabitants and frequent visitors in the ideal position to facilitate borderland connections. At the edge of a rapidly expanding Anglo-American east and a threatened and retreating Franco-Spanish west, Appalachia stood as both a mountainous buffer and dynamic mixing zone between competing Euroamerican nations. Additionally, with native Cherokee Indian residents scattered across the southern mountains and valleys and other Amerindian nations (including the Upper Creeks, Shawnee, Mingo, and Delaware) surrounding the region on all sides, Appalachia served as a natural cultural, economic, and political crossroads connecting native peoples to each other and to whites. Thus, Appalachia's intermediaries found themselves either in or on the edges of a mountainous borderland and their actions transformed the lives of the region's residents.

Appalachia's first borderland brokers emerged within the complex system of trade and exchange that developed during the 17th century and reached its maturity during the 18th century. Largely centered on the pelt trade, Euroamerican-Amerindian economic exchanges demanded cultural intermediaries to bridge the socioeconomic divide between the tenets and structures of European capitalism and native concepts of wealth and reciprocity. Many of these economic intermediaries (largely dominated by men) were either born into *métis* families or later formed their own mixed families. According to historian James Merrell, borderland regions "produced mediators the world over."¹¹ I don't want to completely discount the role true affection played in these relationships, but these cross-cultural marriages also served a distinct fiscal purpose. As Colin G. Calloway states in his recent study of the relationships

¹⁰ Stephen Aron, *How the West was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 20.

¹¹ Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 73-74.

between Amerindians and Scottish Highlanders, backcountry traders “strengthened their ties... in Indian country by marriage [to Indian women] and trade.”¹² The marriages of men like Scottish traders Alexander Cameron, John McDonald, and John Norton to Cherokee women (often from prominent clans) served as one of the strongest bonds between Appalachia’s “first people” and the rapidly expanding Euroamerican world.¹³ Perhaps the life of *métis* Upper Creek chief Alexander McGillivray best illustrates the prominent role mixed-blood Amerindians played in fostering cross-cultural economic connections. As previously stated, McGillivray was the son of Lachlan McGillivray, a successful and well-connect Scottish trader, and Sehoy Marchand, an influential member of the Creek Wind Clan. Through his father’s influence, Alexander was educated in Charleston, South Carolina and was immersed in the inner-workings of backcountry trade. His mother’s clan and tribal connections allowed Alexander to rapidly ascend the leadership ranks within the developing Creek Nation. By the time Alexander reached adulthood, he was fluent in several languages (English, Spanish, and his native Creek language), had made political and economic connections with some of the most important Euroamerican (Spanish, British, and American) and Amerindian leaders in North America, and was well-acquainted with the dynamics of the trans-Appalachian pelt-trade. Alexander McGillivray’s birth and life experiences forged him into the ideal borderland broker, as comfortable negotiating contracts with European trade firms (such as Pantan, Leslie, & Company out of East Florida) as leading his fellow Upper Creeks and their allies in their struggle to resist white encroachment (or as one historian labeled him, McGillivray was “the Talleyrand of the Creeks”).¹⁴ Across the trans-Appalachian backcountry, men and women filled

¹² Colin G. Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders: Tribal Peoples and Colonial Encounters in Scotland and America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 154-155; Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 80-81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 152-155, Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53-54.

¹⁴ Wright, *The McGillivray and McIntosh Traders on the Southwest Frontier*, 217-245; Langley, “The Tribal Identity of Alexander McGillivray,” 233-239; Michael D. Green “Alexander McGillivray,” in R. David Edmunds, ed., *American Indian Leaders: Studies in Diversity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 41-45; Saunt, *A New Order of Things*, 67.

roles as transnational, cross-cultural economic intermediaries, but this was only one contribution that brokers made in the maturation of the transmontane west.

The contest between Amerindian and Euroamerican nations over control of the trans-Appalachian region created the need for borderland brokers to serve as martial and diplomatic intermediaries. These men and women were tasked with establishing transnational and trans-tribal military alliances as well as being instrumental in avoiding conflict and securing peaceful relations. Beginning with the first conflicts arising out of Euroamerican western speculation and settlement, trans-Appalachia's native inhabitants forged pan-Indian resistance movements.¹⁵ During the French & Indian War, Lower Shawnee leader Cornstalk organized a pan-Indian force comprised of Shawnee (both Lower and Upper), Delaware, Mingo, Wyandot, and Seneca Indians to aid the French (and themselves) in barring the English from taking the Ohio Country. In the southern mountains, Cherokee leaders such as Atakullaculla (Little Carpenter) and Oconostota entered into their own mutually-beneficial alliances with the French and targeted English backcountry forts such as Fort Loudon and English-allied Amerindian communities.¹⁶ During the pan-Indian resistance movement that has become known as Pontiac's Rebellion, Chief Cornstalk again organized a multi-tribal force comprised of a diverse collection of Ohio and Illinois Indian groups to reap havoc on the western Virginia frontier. Cornstalk's role as the Ohio Country's most influential borderland broker culminated in his assemblage of an enormous pan-Indian force, estimated at over 1000 warriors, from across the region to confront western militiamen at the Battle of Point Pleasant, the climactic engagement of Lord Dunmore's War, in the fall of 1774.¹⁷

¹⁵ Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xvii-xxiv.

¹⁶ James Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Asheville, NC: Blight Books, 1982), 40-43; Aron, *How the West was Lost*, 35-36.

¹⁷ Otis K. Rice and Stephen J. Brown, *West Virginia: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 26-28; Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 44-46; Ruben Gold Thwaites and Louis Phelps Kellogg, eds., *A Documentary History of Dunmore's War* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1907), 308; Aron, *How the West was Lost*, 20.

The outbreak of the Revolutionary War provided skilled trans-Appalachian borderland brokers with numerous opportunities to forge transnational military and diplomatic alliances. In central Appalachia, Amerindian leaders such as Cornstalk and his sister Nonhelema, once bitter enemies of Virginia's "Long Knife" leadership, shifted their allegiances during the opening months of the war and became, borrowing a term from James Merrell's masterful *Into the American Woods*, diplomatic "go-betweens." In a remarkable turn of events, both the Shawnee chief and his sister, referred to as the "Grenadier Squaw" by Virginia's backcountry leaders for her earlier military exploits against them, made several diplomatic voyages across the Ohio River to warn of impending British-allied Indian attacks. Cornstalk even went as far as to return to Fort Randolph, located on the site of his recent crushing defeat during the Virginia Governor Dunmore's, campaign against the Ohio Indians, to warn the fort's commander of an imminent attack being planned by some of his fellow British-backed Shawnee warriors.¹⁸ Drawing upon knowledge gleaned from their two-decade old relationships with Euroamericans and their intimate understanding of the cataclysm of war, Cornstalk and Nonhelema recast themselves as borderland diplomatic brokers attempting to forestall further bloodshed between their people and American militiamen.¹⁹ The Cherokee Nation also produced a number of remarkable "go-betweens." Perhaps the best known is Wolf Clan member Nancy Ward. Ward earned the distinction "Beloved Women" as a result of her actions during the Creek-Cherokee wars that raged during the eighteenth-century, and her extended *métis* family placed her in a simultaneously precarious and powerful position during the American Revolution. As the Revolution plunged southern Appalachia into yet another wave of violence, Nancy Ward emerged as one of the Cherokee Nation's most active diplomatic intermediaries. Using her connections within both Native American and Euroamerican society, Ward warned western settlers of impending British-allied Indian attacks, protected Cherokee towns from being put to the torch (including

¹⁸ Rice and Brown, *West Virginia: A History*, 26-30; Thwaites and Kellogg, eds., *A Documentary History of Dunmore's War*, 104, 272, 290, 308; Aron, *How the West was Lost*, 20.

¹⁹ Aron, *How the West was Lost*, 38-40.

the Overhill capital of Chota), facilitated captive exchanges, and helped broker peace treaties after the conclusion of the war (including the important Treaty of Hopewell).²⁰

Of course, the American Revolution in the Appalachian backcountry did not only create opportunities for diplomatic “go-betweens,” but Amerindian leaders and their intermediaries across the region took advantage of the conflict and confusion of the war to forge pan-Indian and transnational military alliances in what many native leaders believed to be their best (and perhaps last) hope to reverse the previous decades of white encroachment, fraudulent treaties, and forced land cessions.²¹ Perhaps the most remarkable Appalachian borderland pan-Indian alliance was brokered by Chickamauga Cherokee War Chief and son of Atakullaculla, Dragging Canoe. The pressures of Euroamerican territorial encroachment and the looming expansion of the war into the Appalachian backcountry convinced Dragging Canoe and a delegation of Ohio Indians to submerge their decades old mutual hatred and to forge a trans-tribal alliance against America’s western militias. According to historian Stephen Aron, “A confederation of Shawnees and Cherokees had once seemed as unlikely as a union of American colonists” and appeared “more revolutionary than the American Revolution.”²² It seems as though the “Cherokee Dragon’s” years of experience as a Cherokee resistance leader in the upper Tennessee Valley and proven ability to unite several of the disparate Overhill Cherokee towns into a fierce and loyal army of Chickamauga warriors made him the ideal Amerindian leader to fill the role of border broker and accept the Shawnee alliance “wampum” belt and the “purple (really black) and white” Mohawk war belt.²³

Postrevolutionary Appalachia also produced a number of remarkable borderland diplomats who found the chaos and confusion surrounding the postwar years to be the ideal climate to attempt to

²⁰ Woodward, *The Cherokees*, 34, 91-99; Tucker, “Nancy Ward: Ghighau of the Cherokee,” 192-196.

²¹ Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 190-191; Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires*, 169-179.

²² Aron, *How the West was Lost*, 38.

²³ Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 47-49; Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, 194-196; Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires*, 210-211; Aron, *How the West was Lost*, 37-38.

brokered several clandestine transnational alliances. Western political leaders, such as former North Carolina congressman Dr. James White and Revolutionary soldiers turned politicians James Wilkinson (in Virginia's Kentucky District) and John Sevier (governor of the rogue state of Franklin in the upper Tennessee Valley), opened secret negotiations with Spanish officials across the western hemisphere. From clandestine meetings with Cuban governor Don Josef de Ezpeleta to fact-finding missions into Spain's Mississippi River Valley settlements, Appalachia's Euroamerican diplomatic brokers eschewed their political allegiances in their efforts to forge political and economic alliances with Spain. The negotiations surrounding the so-called Spanish Conspiracies reveal the fluidity of national identities and the complexity of diplomacy on the trans-Appalachian borderlands. Despite the collapse of these post-revolutionary negotiations, White, Wilkinson, and Sevier skillfully navigated the treacherous diplomatic landscape created by religious differences, language barriers, and geographical distance.²⁴

While this presentation has revealed only a fraction of the region's borderland brokers and the relationships each facilitated across the transmontane west, what is readily apparent is that preindustrial Appalachia is clearly a borderland and a remarkable and talented set of individuals and kinship groups directed this complex and dynamic system of interaction and exchange. These mountain intermediaries and the economic, diplomatic, military, and kinship connections that resulted from their efforts are the forces that propelled the region's pan-Indian, transnational, and cross-cultural interactions. From the skilled diplomatic negotiations between *métis* Amerindian "go-betweens" and Euroamerican leaders during the all too frequent periods of war to the trans-national and cross-cultural parleys of American and Spanish diplomats accompanying the post-revolutionary struggle for the trans-Appalachian backcountry, borderland brokers transformed the political, economic, and cultural landscape of early Appalachia.

²⁴ Kevin T. Barksdale, "The Spanish Conspiracy on the Trans-Appalachian Borderlands, 1786-1789."