

## THE SUWANNEE - SHAWNEE DEBATE

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### Introduction

Much has been written and said about the Suwannee River, one of the most beautiful and peaceful rivers within the United States. It was, however, a historical battleground for anthropologists and linguists who, from 1875 to 1910, frequently debated whether a group of Shawnee Indians had at one time settled near the Suwannee and given it their name.

The main factors that led to the supposition of Shawnee residency within this area were; the phonetic similarity of the words Suwannee and Shawnee, Shawnee tales of life in Florida, and some papers written by the early explorers of Florida. This paper seeks to reexamine this interesting and largely unknown debate and to interject modern findings.

### Phonetic and Linguistic Arguments

The phonetic argument, and the debate itself, were started by a young U.S. Indian agent, John Johnson, who in an 1819 letter (Archaeologia Americana 1820:273) said, "The Shawanoese...came here {Ohio} from West Florida, and the adjacent country. They formerly resided on Suwaney river, near the sea. Black Hoof, who is eighty five years of age, was born there, and remembers bathing in salt water when a boy, 'Suwaney' river was doubtless named after the Shawanoese, Suwaney being a corruption of Shawanoese."

### Tribal Legend

The Shawnee have two primary legends that concern the south. The first is a religious legend that states that the Shawnee were created by the Great Spirit in the south and are, as their name states when translated, southerners. Most modern authorities tend to disregard this legend as there is evidence that the tribe was one of the last to make the long migration from Asia. Unfortunately, this myth has become confused with the tales of Shawnee who related remembrances of living in Florida.

These tales were told to many of the leading historians of the early 19th century, and the multiplicity of tales is so great that there may have been some truth within them. The following is typical of the tales told, this one to agent Johnson in 1854 by a group of Shawnee who had relatives that passed down their experiences about a river in the south.

"...the people in their wandering came to a river...A woman with them, blind with age, said that this should be their ancient seat; if it were so, near the bank, at a point she described, there was a spring of water. It was found; and close by where she directed them to dig, they found a jar, in which there was a sea couch, that had been fashioned to wear as a neck ornament... They were told that they had left that place before... (and) the hillocks were of nothing but ashes ...which had been thrown together from their (past ) fires" (Wright 1945:46).

These sources and tales all claim adamantly that the river in question was Suwannee and not the Savannah, as has been claimed by some writers and ethnologists.

#### Early Anthropological Argument

In 1854 a noted historian, Buckingham Smith, mentioned Johnson's statement in connection with the memoirs of a Spanish soldier (c. 1575) that he had personally translated and edited. He included the following statement, "He (Johnson) thinks that the stream was doubtless named from the nation 'Shawnoe' which I write from the lips of the natives Sa-wan-wa-ki, the last word denoting people."

The refutations of the theory came in 1884 when Creek Indian anthropologist A.S. Gatschet stated in his book The Migration legends of the Creek Indians, "The name of the Suwannee river, Florida... seems to contain the Creek term Sawani 'echo'." "By all means, these (other) names cannot serve to prove the presence of the Shawono tribe in these eastern parts..." (Gatschet 1884:23)

In 1889 another historian, D.G. Brinton, brought out the fact that the word Suwannee might be a corruption of a word other than Shawnee. He stated, "That such was the origin of the name is quite false, and it's present appellation is merely a corruption of the Spanish San Juan, the river having been called the Little San Juan, in contradistinction to the St. Johns (el rio de San Juan) on the eastern coast. Nor did they ever live in this region, but were scions of the Savanna stem of the Creeks, accolents of the river of that name..." (Wright 1945:45)

A study of Indian linguistics yields three basic language stocks that may be considered for clues to the origin of the word Suwannee. In Timucuan, the most prevalent dialect in north Florida, there is no known word similar to Suwannee. In Muskogean, the Creek language stock, there is the previously mentioned word Sawani, which means echo. If we expand the search to include Algonquian, the language stock of the Shawnee, there is a root word Sawa or Sawan, which means south. Smith's word Sa-wan-wa-ki would then translate as South People or simply Southerners (Lewis and Kneberg 1958:70). It would appear that Shawnee is, in fact, a corruption of the correct tribal name as has happened to many other tribes (i.e. Tsalagi/Cherokee, Nabahu/Navaho, etc.).

In light of this information it is quite possible that the exact origin of the name may be lost as both sides of the linguistic argument bear weight and are equally without solid evidence.

### RECORDED SHAWNEE MIGRATIONS

Prior to the period of reservation confinement the Shawnee tribe exemplified American Indian nomadism. Their long history of migration and settlements lends weight to a possible visit to the Gulf Coast, if not Florida.

Until the late 1400's the Shawnee inhabited the eastern portion of Pennsylvania with the Delaware tribe. Around 1475 a portion of the Shawnee, dissatisfied with the dominant Iroquoian league, started south (Figure 1). Roaming in several bands, they skirted the coastal colonial settlements and eventually reunited in eastern Tennessee. At that point it was decided that the tribe would divide into two parts; one which later migrated north to the Ohio river region, and one which went south to live with their friends, the Creeks.

From early records (Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin No. 137) it is moderately well determined that part of the tribe was settled on the upper reaches of the Flint River with the remnants of other tribes. Geographically, this region is located in the extreme southwest of Georgia; about 156 miles from the mouth of the Suwannee river. This information would seem to negate Brinton's statement that the tribe penetrated no further south than the Savannah River.

### Historical Inferences

Written historical records would tend to prove that the Shawnee Indians did not enter the Florida peninsula at the time period in question, that of around 1715, and if they did, it was a short visit that did not imprint their name upon the river.

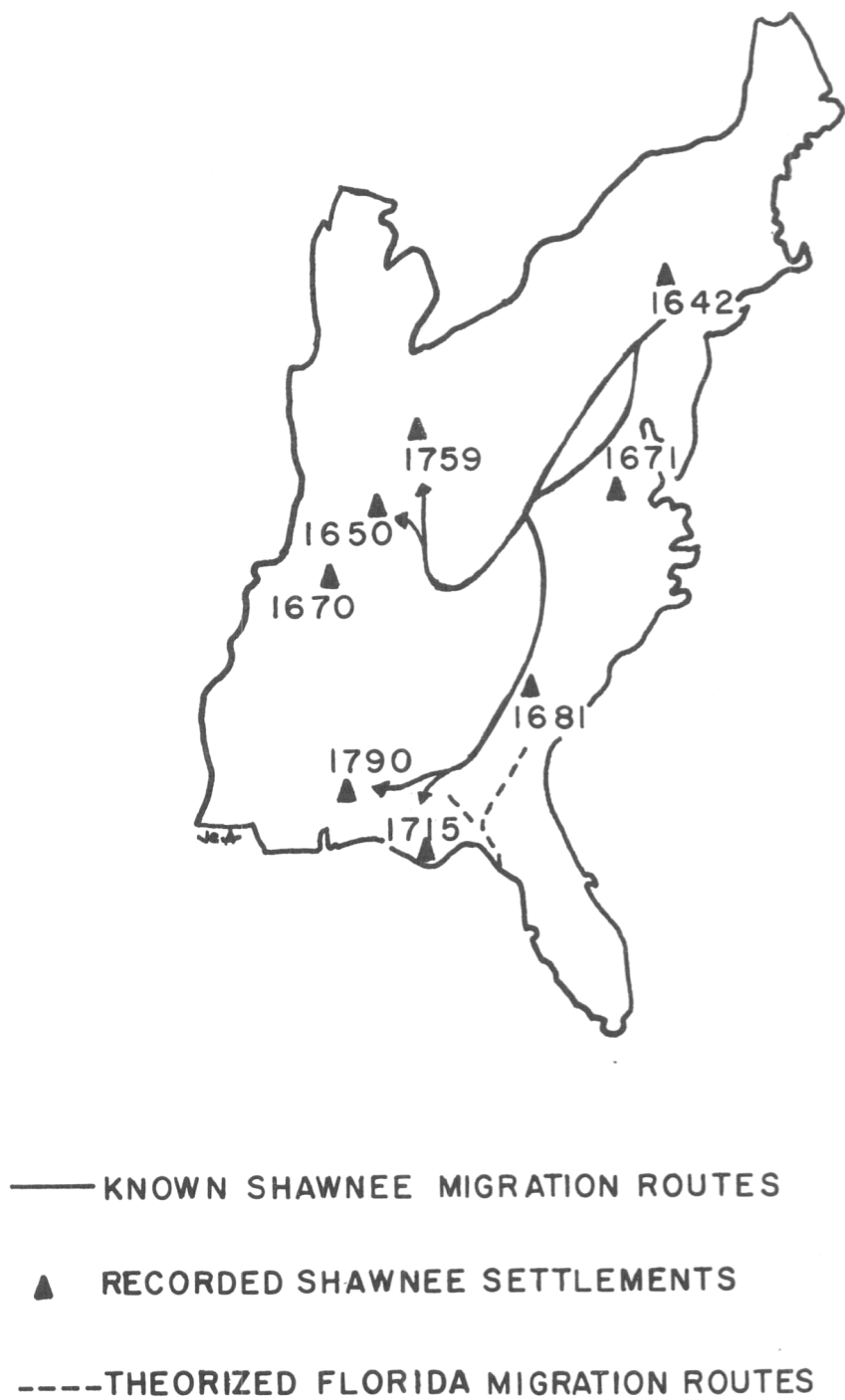


FIGURE 1



In 1704 Governor Moore of Carolina ventured down the Flint River with 1000 Creek Indians and burned the Missions of the Spanish east of Tallahassee. In 1716 Diego Pena, a Spaniard went from St. Augustine to the junction of the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers and found not a human being in the area between the St. Johns and the Forks (Boyd 1949). He does not list any Shawnee among the Indian towns above the Forks. This would imply that the Shawnee that had settled with the Creeks had been adopted into the Creek tribe and had lost their Shawnee culture, or that the settlement listed as having been located on the river in 1715 was of extremely short duration, too short for the Shawnee to have made a settlement, or perhaps a visit to Florida. In any event no one would have been there to record their name. In all probability the Shawnee and their legend of a river running into the ocean concerned another area.

### CONCLUSIONS

Modern linguistic studies and the knowledge of Shawnee migrations, coupled with the frequent visits to northwest Florida from 1704 to 1715 hint strongly at a Spanish origin of the name Suwannee. The legends of the Shawnee speak strongly for at least a visit by members of the tribe to the Gulf of Mexico area. Perhaps only archaeology will answer the question of where the Shawnee went in their travels in the south.

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