

2012

# Excavations at Samuel Moniac's House on the Old Federal Road

Presentation for the Alabama Historical Association 2012 Annual Meeting  
Huntsville, Alabama

Raven Christopher

University of South Alabama,  
Center for Archaeological Studies

4/14/2012

- I. Introduction (Slide 1): In 2009, the University of South Alabama, Center for Archaeological Studies, received a grant from the Alabama Department of Transportation to research the Old Federal Road (OFR). The main goal of the grant was to determine, with as much precision as possible, the route of the OFR and identify any historic sites along its path. During our work we identified the location of Samuel Moniac's house through historic research and conducted a small-scale excavation at the site. I will begin with a brief summary of the OFR then discuss our historical research and archaeological findings of Samuel Moniac's house on the road.
- II. Introduction to OFR (Slide 2): The OFR was very significant to the formation of Alabama, the westward expansion of the United States and the demise of the Creek Nation in Alabama. The OFR, which was an old Indian Path long before European contact, became important to the U.S. around 1805. It originally served primarily as a route for communication between Washington D.C. and the newly acquire Louisiana Territory-particularly the important port city, New Orleans. However, the road went on to have significant value to the U.S. during the War of 1812 and the Creek War of 1813-1814. In decades following the war, the road became the major thoroughfare for settlers from the eastern seaboard to central and southern Alabama. To really understand the complexity of the Federal Road, you must go beyond the physical manifestation of the road, and examine the social impact it had on the lives of the people it affected. The road had very different consequences on the different groups of society. For the U.S., the road was a monumental achievement. It provided faster more reliable communication to the western lands, and after Creek Removal it offered settlers low cost fertile lands and the opportunity to start a new -potentially profitable- life. However, the vast acres of fertile lands required a large labor force. So to work the land, settlers brought with them enslaved Africans and African Americans. Additionally the road allowed for the transport of large numbers of slaves for sale in the South. The relocation of slaves had a detrimental impact on slave families and communities, as well as on the dynamics and demographics of the antebellum South in general. The road also had a significant impact on the Creek Indians who occupied the land through which the road passed. The road, accompanied by the sudden influx of white settlers, significantly disrupted Creek lifeways. By the early 1800s, the Creek Nation was beginning to fracture. A religious revitalization was causing a division between those eager to preserve Creek traditional ways and those who were interested in assimilating with white society. The Federal Road further perpetuated this

divide by increasing the interaction between the cultures and offering some Creeks opportunities for financial gain and prominence in the white community. One such Creek was Samuel Moniac, who I will discuss in greater detail momentarily. The division between the Creeks continued to grow and eventually turned violent. The Creek War of 1813-1814 began as a civil war between the Creeks but grew to involve the United States after a number of Creek attacks on white settlers and “friendly” Creeks. The war ended in 1814 after the Redstick surrender at Fort Jackson. The connection between the road and the Creek War is complex and I could go on for hours, but I unfortunately I must stop here and continue with my main agenda, which is the excavations at Samuel Moniac’s tavern.

III. Samuel Moniac: Samuel Moniac was of mixed Creek and European descent and was brother-in-law of William Weatherford. He was relatively wealthy and prominent among the Creek people and influential in the white community as well. So, to the Redstick faction of the Creeks, who adamantly discouraged assimilation into white culture, Moniac was not considered a friend. Moniac owned a plantation near the Alabama River in Lowndes County, at the present-day crossroad community of Manack. When the U.S. government needed Creeks to establish “places of entertainment” along the Federal Road, they extended the offer to Moniac and a handful of other influential men in the Creek Nation.

IV. Tavern history (Slide 3): Moniac built his tavern on the Old Federal Road in present-day Montgomery County, near Pintlala. The exact date the tavern was built is not known, but it was likely in 1809. The first mention of Moniac’s place on the Old Federal Road at Pintlala occurs in a letter written by Benjamin Hawkins to a mail contractor dated January 19, 1809. “The station at Pinahlucho by Mr. Nal [sic] will be an useful one. I wrote to him last fall to fix one on the post path. He is a wealthy man and can keep it supplied with necessaries at all times.” The post stop was operational in June 1813 when U.S. Army General James Wilkinson stopped there to compose and send a letter via post rider to Benjamin Hawkins about the Redstick attack on Tuckabatchee. The general and his party made it safely through the nation to Georgia, but they must have been among the last travelers to stop at Moniac’s house on the road. Soon after the attack on Tuckabatchee and Gen. Wilkinson’s stop at his tavern, Moniac, “went up to my house on the road, and found some Indians camped near it, who I tried to avoid but could not. An Indian came to me who goes by the name of High Headed Jim.... He shook hands with me & immediately began to tremble & jerk in every part of his frame, and the very calves of his legs would be convulsed.” High Headed Jim was a staunch supporter of the new Redstick religious

movement. The Redsticks believed they could identify unbelievers, like Samuel Moniac, by this violent reaction to their touch. Within days of the encounter, Redsticks burned down Moniac's plantation on the Alabama River and his house on the Federal Road.

Soon after the war, Samuel Moniac rebuilt his house on the Federal Road, although precisely when remains uncertain, as does the duration of his re-occupation. The survey plat draw by Thomas Freeman in 1816 or 1817 depicted "Manack's Store" and Moniac apparently still owned his place there in 1818 when he brought "twenty or more" Creek hunters to the aid of state militia gathering at Burnt Corn Springs. There is also a mention of the "path from Manacs" at that time. Postal records identify Maximillian Armstrong as postmaster of the local post office at "Manacks" in late 1818, so perhaps by this time Moniac had sold the house. We believe Moniac and his family had almost certainly moved by 1819, when death threats against all Creeks living on ceded lands prompted the state militia to escort frightened Creeks into the Nation. And by the time English traveler Adam Hodgson passed through the area in 1820, he made no mention of Moniac or his house of entertainment, despite his detailed description of the Pintlala area.

- V. Physical description of tavern: Several historical sources give us some clues about Moniac's place on the OFR. Because he participated actively alongside the American army in the Redstick War, Moniac successfully petitioned Congress for compensation for property he lost during that conflict. His "Statement of property destroyed" includes his plantation on the river and his house along the Federal Road. It is just a single list, so unfortunately it does not differentiate between the two. However, it is likely the large supplies of coffee, sugar, and whiskey were lost at the house on the road, as well as a large portion of his household wares, including cooking utensils (10 iron pots, 2 Dutch ovens, 4 tin kettles) and serving vessels (2 dozen earthen plates, 2 dozen cups and saucers, half dozen tumblers, half dozen tin cups). Interestingly, Moniac mentions just one bedstead and two feather beds, which suggests that travelers had to carry their own bedding. Moniac's primary residence at the river plantation was valued at \$230 and his "House on the Federal Road" valued at just \$30. Judging by its low worth, this structure was likely a notched log building, probably a dogtrot-style log house, which was common in that time (Slide 4).
- VI. Archaeology: The archaeological investigations, conducted by USA in May 2011 and generously funded by the Pintlala Historical Association, support the historical references

about Moniac's place on the OFR. Artifact recovery was relatively low at the site, but the artifacts recovered do coincide with historical references and validate the site as Moniac's house. The two main reasons for the low density of artifacts are the existence at that location of a modern house and the considerable erosion that has impacted the site in the last 200 years. (Slide 5) The historic map overlay places Moniac's house directly under a modern house, so the archaeological remains could have been destroyed by the modern construction or still be intact underneath the existing structure. Additionally agricultural activities and erosion have further displaced artifacts surrounding the house. (Slide 6) Despite these limitations, we placed four test units around the house. (Slide 7) Here is a photograph of Test Unit 1, along with an image of its profile. As you can see there is very little soil, only about 20-25 cm, before we encountered undisturbed clay subsoil. The artifacts recovered from test units include some cast iron kettle parts, a few unclenched nails, and small quantities of European and Creek pottery. (Slide 8) The archaeological find of unclenched nails strengthens the impression of a simple log structure. At sites with more substantial structures made of boards, we typically find a large number of clenched nails, which are L-shaped, with the pointed ends hammered over during construction. The nails were also burned, which coincides with the historical accounts of the house burning. (Slide 9) The cast iron kettle or dutch oven fragments are typical of the cooking vessels used in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Slide 10) The European pottery collection is made up of British-made creamware and pearlware serving vessel fragments. These two types of wares were used in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but were superseded by whiteware in the late 1820s. The presence of Creek pottery is consistent with what we would expect to find at the Moniac house, considering his mixed ethnic heritage. So, despite the low density of artifacts, we recovered enough historical evidence and diagnostic artifacts to identify the site with confidence as Moniac's house on the Old Federal Road. Unfortunately, not much more can be inferred at this point, given the sparse assemblage.

- VII. Conclusion (Slide 11): Samuel Moniac was among the thousands of Creek Indians removed from their land during Indian Removal. He died along the Creek Trail of Tears near Pass Christian, Mississippi in 1836. Moniac lived in a time of civil and cultural unrest. His non-traditional beliefs and desire to accumulate wealth and prestige put him at odds with a faction of the Creek Nation, a faction that ultimately retaliated and set fire to his possessions. Sadly, the community he sought prominence and acceptance within shunned him only two decades later. This fascinating, though troublesome, time in Alabama's history is often forgotten, but hopefully the continued efforts of historians, archaeologists, and local enthusiasts can

continue to uncover, preserve, and share this history with their fellow citizens and the generations to come.

- VIII. Acknowledgements (Slide 12): The historic research and archaeological survey of the Old Federal Road was funded by a Transportation Enhancement grant from the Alabama Department of Transportation, with funding derived from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Additional financial support was provided by two grants from the American Battlefield Protection Program, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Funding for the archaeological excavations at Samuel Moniac's house was provided by the Pintlala Historical Association.

References:

Christopher, Raven, Gregory Waselkov, and Tara Potts. *Archaeological Testing along the Federal Road: Exploring the Site of "Manack's Store," Montgomery County, Alabama*. Report prepared for the Pintlala Historical Association. Mobile, AL: University of South Alabama, Center for Archaeological Studies, 2011.