



# *Paths to a Middle Ground*

The Diplomacy of Natchez, Boukfouka, Nogales,  
and San Fernando de las Barrancas, 1791–1795



CHARLES A. WEEKS

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## *Preface*

This book represents a blend of older borderland histories, which emphasize the role of the Spanish during the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries in the broad area stretching from California to Florida, and more recent work that portrays the same region as one of encounter among its most numerous peoples, Native Americans, and other European and African newcomers in addition to the Spanish. Benefiting from the work of archaeologists, anthropologists, and social historians, these newer studies present a much fuller and more complex picture of place and time. While still maintaining a Hispanic perspective, this work endeavors to further an appreciation and understanding of a region that was not so much a frontier or borderland but rather a place of mixing and melting, where politics and diplomacy often sought the impossible: the creation and maintenance of “walls”—or boundaries—to make good neighbors where, to borrow more words of the poet Robert Frost, there was always “something that doesn’t love a wall.”

In the course of working on this project, many people and institutions have contributed much to it and to my education. I would like to thank them for their help and encouragement and absolve them from any of the book’s shortcomings. The people who played an especially important role in its creation include, first, Patricia K. Galloway of the University of Texas at Austin, who called my attention to the existence of Spanish materials in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History when she was associated with that institution and encouraged me to become familiar with them and to read them carefully. I continue to benefit from her scholarship and wisdom. Sarah J. Banks, a professor of modern languages at Jackson State University, and I collaborated in the preparation of a reader consisting of Spanish documents from the late fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries to illustrate Mississippi’s Spanish heritage. She approached that project with great enthusiasm, which encouraged me to continue working with eighteenth-century Spanish documents and ultimately produce the translated documents included in this book. While work-

ing in Spain, I benefited much from the knowledge of G. Douglas Inglis—now director of the The Texas Tech University Center in Sevilla—about Spanish archives generally and the Archivo General de Indias in particular. His interest in the same region and period and his enthusiasm for eighteenth-century history have been a continual source of encouragement. Colin G. Calloway, head of the Native-American Studies department in Dartmouth College, took an interest in the project and offered many good suggestions about an earlier version of the text. Jack D. Elliott, Jr., has been a most helpful source of knowledge about Spanish Natchez, particularly the house its Spanish governor built. A good friend and former colleague, the late Robert L. Smith, entered the lists late and provided generously of his talent and time to translate a number of French documents and edit an earlier version of the narrative portion of the book. Thanks to him and Pat Galloway I was reminded constantly of the continued importance of people of French or French Canadian descent in the life of a region that became only nominally Spanish during the second half of the eighteenth century. Finally, I appreciate very much the many good suggestions offered by anonymous readers of the manuscript.

The book prepared by Sarah J. Banks and me, *Mississippi's Spanish Heritage: Selected Writings, 1492–1798* (1991), came about with the help of the Mississippi State Department of Education and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Hardin Foundation. At the time of its preparation, I was benefiting from a National Endowment for the Humanities–Reader's Digest “Teacher-Scholar” award that made possible a year-long sabbatical to work with documents from which many were selected for the book. The “Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Heritage” program of the University of Houston provided a small grant in 1996 that allowed me to assemble in translated form documents pertaining to the Nogales controversy of the early 1790s and the subsequent presentation and publication of a short paper on that topic. The grant also encouraged me to travel for the first time to Spain to work in such Spanish archives as the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid and the Archivo General de Indias in Sevilla. During one of my many visits to Sevilla, the Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, in addition to providing lodging, offered an opportunity during one of its weekly Mesas Redondas, or roundtable discussions, to share some preliminary thoughts on the subject of the cultural dimension of late eighteenth-century Spanish-Indian diplomacy in the lower Mississippi valley. The staffs and collections of the Historic New Orleans Collection, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the Library of Congress, the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley, the New York Public Library, the Baker-Berry Library of Dartmouth College, the Ohrstrom Library of St. Paul's School, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History have offered me pleasant and valuable places to work.

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# Introduction

## An Argument

Piomingo, the astute and able Chickasaw chief, when invited by the Spanish to participate in a major assembly in 1793 with other Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Cherokees, responded by saying he would follow a “straight path” to Nogales, the site chosen for the meeting.<sup>1</sup> In using the word *path*, Piomingo invoked perhaps the most common symbol used by Indians in their highly metaphoric language, especially in diplomatic discourse.<sup>2</sup> Its meaning and significance derived from the numerous physical paths or trails connecting villages and making possible frequent and remarkably fast communication. Such practical importance enhanced the word’s symbolic or metaphoric meaning, for in Indian rhetoric *path* connoted a range of human relationships from the difficult or even bellicose—conveyed by such modifiers as crooked, dark, obstructed, bloody, or red—to the amicable or peaceful when described as straight, clear, or white.<sup>3</sup> In this particular context, Piomingo expressed a preference for the latter, and it is the one sought by local Spanish officials as they endeavored through diplomacy to forge closer ties with chiefs such as Piomingo and the people they represented.

The essay and documents that follow will attempt to offer some insight into the diplomacy associated with establishing and maintaining such paths in the Gulf South during the last few years of a century of imperial rivalry in North America. It was a diplomacy that was defined principally by Native Americans but also one that eighteenth-century Europeans could understand and employ. Despite differences of culture and interests, Europeans and Indians found that they shared a diplomacy with similar assumptions and characteristics. Both knew the ways of diplomatic negotiation: missions to convey important messages or engage in talks, full-scale councils or congresses accompanied by elaborate protocol, interpreters, and eloquent, often highly metaphoric language.<sup>4</sup> That diplomacy contributed much to break down barriers and bound-

aries and define the region as one of mingling and exchange, perhaps even “the world’s first multicultural society.”<sup>5</sup>

The focus here will center on the end of the century, particularly the first half of the decade of the 1790s. Then both local Spanish officials and representatives of the major Indian groups in the region concluded that they needed to be more active in finding ways to deter what they saw as serious challenges coming from the newly independent United States. Although Piomingo, in spite of his words of 1793, continued to follow paths to the Americans, many other chiefs and factions, who had begun to feel more insecure as they experienced increasing pressure from an expanding American population, found it more advantageous to respond to such Spanish invitations as that extended to Piomingo in 1793.

This story begins in early 1791 with a Spanish decision to establish a post at the mouth of the Yazoo River some eighty-five miles north of Natchez.<sup>6</sup> Both the governor-general in New Orleans, Estevan Miró, and the governor in Natchez, Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, had concluded that such a post, which Gayoso hoped might eventually become a city, was needed to deter a projected American settlement there, backed by the South Carolina Yazoo Company.<sup>7</sup> Dubbed earlier by the British “Walnut Hills” because of a stand of black-walnut trees, the site lay at the western end of what the Spanish regarded as the northern boundary of the Natchez district within their province of West Florida.<sup>8</sup> Miró appointed a member of the Louisiana Infantry, Elías Beauregard, as commandant of the new post, to be called “Nogales,” the Spanish plural of “walnut,” and he provided Gayoso a copy of the instructions he had prepared for Pedro Foucher, commandant of the recently created post of Nuevo Madrid, to serve as a model for Beauregard’s instructions. They reveal that, although the Spanish saw the post as a way to deter a similar American one, emigration by Americans willing to take an oath of allegiance to the Spanish king should be encouraged, and the commandant was instructed to discharge his office in such a way as to demonstrate the advantages of a community ordered by good government. After a difficult trip up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, Beauregard took charge of construction work on a fort and other buildings for what Gayoso described as “the most important [post] of this province because of its location with respect to our neighbors and its land.”<sup>9</sup>

Gayoso joined Beauregard’s expedition to Nogales and spent most of April there. By means of a diary, he provided a rather detailed and sanguine report of his activities, which included entertaining a delegation of Indians.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after his return to Natchez, however, he received a letter, written in English, containing the names of two chiefs of the Choctaw Nation, Franchimastabé and Taboca. The letter had been carried to Nogales by Itelegana, one of the Choctaw chiefs Gayoso had met during his stay at Nogales, and delivered to

Beauregard to send down to Natchez. It protested what the authors described as a usurpation of lands belonging to the Choctaws and their “brothers” the Chickasaws. The letter was short and blunt. Not only did it accuse the Spanish of taking the land by force; it said that it was not theirs to occupy, that fifteen villages “of our nation” wanted it, and that the Chickasaws and the Choctaws were united in their opposition to the Spanish initiative. They begged the Spanish to leave and, as others repeated in later communications to Spanish officials, “let the cane grow again.”<sup>11</sup>

More than a year of active diplomacy followed, involving principally Gayoso and a number of Choctaw and Chickasaw chiefs, aided by traders and interpreters. Gayoso tried to meet the objections raised by Taboca and Franchimastabé so that the Spanish could build their post in a way that would strengthen the bonds of “friendship and commerce” agreed upon in 1784 meetings with the Choctaws and Chickasaws in Mobile and deter American expansion. Culminating with a major congress in Natchez in May 1792, Gayoso’s diplomatic efforts produced a treaty in which the principal Indian chiefs in attendance agreed to the post.

This success, encouraged by subsequent events including a visit to New Orleans later in the year by a large delegation of Indians that included a group of Cherokees, led late in the next year to another major council or assembly at the site of the new post at Nogales. This meeting supported other measures to check what all agreed were threats coming from the north. For the Spanish, these measures included creating a squadron of naval vessels to patrol the Mississippi River, establishing additional posts, appointing resident diplomatic agents or commissioners, and, for those Indians meeting in New Orleans, forging some kind of confederation to include Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, Cherokees, and other groups. Finally, in the spring of 1795, the diplomatic efforts of Gayoso and the Chickasaw chief Ugulayacabé secured enough support from the Chickasaws to enable the Spanish to create farther north the post of San Fernando de las Barrancas along the east bank of the Mississippi River on bluffs like those of Nogales and Natchez. A few months later, however, other diplomats in Europe undid this work by means of the Treaty of San Lorenzo between the United States and Spain, which required Spain to withdraw from all these posts and turn them over to the United States. San Fernando de las Barrancas soon became the city of Memphis, Tennessee.

Both the Spanish, in terms of what their officials set out to accomplish in this region, and the great majority of the people living there—the Indians—lost by this 1795 treaty. The Spanish were forced to give up the posts their local representatives had worked so hard to achieve, and they eventually gave up all claims to a political presence in the region. In the context of their withdrawal, many Indians felt betrayed, sensing they had lost a major ally in their struggle

to hold at bay an ever more aggressive and expansionist United States. More important perhaps was the loss of a significant participant in the political culture of the region. With the absence of the Spanish, politics became less competitive and hence less diplomatic. There were fewer opportunities for chiefs such as Piomingo to bargain in the context of pressures from what historians Arthur Whitaker and Frank De Fina characterize as the “insatiable voracity of [American] frontiersmen and speculators” and others who concluded that the region could no longer accommodate Indian ways of life.<sup>12</sup> The paths open to the Indians, in other words, diminished and for many ultimately came to mean paths of egress.

Hence, a particular significance of the focus of this essay and accompanying documents. A consideration of the diplomatic process centering on Natchez, the Choctaw village of Boukfouka, the new post at Nogales, and San Fernando de las Barrancas can add to an appreciation of a century in which European newcomers and Indians created and sustained diplomatic paths as one way to live together. Despite strains and lapses, these paths helped define here, as elsewhere, a “middle ground”—an economy and culture of exchange involving goods, people, and language.<sup>13</sup> Both Spanish officials and their Indian counterparts had a very real sense of what might be described as a kind of eighteenth-century *realpolitik* that reflected a remarkable sensitivity to power relationships and native traditions enabling them to resolve problems through diplomacy. Indian participants in this process—notably such leaders as Franchimastabé and Taboca of the Choctaws, Bloody Fellow of the Cherokees, Piomingo and Ugulayacabé of the Chickasaws—were shrewd politicians and diplomats. Like their European counterparts, they had developed formal ways of dealing with one another, many of which could be easily understood by Europeans. To such chiefs, historian John Alden has pointed out with regard to the 1760s and 1770s, “the strategy of balance of power had not the slightest mystery.”<sup>14</sup>

Other historians after Alden have done much to bring out more about the active and important role these chiefs and others played in a multicultural diplomacy that to a considerable extent integrated European newcomers into the life of the region during the eighteenth century. Greg O’Brien’s recent history of the Choctaws during the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth portrays the important role of the two Choctaw chiefs, Franchimastabé and Taboca, in the politics and diplomacy of their time.<sup>15</sup> Claudio Saunt’s study of changes among the Creeks in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries devotes considerable attention to such chiefs as Efau Hadjo and Hoboithle Micco to balance what he sees as too much emphasis in earlier literature on Alexander McGillivray, a Creek chief of Scottish and Creek ancestry.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to directing attention to other chiefs, Saunt writes about how

power should be seen to expand over the century to include warriors and women. Others have explored this dimension of power in the Indian world. Theda Perdue and Kathryn Braund provide additional insight into the important role of women as agents of change by describing how Cherokee and Creek women through marriage to traders integrated them into the kinship structure of their societies. They also educated the traders in native ways. Hence, traders, their wives, and their children played valuable roles as diplomatic agents and cultural intermediaries. Many of the male children became chiefs.<sup>17</sup> These various people and practices made Indians “facilitators of the many multicultural accommodations essential for survival on a colonial frontier.”<sup>18</sup>

Although limited to what Europeans or Americans recorded and interpreted in documents—in this case Spanish documents—the discussion that follows will endeavor to sustain an emphasis on the contribution of these Native Americans and their culture to the political life of the eighteenth-century Gulf South. Recent historical literature has done much to establish their deserved place in histories of the region; more still is needed to make their voices and actions better known and understood. Despite changes resulting from a century of interaction between Native Americans and the European newcomers, their culture remained strong and influenced substantially the procedure and substance of the diplomatic agenda of the early 1790s. Ceremony, symbolism, and—what often seemed to Spaniards and other Europeans who had been raised in a culture of written as well as spoken language—long, repetitious talking set much of the agenda. Those elements created and sustained the paths of communication that defined much of life and made possible resolution of issues.<sup>19</sup> Through such practices, Spanish officials and Indian elites at the end of the century overcame the difficult terrain of multiple centers of power to create and sustain paths, which, while never straight, did facilitate the peaceful resolution of such issues as Nogales and for a few years enabled Indians to find more common ground with the Spanish.

As will be seen, the diplomacy creating such paths was neither easy nor always successful. The documents that record the talk and activities of Piomingo provide an example of the challenge to local Spanish officials and ultimately, in his case, failure. During the American Revolution, Piomingo and his faction supported the English against the Spanish. In the period following the Revolution he shifted his allegiance to the Americans, developed close ties with American settlers who were settling in Tennessee along the Cumberland River, and became a good friend of a leader of those settlers, James Robertson, whom he referred to with another common metaphorical term deriving from the importance attached to kin as “my Brother Colonel Robertson.”<sup>20</sup>

Given the Spanish orientation of this book, some irony accompanies its initial focus on Piomingo’s metaphor of “straight path” in his talk of June 1793

saying he would follow such a path to the assembly called by the Spanish. Securing his support had become an important goal of Spanish officials, but in the end it failed, for he continued to follow the paths between his town, Tchoukafala, and Cumberland and other points north, where there seemed to be, in his view, more for him and his "nation." "I often go to Cumberland to See my Friends there," he said in 1789, and "the Spaniards . . . are people we niver loved they have Sent to us often to come to them but we will not if we can help it."<sup>21</sup>

He did not waver in the 1790s, and the Spanish had to look to and cultivate other chiefs. Competition to create paths and connections fed the politics and diplomacy of the time, making the paths neither straight nor one-directional. It was a complex politics, but for a time it worked to sustain both the Spanish and the Indians. Spain's eventual retreat, beginning in 1795, left only the United States as an increasingly aggressive and unified external power that proceeded to behave as Spanish officials and some Indian chiefs said it would. The insatiable demand for land by Americans supported territorial expansion as an important object of public policy, which found support in an ideology of republicanism to support an agrarian "empire for liberty."<sup>22</sup>

Despite the failure to secure the allegiance of Piomingo and his faction of Chickasaws, the diplomacy making possible the resolution of the dispute over Nogales and the achievement of other agreements marks a high point of Spain's presence in the lower Mississippi valley. Indian diplomats, too, could regard the moment as a good one, particularly in view of what happened when they found their position significantly weakened by the Treaty of San Lorenzo of 1795, which required the withdrawal of Spain from most of the region. In Gayoso's view such an achievement was not easy; it required much tact and patience. He and others realized they had to pay close attention to the many interests, traditions, and values present among those with whom they dealt and which, while perhaps changing, nevertheless remained strong. Aptly characterized as "an astute Indian diplomat," Gayoso seemed particularly successful in securing whatever goals he and his superiors in New Orleans and Havana agreed were important.<sup>23</sup>

Indian leaders, it must once again be emphasized, brought to these proceedings as much diplomatic savvy as Gayoso and his colleagues; they need to be seen as players, and not mere pawns, in the political games of the century.<sup>24</sup> A number of them had already many years of experience dealing with Europeans and even Americans. Taboca, one of the two whose names were on the May 1791 letter to Gayoso, had participated in a congress with the British in Mobile in 1765 and twenty years later, in the fall of 1785, led a delegation of Choctaws to meet with American commissioners at Hopewell in South Carolina. There he impressed observers as one who expressed forcefully Choctaw inter-

ests, and he and others did much to educate Americans as to Indian expectations. In the summer of 1787 he led a delegation of Choctaws to Philadelphia to press Americans to honor the Hopewell agreements, particularly with regard to trade. "By the 1790s," notes O'Brien, "Taboca possessed greater knowledge about Euro-American people than any other Choctaw. He had traveled to more non-Indian centers of power and had met more Euro-American officials than any other Choctaw of his generation."<sup>25</sup>

The other name or title on the protest letter sent to Gayoso was that of the war chief Franchimastabé, who had actively assisted the British during the Revolutionary War. During that time he apparently agreed to the cession of the Nogales lands to the British, and he led Choctaws in a joint British and Choctaw war party to Natchez in search of American rebels and, later, led another force of Choctaws to assist the British during the siege of Pensacola. As a consequence of these activities, he received the sobriquet "the English chief."<sup>26</sup> Both these Choctaw chiefs, Taboca and Franchimastabé, had established themselves as forces to be reckoned with by the time the Spanish displaced the British.

As indicated, comparable figures can be found among the Creeks and Cherokees, and, among the Chickasaws, the chief known to the Spanish as Ugulayacabé emerged in their eyes as a prominent leader and the one most friendly to their interests. "Ougoulayacabe's importance in his nation is great," wrote Gayoso to Governor Carondelet in New Orleans in the summer of 1793; "he has declared himself on our side, and because of his talents and his influence, I believe he is capable of counteracting the machinations of Piomingo."<sup>27</sup>

The experience and position of leaders such as these simply reinforced to the Spanish the fact that Indians were the most numerous and powerful presence in the region.<sup>28</sup> Deference to their numbers, their skill as negotiators, and their traditions was a *sine qua non* of successful relations; the Spanish had to understand and accept the import of such words as those expressed by the Chickasaw chief Taskietoka to Juan Delavillebeuvre, the first Spanish commissioner to the Choctaws and Chickasaws: "you are in a borrowed land."<sup>29</sup> As such, the Spanish, as had the French and British before them, needed to honor the value Indians throughout the century continued to attach to exchanges of all kinds, especially those enhanced by ceremony and gifts, as a way to seal social and political relationships.<sup>30</sup> And, to take issue with the view of Arthur Preston Whitaker, the Spanish, as had their predecessors, did gain some understanding, as did the Indians of them.<sup>31</sup>

Such understanding may have been imperfect, or, if acquired, not always liked. Often, early in the century, the French misread Indian ways, and after the French some Spanish and American officials found it particularly difficult to accept the importance they attached, for example, to gifts. At Hopewell in

1785, Americans described the Choctaws as being “the greatest beggars, and the most indolent creatures we ever saw.” Similarly the Spanish commandant in Mobile in 1793, Manuel de Lanzas, described a talk of Franchimastabé during a visit to that post as “about nothing but the poverty which his Indians are suffering” and concluding with “the usual begging position.” Indians resented such views. They explained and justified gifts in terms of their kinship system or, as Taskietoka put it, that Europeans and eventually Americans should see themselves as guests. They were ways fathers and children and brothers supported one another, and, because to a large extent Europeans had been accommodated by this kinship system, encounters such as these required the exchange of gifts as symbols of generosity, friendship, and hospitality.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, it has been observed that Indian chiefs came to depend on such gifts as evidence of their capacity to secure desired goods and therefore these gifts became a source of power for them.<sup>33</sup>

These and other points will emerge more extensively in the two-part discussion that follows. The first part highlights how Indians and Europeans interacted with one another to form what might be called a culture of diplomacy, or ways of talking and acting that blended Indian and European elements to make possible the identification and advancement of common interests. That process began with the arrival in the region of the British and the French in the late seventeenth century and continued with more activity by the Spanish as they replaced both the French and the British as the major European presence in the region after the American Revolution. The second part will then examine how this culture of diplomacy operated to make possible the resolution of the Nogales conflict and the achievement by the Spanish of additional posts and closer ties with members of all the major Indian groups in much of the lower Mississippi valley and Gulf South in the early 1790s.



# *Part I*