

**Rediscovering a Lost Georgia Battlefield:
The 1702 “Battle of the Blankets” along the Lower Flint River**

John E. Worth
Randell Research Center, Florida Museum of Natural History

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Introduction

The “Battle of the Blankets” is one of the most poorly documented engagements of Queen Anne’s War (1702-1713) along the Spanish-English frontier, and to this day remains largely unrecognized except for a few brief references in a small number of specialized history books (e.g. Swanton 1922: 120-121; Crane 1981: 74; Hann 1996: 294). Nevertheless, it was an important part of the broader borderlands conflict between English-allied Creek Indians and Spanish-allied mission Indians, and also represents one of the few military actions during this era which occurred within the present state of Georgia.

Detailed analysis of all the available primary sources regarding the “Battle of the Blankets” has never been published, and the following text is based on a careful examination of several sometimes ambiguous and conflicting sources from both Spanish and English authors. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct a fairly accurate portrait of the events surrounding the battle, and establish at least the general area where it was fought along the Lower Flint River.

Historical Descriptions of the Battle

Based on an assortment of primary Spanish sources (Romo de Uriza 1702; Solana 1702; Zuñiga y Cerda 1702a, 1702b), the following reconstruction of the battle and its surrounding events has been reconstructed.

Following a meeting in the town of Hitchiti (Achito), a Creek force with some 400 warriors departed from Hitchiti heading toward the Apalachee missions, and a second force of unknown strength departed at the same time toward the Timucua missions, both with explicit instructions to decimate the mission towns of Bacuqua and Escambé in Apalachee along with other towns in Timucua. The force of 400 was reported to have included Creek (Apalachicola) men and one Creek woman, Chisca men, and 10 Westo (Chichimeco) men and 3 Westo women. They were armed with firearms, including muskets and pistols, as well as a great deal of powder and shot, along with cutlasses. They were led by an English lieutenant named Anthony (Antonio), along with two other Englishmen and two black men. Although there is at least one later Spanish account (Nieto de Carvajal 1707) that places the English-Creek numbers at 1,500, given the date and context, this is almost certainly an exaggeration or a mistake intended to excuse the Spanish defeat. The date of departure for this force is not entirely clear from the Spanish sources (and absent from English sources), but it was probably on the 6th of October, 1702 (see below).

Apparently on the very same day, a force of some 800 Apalachee, Chacato, and Timucua Indians set out northward from the Apalachee mission of San Antonio de Bacuqua, determined to take vengeance on the Creeks for their recent attack on mission Santa Fé de Teleco in the Timucua province, and the murder of provincial lieutenant Juan Ruíz de Cañizares the previous May. This force was led by Captain Francisco Romo de Uriza and 30 Spanish infantrymen. Their force of arms is unknown, but it is likely that most of the Apalachee and other Indians were not armed with muskets, but rather bows and arrows and war clubs, leaving them at a significant disadvantage with respect to the Creek force.

Just as this Spanish-Indian force marched northward along the trail which would eventually pass just east of the Lower Flint River, the English-Indian force marched southward along this same trail. A later English reflection on the battle states that:

In 1702, before Queen Anne's Declaration of War was known in these Parts, the Spaniards formed another Design to fall upon our Settlements by Land, at the Head of Nine Hundred Apalachee Indians from thence. The Creek Indians, in Friendship with this Province, coming at a Knowledge of it, and sensible of the Dangers approaching, acquainted our Traders, then in the Nation with it, when this Army was actually on their March coming down that way. The Traders having thereupon encourag'd the Creeks to get together an Army of Five Hundred Men, headed the same, and went out to meet the other. Both Armies met in an Evening on the Side of Flint-River, a Branch of the Chatabooche. In the Morning, just before Break of Day (when indians are accustomed to make their Attacks) the Creeks stirring up their Fires drew back at a Little Distance leaving their Blankets by the Fires in the very same Order as they had slept. Immediately after the Spaniards and Apalachees (as was expected) coming on to attack them, fired and run in upon the Blankets. Thereupon the Creeks rushing forth fell on them, killed and took the greatest Part, and entirely routed them. To this Strategem was owing the Defeat of the then intended Design (cited in Swanton 1922: 120-121).

Spanish sources are less clear about the details of the battle, but just a few days after the battle, the defeated Captain Romo de Uriza reported from Apalachee that roughly 200 of his warriors dropped their weapons and ran away immediately. Complaining that even the 1,500 potential warriors left in Apalachee would probably do the same, Romo noted that they were:

...of no value for whatever might happen, since, in what I have seen, they find themselves with hopes of fleeing, making use of their feet like they did in the occasion that happened to me, since on the second day up to two hundred, more or less, found themselves in this province from flight, without bringing even their underwear with them (Romo de Uriza 1702).

He also indicated that some 300 of his warriors returned with him to Apalachee, suggesting that approximately 300 Spanish-allied Indians were killed or captured during the battle. Romo also noted some details of the encounter, recounting in this same letter that:

The enemy were many, inasmuch as the Chacato woman [see below] says that in the villages of Apalachicola there remained noone other than women and children, and this can be inferred by what we saw in the pine forest [*pinal*] where we met each other, in which we could not make use of the grenades on account of being discovered, and the enemy being dispersed and shielded by the pines (Romo de Uriza 1702).

Spanish Governor Joseph de Zuñiga y Cerda described the battle as follows:

...having left from Apalachee, they encountered the enemy twenty five leagues distant upon the Flint River [*Rio de Pedernales*], the number of which was much greater than ours, and having come at hand, ours were defeated, and the Spanish leader came back in retreat, seeing the few muskets that he had, many dead

Indians having remained, in such a manner that if they return, they would depopulate [Apalachee] with great ease, without I having anything to aid them with, with which I find myself with great despair (Zuñiga y Cerda 1702a).

The impact of the defeat was significant in a number of ways, not the least of which was to demoralize the Spaniards and their Indian allies in the western missions.

Additional details regarding the battle and its aftermath are fortunately provided by a Chacato Indian woman who had been present in Hitchiti town during the original meeting prior to the departure of the English-Creek force, and who subsequently fled south to the Apalachee missions. Her testimony furthermore provided details on the imminent English invasion of St. Augustine itself. The unnamed woman apparently left Hitchiti some four and a half days after the force set out toward Apalachee, and since she traveled off-road to remain hidden, she apparently by-passed the returning victorious English-Creek force, only to stumble upon their trail shortly later. As recounted by Apalachee provincial lieutenant Adjutant Manuel Solana in his letter dated October 22, 1702, the woman:

...came out to where she saw the traces of this troop which was returning, where they spent the night, and according to the signs she discovered that they were carrying many prisoners, because they had left many stocks [*cepos*] which they make in order to secure them (Solana 1702).

The following day, the Chacato woman continued her journey, finally arriving at the site of the battle itself, where she “saw some dead people” and found some food to eat before proceeding south to Apalachee.

Despite the fact that the descriptions of the Chacato woman’s testimony are not completely unambiguous, the precise day of the battle was probably on or about Thursday, the 12th of October, 1702. Adjutant Solana appears to state that the Chacato woman left Hitchiti town ten days before she arrived in mission San Luís on the night of October 21, and both Romo and Solana note that she departed four to four and a half days after the English-Creek force left Hitchiti. Furthermore, since the Spanish force was said to have departed Bacuqua on the same day that the English force left Hitchiti (October 6) and returned to Bacuqua on the 18th of October, this would make the total round-trip journey for the Spanish forces about 11 full days.

The battle site was stated by the Governor to have been approximately 25 leagues (almost 66 miles) from Apalachee, probably at Bacuqua (Zuñiga y Cerda 1702a). Normal daily overland travel rates for small Spanish and Indian forces seems to have been between 4 and 7 leagues per day, commonly averaging about 5 or 6 leagues, or approximately 13-16 miles per day. If an 800-man army could travel this fast, this would place the Spanish in the vicinity of the battle site within 4 or 5 days, on either October 10 or 11. Allowing time for the battle and its aftermath around the 12th, the devastated army could have taken another 6 days to return to Bacuqua, and another day to return finally to San Luís on the 19th, as reported by Romo.

Locating the Site of the Battle

There are three potential sources of information bearing on the question of the battle’s location. First, Governor Zuñiga y Cerda (1702a) says it was 25 leagues (66 miles) from Apalachee, “upon” or “about” [*sobre*] the Flint River. Second, there are many English maps that

locate the battle site close to the Flint River on the eastern side, directly along a path that stretches from the Ocmulgee River at the middle Georgia Fall Line to Apalachee in the Florida panhandle (e.g. the 1755 Mitchell map in Swanton, 1922). Third, the textual descriptions above provide some indication that the two armies, which departed on the same day, may have met roughly at the mid-point along this trail.

Using this admittedly ambiguous information, it is possible to project a highest-probability zone for the site of the battle. If the route of the advancing Spanish army took it north from Tallahassee along the route of modern US 319 across the Georgia border, then along the route of Highway 93 up to modern Pelham, then along US 19 up to Camilla, and finally along Highway 3 toward the Flint River and eventually modern Albany, then the southernmost point at which the battle might have occurred would be along the Flint River in northern Mitchell County in the vicinity of modern Baconton or Dewitt, which are approximately 25 Spanish leagues north of the Apalachee province. Dividing the entire route between Tallahassee and Macon into two equal halves, the midpoint falls somewhat farther to the north, along the east side of the Flint River in eastern Dougherty County, near modern Albany, or perhaps just over the line into Worth County. Any point along the Flint River in this zone of highest probability (i.e. from Baconton to just north of Albany) could have been the site of the “Battle of the Blankets.”

Further refinement in this interpretation might be possible if detailed study of early maps and land surveys and plats were carried out in order to more precisely trace the route of early trails along the Flint River corridor in this vicinity. Nevertheless, the only way to conclusively identify the actual site of this important battle would be through archaeological means. In particular, the battle site should be characterized by a fairly high density of spent early 18th-century musket balls, and probably other military debris and personal items that might have been left on the battlefield after both groups withdrew. It would *not*, however, be the site of an Indian village, or any other sort of habitation. This was a chance encounter by two substantial armies in a pine forest where the English and Creeks were camped for the night. The fact that the forest was pine strongly implies that the terrain was upland, i.e. not within the riverine floodplain forest immediately adjacent to the Flint River. Furthermore, the terrain would probably have been broadly level, to accommodate the 400 Creek warriors and their English leaders. Beyond this characterization, however, no further details seem possible. The greatest likelihood is that the actual battle site will never be discovered with any certainty. Nevertheless, its significance in the early history of Georgia and the Southeastern borderlands makes it well worth marking in order to increase public awareness of its existence and importance.

Hypothetical Timeline

October 6 – English-Creek forces depart from Hitchiti; Spanish-Apalachee forces depart from Bacuqua

October 11 – Chacato woman departs Hitchiti

October 12 – Battle occurs

October 14 – Fleeing Apalachee warriors arrive in Apalachee

October 18 – Romo de Uriza and 300 remaining Indians arrive in Apalachee mission of San Antonio de Bacuqua; Chacato woman departs battle site heading south

October 19 – Romo de Uriza arrives in Apalachee garrison headquarters at San Luis de Talimali

October 21 – Chacato woman arrives in San Luis at night

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