

Cameron, Alexander ^[1]

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by James H. O'Donnell III, 1979

d. 27 Dec. 1781

Alexander Cameron, British Indian agent, was born in Scotland during the early eighteenth century and emigrated to the Southern colonies with a number of his countrymen in the 1730s and 1740s. It is not certain whether he engaged in planting or trading during his early years in the colonies, but his first recorded public service was as ensign in the British Independent Regulars. His unit was stationed at Fort Prince George, S.C., on the edge of the Lower Cherokee country, during 1762 and 1763, and he took advantage of the excellent opportunity to learn the Cherokee ^[2] country and become acquainted with the natives. His acceptance by the Indians was no doubt enhanced by his marriage to a Cherokee girl. He came to be known among the Cherokees and the Creeks by the sobriquet of endearment "Scotchie."

After his demobilization, Cameron took up the two thousand acres of land to which he was entitled by his military service record. At about the same time he entered the service of the British Indian Department in the South. He received the appointment in part because of his frontier experience and in part because he was an acquaintance, if not a kinsman, of his countryman John Stuart ^[3], just appointed superintendent. Commissioned as principal agent for the Cherokees and then given a titular promotion to deputy superintendent in 1768, Cameron lived among or near his wife's people until 1776. He came to have great influence with the Cherokees, who deeded land to his sons, but he still could not stop wily whites from cheating the tribe of lands or prohibit illegal transactions like the Henderson Purchase of 1775. ^[4]

When the rumblings of discontent arose between England and America in 1775, Cameron assured the Cherokees that they need not fear, for their lands and people were not threatened. Despite his pacific directions to the tribe, the pro-American frontiersmen viewed Cameron as an enemy; when revolutionary turmoil reached upcountry South Carolina, Cameron fled his plantation near the present Abbeville, S.C., moved deeper into the Indian country, and took up residence among the Overhill Cherokees.

From his new headquarters, Cameron strove to implement the superintendent's advice by urging the Cherokees to remain neutral. Such advice was hard to follow, however, since the tribe was faced with daily encroachment by white trespassers. In the spring of 1776, Cameron was joined in the Cherokee country by Henry Stuart, the superintendent's brother, who had come with instructions and ammunition. Shortly after Stuart's arrival, a band of Northern Indians reached the Cherokee country, intent on persuading the Cherokees to go to war. When the Cherokees heard of the insults to their brethren in the north, they would wait no longer; they determined to drive out the hated white settlers. Cameron tried to direct the attacks in such a way as to limit bloodshed, but it was largely impossible for him to do so.

In response to the Cherokee invasion came a series of punitive raids ^[5] by the southern states, which leveled many of the towns and destroyed the supplies cached for the winter. Cameron was forced to flee into the Creek country to avoid capture by the Americans. For a time he lived with David Taitt, the British deputy for the Creek; then a band of pro-American Creeks plotted to assassinate the two whites, so they fled to the safety of Pensacola in the fall of 1777.

For the next eighteen months, Cameron attempted to carry out his duties from a distance. In addition to his normal responsibilities, he was assisting Superintendent Stuart, whose age and physical condition made him less and less effective. Then, in the spring of 1779, John Stuart died, leaving the post of superintendent vacant. Cameron and another of Stuart's deputies, Charles Stuart, assumed joint control pending the appointment of a successor.

To their great dismay, the decision made in London was to appoint not a successor but successors. That decision alone would have been disappointing, but far worse was the instruction that Cameron would superintend the western division of the department, which would give him jurisdiction over the Choctaws and Chickasaws, two tribes with whom he had had only incidental contact.

In truth, Cameron never recovered from the trauma produced by this situation. He tried to carry out his duties by sending messages from Pensacola to the tribes, but it proved an ineffective method. Both Governor Peter Chester of West Florida and General John Campbell of the Pensacola garrison believed that Cameron had no intention of taking up residence among the Choctaws and Chickasaws. The question became an academic one, however, for the Spanish capture of Mobile in 1780 and Pensacola in 1781 forced the British away from the Gulf Coast. Cameron traveled through the Indian country and reached the relative safety of Savannah, where he died.

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