
Reviewed by Steven C. Hahn (St. Olaf College)

Published on H-Early-America (August, 2023)

Commissioned by Patrick Luck (Florida Polytechnic University)

Elizabeth N. Ellis's pioneering book, *The Great Power of Small Nations*, explores the early history of the “Petites Nations” of the lower Mississippi valley and gulf coast. Beginning her discussion with the dissolution of the Mississippian chiefdoms, Ellis’s main focus is the Petite Nations' entanglements with the French but also with the British, Spanish, and, later, American administrations of Louisiana in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Individually, each of these nations was quite small, but collectively their numbers approached those of larger nations like the Choctaws and often exceeded that of European settler societies. To compensate for their low numbers, the Petites Nations achieved the “great power” to which Ellis refers by deploying strategies traceable to the precolonial era, migrating, forming multinational communities, placing themselves at the edge of larger indigenous polities, and strategically forming alliances with Europeans. In a century marked by disease, enslavement, and warfare, the Petite Nations' mere ability to survive was indeed a great power, as was their collective ability to influence the terms of European colonization.

Ellis, drawing on archaeology and ethnography, attributes the origins of the Petites Nations to the collapse of Mississippian polities located in the lower Mississippi, Yazoo, and Tensas River systems. The Plaquemine culture of the Yazoo basin serves as an example. In the thirteenth century, Plaquemine peoples built a massive political and ceremonial complex consisting of twelve large earthen mounds situated around a central plaza. The existence of mound complexes like these indicates that Mississippian peoples lived in densely settled and socially stratified societies that arose and dissolved, only to be reconstituted again elsewhere through a process known as “cycling” (p. 24). While the Mississippian world was not static, the advent of European colonization accelerated processes that destabilized this world. Hernando de Soto’s 1539-43 entrada, epidemic diseases, and slave raids carried out by indigenous allies of the English in the late seventeenth century rendered the lower Mississippi valley a “world of towns” (p.
Survivors within this “shatter zone” displayed flexibility in coping with destabilization, by migrating and forming multiethnic towns, facilitating cross-cultural alliances through new practices, such as the calumet ritual.

When the French arrived in 1699 seeking to establish a new colony on the gulf coast, peoples of the Biloxi and Capinan nations greeted them, even determining the location of the first French fort erected in the region. During the first two decades of French occupation, a system of interdependency with the Petites Nations emerged. Readers familiar with Kathleen DuVal’s book on the revolutionary Gulf South, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (2015), will recognize many of the features of this system. Because of their low numbers (only 350-400 people in 1718) and meager economic output, the French relied on indigenous people for labor, trade, and military assistance. Consequently, the French had to accommodate themselves to the Petites Nations’ diplomatic protocols, including gift giving and participation in the calumet ritual. Importantly, the French also had to defer to indigenous gender norms and practices, in which women played visible roles as leaders, peacemakers, and culture brokers. For instance, as men gathered in ceremonial fashion to smoke the calumet, women prepared food and lodging for their guests, and also sang and danced in ceremonies that accompanied smoking. At one point, at least two of the Petites Nations, the Houmas and Tunicas, had female supreme leaders known for donning men’s clothing. Ellis also illustrates that the French had to adjust to the Petites Nations’ acceptance of nonbinary individuals, notably the biologically male Natchez people who, in their dress and mannerisms, presented as females and occupied female domestic roles.

Conversely, Ellis emphasizes that Native leaders “worked hard to adapt to French customs and rituals,” noting that they “were used to living and interacting with foreigners whose practices differed from their own.” As a result, their ability to adapt “was a critical part of what made their multinational settlements work” (p. 62). In this way, precolonial practices facilitated the incorporation of the French into their world. One vital incentive for doing so was to obtain military allies. Writing about the Petites Nations of the Mobile Bay area, Ellis reminds readers that in the early 1700s these nations were “continually pummeled” by Upper Creek slave raiding parties allied to the English in Carolina. Mobile consequently became a “hub for refugees” as Apalachees, Pensacolas, Chatots, and Tawasas from the interior gravitated toward the Mobilian homeland near the bay (p. 64). To defend their communities, in 1702 Mobilian leaders invited the French to construct another outpost at Mobile, thereby replicating the Biloxis’ strategy of welcoming a foreign power because of its military capabilities.

Ellis demonstrates that the persistence of slave raiding and the French need for labor meant that the relationship between the French and the Petites Nations, while interdependent, was not altogether harmonious. Demolishing the myth that the French never enslaved their allies, Ellis recounts the experiences of the Tensas and Chitimachas, whose members routinely appear in the archival records as being enslaved. One of the great strengths of Ellis’s work is the nuance she brings to these and other discussions. In the case of the Tensas, the French typically purchased them as war captives, who trickled into the French settlements through purchases from Chickasaw and other raiding societies. In contrast, the Chitimachas were the targets of a decade-long war of attrition conducted by the French and Petites Nations allies (1707-18) that ensued after the Chitimachas murdered a French priest. Captive Chitimachas thereby arrived in the colony through a more direct process of enslavement.

While this imperfect system of interdependence defined the Petites Nations’ relationship with the French for a couple of decades, a transforma-
tion in colonial administration ushered in dramatic changes that had lasting repercussions for all those involved. In 1718, the French king bestowed the struggling colony upon the Scottish financier John Law, whose Company of the Indies “had a bold new vision for Louisiana.” Under Law, the Company of the Indies promoted “large-scale immigration” to the region and “financed the transatlantic trafficking of enslaved Africans,” all with the intention of transforming Louisiana into a plantation society (p. 115). Thanks to propaganda circulated in Europe, swarms of immigrants began to arrive; the rapid increase in the enslaved African population likewise prompted the 1724 Code Noir legislation regulating slavery and circumscribing the lives of enslaved Africans. The boom in settlement, along with the expanding footprint of colonial settlements exacerbated tensions between the French, the Petites Nations, and larger polities like the Natchez. In 1723, the Natchez village of White Apple rose up against the colony, primarily to protest encroachment on their land and the mistreatment of their people. Although Louisiana experienced rapid growth in the 1720s, the French remained dependent on their Petites Nations allies, who reluctantly provided the French with the military assistance necessary to put down the revolt. The 1723 conflict foreshadowed the larger-scale Natchez uprising that engulfed the region six years later.

Another of the book’s strengths is its treatment of the well-known 1729 Natchez revolt. Rather than examine that conflict in isolation, in two chapters Ellis contextualizes it within a framework of subsequent indigenous wars that permanently altered the region’s geopolitics. As the French were gradually suppressing the Natchez, the Chickasaws fought against the French in the mid-1730s, and a decade later a civil war erupted among the Choctaws. Each of these conflicts unfolded differently, sometimes strengthening the Petites Nations’ alliances with the French, while at other times stressing them. Given the localized, town-centered basis of indigenous political leadership, that the Petites Nations responded to the summons to war in a variety of ways is unsurprising. For instance, Ellis describes the Petites Nations as being “caught in the middle” between the French and the Natchez (p. 142). She explains how the Tioux, Yazoo, and Koroas fought on behalf of their Natchez allies, while the Tunicas supported the French and provided them with military assistance. Meanwhile, the Ofogoulas struggled to maintain their neutrality as both the French and the Choctaws sought to draw them into the conflict. A somewhat different dynamic played out during the Chickasaw wars of the 1730s, during which the Chickasaws and the French each lobbied for Petites Nations’ support. Ellis writes that the “mutual needs” of the French and Petites Nations “led to a renewal and improvement of diplomatic relationships” (p. 180). This was particularly the case for the Chakchiumas, who by suffering from Chickasaw attacks formed a “closer partnership” with the French, who even convinced Chakchiuma leaders to relocate their village in closer proximity to a French fort (p. 181). Ironically, when Western Division Choctaws, who wanted to forge a closer alliance with the British, launched a war in 1747 against the French-allied Eastern Division Choctaws, the Chakchiumas threw in their lot with the Western Division under the leadership of Red Shoe. Meanwhile, the majority of Petites Nations adhered to their alliance with the French, engaging in combat, scouting, and patrolling Louisiana’s waterways. Doing so enabled the Petites Nations to acquire “bargaining leverage,” leading to the restoration, for a time, of the interdependent relationships that had characterized the first two decades of French colonization (p. 191).

The 1763 Treaty of Paris ushered in a “tense time” for the Petites Nations, although they largely refrained from engaging in any of the conflicts generated by the Seven Years’ War. They had to reconstitute their European alliances as the French ceded Louisiana to the Spanish (now in control of New Orleans and territories west of the Missis-
sippi River) and the British acquired what became known as West Florida, centered around Mobile. In 1764, the Tunicas led a coalition of Petites Nations that obstructed a British regiment’s attempt to navigate the Mississippi River and used their favorable location there to extract some concessions from the British, now occupying a few posts along the eastern bank of the river. Recognizing Tunica strength, many Petites Nations from the region resettled on Tunica territory, thereby strengthening their collective power. Courted by Britain and Spain, the Tunicas extracted gifts from Europeans and prohibited traffic through their territory, in a diplomatic process resembling the “play off” or “neutrality” policies developed by larger indigenous polities. Tunica independence, facilitated by their network of indigenous alliances, meant that the immediate postwar period was the “highpoint” of Tunica power (p. 209).

The revolutionary era, and the Americans’ victory in their war for independence, exposed the Petites Nations to the full force of settler colonialism. It represented, in Ellis’s words, “the beginnings of marginalization” (p. 213). As in previous decades, Petites Nations employed mobility, the formation of multinational polities, and strategic positioning near imperial borders to ensure their survival. For instance, British and, later, American occupations of Mobile caused a widespread scattering of Petites Nations, who migrated westward to evade European settlers as well as Creek attacks. Mobilians, Tohomes, and Naniabas amalgamated with the Choctaws. Other groups gravitated to “geographically remote” locations that were unoccupied, while a few groups attempted to integrate with their Euro-American neighbors (p. 223). In the process, Ellis writes, “almost all of the Petites Nations lost large portions, if not the entirety, of their homelands during the 1770s” (p. 216). Yet these shrewd survival strategies enabled the Petites Nations to hang on. Many survived as autonomous polities, even as larger indigenous nations lost land by treaty and expulsion.

The book’s final chapter and afterword address another common misperception about the Petites Nations, the myth of their “disappearance.” Ellis recounts a local legend about unrequited love that ends with the mass suicide of the Pascagoulas, symbolically reinforcing the settlers’ perception “that the small Native polities of the Gulf Coast were either gone or on the verge of destruction” (p. 231). To the contrary, Petites Nations employed centuries-old survival strategies and lived on the margins of American settlements. Very few of their members appear to have been drawn into the “civilization” policies affecting their more numerous indigenous neighbors. Miraculously, they avoided the “removals” of the 1820s and 1830s; perhaps because of their small size and marginality, the US government never even bothered to enter into treaty relationships with the Petites Nations. They continued to live in the shadows of American settlements into the twentieth century, and only then did some of these nations gain recognition as formal political entities through a process facilitated by the US government. Rather than disappearance, descendants of the Petites Nations remember this era as a “time of reorganization and migration,” as indicated by a concluding story about the Avoyelles, who survived by integrating with the modern-day Tunica-Biloxi Tribe, one of several multinational polities still present in the gulf area (pp. 239-40). Ellis, who bookends her story by recounting the territorial degradation caused by climate change experienced by the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe of Louisiana, offers a reminder that the Petites Nations are an important part of not only the past and present but also the future.

Readers with expertise in the Native South and colonial Louisiana will find much here that resonates with preexisting work. For instance, Ellis’s understanding of the ethnogenesis of the Petites Nations draws inspiration from Patricia Galloway’s *Choctaw Genesis, 1500-1700* (1996) and Robbie Ethridge’s *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of*
the Mississippian World, 1540-1715 (2010), both of which illustrate, through archaeological and historical evidence, how these larger historic polities emerged from the remnants of the Mississippian societies that preceded them. She likewise builds on Daniel H. Usner’s study of Louisiana’s “frontier exchange economy” depicted in his seminal book, Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783 (1992). Likewise, the system of interdependency Ellis recounts resembles that described in DuVal’s aforementioned work on the Gulf South during the revolutionary period. Much to her credit, Ellis’s integration of a more expansive historiography, including works on indigenous groups ranging from the Anishinaabeg and Haudenosaunee, enriches her discussion of varied topics, including polity formation, kinship, migration, and gender. Perhaps Ellis’s main contribution, then, is to illustrate specifically how the often overlooked Petites Nations affected—and were affected by—the colonial processes outlined in these and other works, placing them collectively on par with their more populous indigenous neighbors. To the extent possible, Ellis highlights the agency of women and nonbinary persons, adding to a growing literature on the intersection between race, gender, and sexuality in Louisiana represented by such authors as Jennifer Spear (Race, Sex and Social Order in Early New Orleans [2009]), Jessica Marie Johnson (Wicked Flesh: Black Women, Intimacy, and Freedom in the Atlantic World [2020]), and Sophie White (Voices of the Enslaved: Love, Labor, and Longing in French Louisiana [2019] and Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana [2013]).

To sum up, The Great Power of Small Nations is an exemplary work of ethnohistory. It features meticulous multilingual documentary research, informed by anthropology and archaeology. By balancing summaries of broader historical trends with more narrowly focused case studies and vignettes, Ellis writes in a way that, despite the book’s multitude of Native subjects and temporal and geographical breadth, enables the reader never to lose sight of its major themes. It is a must-read for specialists in the study of the Native South and broader gulf region, and the book will likewise serve as a model for those studying the small, marginalized Native communities elsewhere in North America. Like any ambitious book, some questions remain unresolved. Why did the Petites Nations not involve themselves much during the Seven Years’ War? How, exactly, did they avoid removal? What more can be known about their persistence during the Jim Crow era? Hopefully, Ellis’s fine work will prompt further investigations into these and other questions, for she has demonstrated that writing about the Petites Nations is possible and that their stories are worth telling.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-early-america


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58828

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.