



## OMOHUNDRO INSTITUTE

### Episode 342: Liz Ellis, The Great Power of Small Native Nations

- Announcer:** [00:00:00] You're listening to an AirWave Media podcast.
- Liz Covart:** [00:00:04] *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of The Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Hello and welcome to Episode 342 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American pasts have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host Liz Covart. Did you know that small Native American nations of only a few hundred people had the power to dictate the terms of French colonization in the Gulf South region? Elizabeth Ellis, an assistant professor of history at Princeton University and a citizen of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma, joins us on an exploration of the uncovered and recovered histories of the more than forty distinct small Native Nations who called the Gulf South Region home during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Using details from her book, *The Great Power of Small Nations: Indigenous Diplomacy in the Gulf South*, Liz reveals information about the Gulf South during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the cultures and diplomacies of the Gulf South Petite Nations of Indians, and details about how the Petite Nations interacted with French colonizers and shaped the terms of their colonization. But first, the holiday season is upon us. As you gather with your friends and families over the holidays, please support Ben Franklin's world by telling your loved ones about our podcast. Word of mouth support is the best way for podcasts to find new listeners, and more listeners for us means creating more understanding about our early American past. So please help us grow our audience by making *Ben Franklin's World* a part of your holiday conversations. Thank you so much for thinking of us and happy holidays. Okay. Are you ready to explore the history of the Indigenous Gulf South? Let's go meet our guest historian.
- Liz Covart:** [00:02:17] Joining us is an assistant professor of history at Princeton University. She's a citizen of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma. She's written numerous articles, including her award-winning article in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, "The Natchez War Revisited: Violence, Multinational Settlements, and Indigenous Diplomacy in the Lower Mississippi Valley" [transcript corrected]. And she's written a book, *The Great Power of Small Nations: Indigenous Diplomacy in the Gulf South*. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Elizabeth Ellis.



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- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:02:45] Hi Liz. Thanks so much for having me. I'm delighted to be here with you today.
- Liz Covart:** [00:02:48] So Liz, I wonder if we could begin by having you tell us a bit about your book. *The Great Power of Small Nations* is a book that investigates early Indigenous and colonial history in the early Gulf South. And I wonder if you could tell us about the period that you were studying and about the geographical and territorial areas that made up the Gulf South during this period of your investigation.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:03:08] So I work on the American Southeast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. So specifically, this is the region that is now Alabama, Louisiana, and eastern Texas. And the real heart of the story I'm telling is the lower Mississippi Valley. The book's narrative follows a couple of the resilient Indigenous nations who live in this region throughout the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. And all of the kind of key players in the narrative live in the area between the Red River in the west and the Mobile Bay in the east, sort of south of the Yazoo River. And these lands are super diverse and they're densely populated by a variety of different Indigenous people. There're more than forty distinct Native nations in this small area. And at the turn of the century, it's what I describe as a borderland. So a land of overlapping and contested sovereignties.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:04:00] It's sort of sandwiched between coalescent Creek power on the east, Choctaw and Chickasaw power sort of to the north and east of this region, south of Osage-dominated power, and just a little bit to the west would be the Caddos. So it's between all of these other sorts of larger nations. It's this super fertile region. If you've been down there, you know it rains a lot. It's kind of swampy. It's kind of marshy, but it's also really fertile soil with all the flooding from the Mississippi River as it kind of washes silt and sediment across the landscape. And in the hundred years between 1680 and 1780, which forms sort of the core of the book, this is a region that's also in the midst of tremendous social, economic, and political transformation. France will kind of lay claim to a lot of this territory, formally, at least on European maps. You know, the narratives that circulate Europe. But in practice, this is really still an Indigenous-dominated place throughout most of the eighteenth century.



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- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:04:56] And I guess just to kind of stress this and bring this home at the turn of the eighteenth century, so right around 1700, these forty distinct smaller nations in the lower Mississippi Valley, if you put all of these populations together, they'd be somewhere between seventeen and twenty thousand people. Even if individually, a lot of these nations are only like 350 people, 700 people, you know, 1,500 people. And for comparison in this era, there'd be about twenty thousand Choctaw people. So the Choctaws are just a little bit larger than Petite Nations. This is sort of a larger known Native nation in the Southeast. And I only stress the size of these things because by the time that the French left, so at the very end of all of their imperial building efforts in the lower Mississippi Valley, there were only about four thousand French settlers and five thousand enslaved Africans in what France was calling lower Louisiana. So even if by the mid-eighteenth century on our imperial maps, by the era of the Seven Years' War, France is laying these really bold claims to the lower Mississippi Valley.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:06:00] It's really still an Indigenous-dominated place that has just a couple French settlers, most of whom are sort of smashed in and around New Orleans and Mobile, some at Biloxi, but it very much remains an Indigenous homeland. And I had sort of said that it's an era that's in the midst of this transition when I pick up the story, and I'll just kind of use this to wrap up that question about what's going on in the region, because I think that the turn of the eighteenth century is a super important part for the formation of the modern Southeast, and by this I mean European empires, but I also mean the larger Native nations that we come to know and recognize in the nineteenth century. Groups like Cherokees, Choctaws, Creeks, or people who are Muskogeese, who will become the Creek Nation. And for a lot of Native people, this era is still the era in which people are moving out of where they had been living during the Mississippian era—so kind of the medieval North American societies. We often think of these as the larger city states of the American Southeast who built these, you know, earthen architecture.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:07:00] Or people are just migrating, moving. They're also moving to address the new onslaught of colonial violence, germs, disease, new animals, English incursions on the Eastern Seaboards, Spanish on the south. So there's all of these peoples in motion in this era, and what this means is that groups like Choctaws, Muskogeese, Tunicas, Biloxis, Chitimachas, all of these nations



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are still in the process of building, kind of, the modern nations that we will come to know. So if we can think about this as the contest of empires, it's also a story of Indigenous struggle for power and of the creation of these more modern Indigenous nations. That's very much all in process and in flux at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

**Liz Covart:** [00:07:43] Forty-plus distinct Indigenous nations lived in the Gulf South region between the 1680s and 1780s. I just want us to sit with that for a minute because, Liz, you're right. We tend to know the names of larger southeastern tribes, like the Choctaw and the Cherokee, or in the Northeast we know the Haudenosaunee and the Pequot. And I wonder, will we find smaller Petite Nations, as you call them, living in other regions throughout North America, what we now know is the United States, or are these forty distinct Native nations, or more than forty distinct Native nations that you're talking about in the Gulf South region, particular to the Gulf South region? I guess what I'm asking is, is this the only place where we're going to find smaller, distinct groups is in this geographic area of the Gulf South.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:08:29] I think this is a wonderful question. I think one of the things that's happened recently in kind of our studies of early America writ large is that since the nineties, really, we've come to understand that Native people and Native power are really important for talking about both the colonization of Native America and also just what's happening in North America as a continent. And in many ways the easiest ways to tell these stories are to focus on really large and powerful Native nations with kind of recognizable political organizations. So big groups like Haudenosaunees, right, who dominate and exercise control of a large swath of the East Coast via a confederacy, or Comanches or Osages, people who are larger nations who are exerting power and who look a little bit more like the nation-state formations, with concrete boundaries, in the ways that we're more used to seeing these exertions of power. But most of the continent really is full of these much smaller Native groups. And I think a lot of what we expect to happen in response to colonization of North America is that smaller groups are supposed to confederate, form larger and larger groups, right, sort of centralize, become more hierarchical.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:09:41] I think this is really just like the hangover from stadial theory that makes us assume that there's, you know, this process that

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Native nations are supposed to follow, but a tremendous amount of smaller nations don't follow this process. And I think it's led us to kind of assume that throughout most of North American history, sophisticated Native societies are big and they're centralized and there's one way they're supposed to look and to really ignore all of the other smaller Native nations. What I think is super interesting is if you kind of go back way further in time to the eleventh, twelfth century in the American Southeast, you can see that in addition to these larger city states, right, the kind of great powers that Hernando DeSoto and others write about as they move through the Southeast, there are tons and tons of much smaller Native societies.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:10:26]

And all of these smaller Native nations are doing the same kinds of really sophisticated art and cultural production as larger societies. They're just not as centralized and not as hierarchical. So for example, if you've ever driven through the Midwest or the South, right, and you've seen what we often call "Indian mounds"—even if that's kind of a pejorative term for, you know, this sort of monumental Indigenous architecture—a lot of people assume that all of those are built by these large, centralized Native societies, when in fact, as Meg Kassabaum and other archaeologists have shown, a lot of these sort of ceremonial and political complexes are made over long periods of time by small groups of people who periodically visit these sites, build up these architecture, and kind of reinforce over time. So they're almost more like decentralized communal centers rather than strictly indications of hierarchy and power. Now, there certainly are these earthen architecture that do indicate that, like Cahokia, but this is a long way of saying that I think that we have assumed that there should be large Native nations everywhere, and because their stories are a little bit cleaner and linear, we think of those as kind of the dominant political structure in North America when it doesn't seem like that's really the case in most of early North America. There's lots of little peoples everywhere.

**Liz Covart:** [00:11:42]

Now, just before we dive into our exploration of the Petite Nations in the Gulf South, Liz, when we've spoken with other scholars about, say, the Wampanoag people, we're reminded to remember that there are many different Wampanoag peoples who are connected by the name and tribal affiliation Wampanoag. So I'm curious what challenges you faced in studying the histories of forty-plus different smaller Indigenous



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nations in the Gulf South? And I wonder is it appropriate to study these different peoples under an umbrella term like the name “Petite Nations?” Or do you think we should be trying to study each of these individual forty-plus nations on their own terms?

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:12:21] Yeah. I think in some ways you’re asking for one of those kind of really important questions about what’s the potential, what’s the future of these early Native histories. I think we need so much more fine-grained and detailed analysis of the specific politics of towns, of gender, of place, and there are some really exciting junior scholars who are doing this really kind of granular research of Native nations. I think that, yeah, to your point about Wampanoags and folks not all being the same, I think the best example of this in many ways for the region I work on, is that people who we sloppily call the “Creeks” or the “Creek Nation” are all of these different kinds of autonomous towns who are loosely confederated, loosely allied, but who would articulate their own identities as primarily based in their clans and their towns at this point in time.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:13:11] Archeologist Patricia Galloway has kind of this great line where she’s saying, during this era, Choctaw people, who again, we think of as like Choctaw as unified, some of their speakers spoke Choctaw with different kinds of accents because they were coming from different Mississippian predecessors, different lineages. And this sort of amuses me, because I kind of think today, like if you asked Oklahoma Choctaws how Mississippi Choctaws sound, people would make some jokes about the varieties of southern accents there, right? And so while it’s sometimes helpful for the purpose of narratives to say Choctaw people or people who will become Choctaws, there’s definitely a lot of division and that does sort of artificially unify people at earlier periods of time. To sort of go back to the first thing I was saying, a lot of what’s happening in this era is that Choctaw Nation, as we come to know it in the nineteenth century, is being built. And that means there are lots of people coming into Choctaw Nation, Choctaws are providing refuge—sometimes for Petite Nations, these smaller Native groups that I work on—for short periods of time.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:14:08] So groups like Mobilians, who are one of these smaller Native nations that are located near Mobile, will go live with the Choctaws for periods of five years, periods of seven years, and

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then leave and exit when stuff is safer again. And this huge amount of movement into and out of Native nations means that those kind of boundaries around, you know, who is who, who is intending to stay, who is only here for short periods of time become super, super important. So I just used the word “Petite Nations.” You could hear I’ve heavily anglicized it. To distinguish it in the book, I uppercase it. And so that’s a way to distinguish it from sort of the French *petites nations*, which is just, you know, “small nations” to use as a political term. And this is my giant lumping term that I hope everyone has issues with and kind of comes to pick apart and do more sophisticated studies at the lower Mississippi Valley. But I use this in part because it’s a word that the French, they don’t capitalize it, but that they use to talk about this huge diversity of Native nations. And it does a couple of things that I think are really important, which is part of why I’ve kept it. Even if groups like Tunicas, one of the main kind of protagonists nations in this story, talk about themselves. I mean, they would call themselves Tayoroni. They’ll have to forgive me for my terrible pronunciation.

**Elizabeth Ellis:**

[00:15:19]

So, basically, this is a catchall term and it functions in one way to emphasize that French colonists saw Native people as nations. So in early modern Europe in this period, the word nation is really flexible. And scholars like Nancy Shoemaker have really elaborated on this, on how it doesn’t quite mean nation-state, with the hard borders and sort of citizenship-based rights that we come to think of by the nineteenth century. But it’s more an affiliation of people within a certain limit of territory who recognize a kind of shared leadership and also has sort of ethnic connotations. So Petite Nations emphasizes that people do recognize these Native nations as nations, which is also really important for contemporary sovereignty struggles among Native communities. But it also helps us see them as parallel to French, Spanish, and British people who come across the continent. And I think it’s really hard to tell Native history with words that don’t denote sort of parity between different structures of sovereignty in North America. So me sticking with “nation” is a way to emphasize that. And then again, it just kind of, it’s a sloppy lumping category, but it’s a way to talk about people who are not part of these larger nations, who are choosing to stay small and independent in these regions.

**Liz Covart:**

[00:16:32]

Yeah, and I think now that we have a better understanding of how we can imperfectly refer to these forty-plus different



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Indigenous nations who consisted of roughly seventeen thousand to twenty thousand people in the early Gulf South. Now that we have that understanding, I wonder if you would take us into the early Gulf South. What do the lands and societies of these Petite Nations look like? And if we really could travel back in time, Liz, and visit this Gulf South before European colonists arrive, what do you think we would see and hear and who do you think we would meet?

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:17:05] Yeah, so you'd hear a whole variety of different languages, for sure. There's like six different language groups. People in this region, again because they're so culturally diverse, they develop a kind of cross-cultural trade language called Mobilian, which is a combination of Choctaw, it comes to have pieces of French in it, it's a Muskogean language that serves as an informal way for people to talk to each other. I think probably a lot of what you would notice is that there are some giant alligators. That's one of the things that routinely blows my mind reading through these sources is when French people first arrived, they're talking about thirty-foot-long and they call them dreadful aquatic monsters. Like, you think about people going up and down the Mississippi River and those tiny little pirogues and think they must have been absolutely bananas or just really, really brave. But of course, Indigenous people had found really savvy ways to adapt to this environment. There's a story I tell in the book that I love that's about this Chitimacha woman.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:17:59] So Chitimachas are one of these groups who are part of the Petite Nations, one of the smaller Native nations. They're sort of at the south and west of present-day Louisiana, along the Gulf Coast. In the early eighteenth century, there're about three thousand people, so they're fairly large as Petites Nations go. But they had become really strategically adept at dealing with marshy environments and things like these giant alligators I was just joking about. So, there's this enslaved Chitimacha woman. The French launched a giant slaving war against Chitimacha in the 1700s and 1710s, and there's a story about a French man who is traveling with her and who goes running away from like an eight-foot-long alligator who approaches the campfire. He freaks out, I'm sure he's cursing in French and running out of the room, and she basically just grabs this big old log and smashes it down on the alligator's head and kills it, which is first of all, pretty badass and second of all, I think a really good indication of the way in which Native people had learned to live with their





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environment and to kind of make space for themselves in ways that didn't disrupt the flow of marshes, but that also were able to protect their families and their children. I think that we have this sense, talk about what would people see. The Gulf South is some sort of swampy, barren wilderness before the arrival of settlement, and I think that that's just part of this sort of narrative of erasure of American past that really informs, still, the way we think about the continent.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:19:29] But again, there are all of these much larger societies. There are smaller societies. I think one of the things an outsider would be struck by is the real diversity. So not only are people speaking different languages and have different cultures and customs, some of these nations, peoples like Natchez folks or Chitimachas, are living in somewhat larger societies, so groups of three and four thousand. And, of course, there are also larger Native nations, people who are up to ten thousand in this earlier era. And then there are very small societies, groups of just a couple hundred people. There are societies again, like Natchez, who maintain very strict hierarchies that are sort of descendants of Mississippian political orders. Or they have a super elite class of rulers who govern with almost, you know, uncontested power within their towns. There're much more egalitarian groups like Bayagoulas or Mobilians. Mobilian people the French famously get really frustrated with because Mobilian leaders will sometimes say, "Well, I have no coercive power to make anyone do anything you want me to."

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:20:30] And the French sort of say, "Well, we need someone to help us carry things." And you know, the leader says like, "Sorry about that. That feels like not a thing I can do anything about because I can't press my people to make decisions they don't want to make." So I think that there's again, huge amounts of social and political diversity. But I think one of the other things that really would stand out to especially European outsiders is the tremendous political and social authority that women held. And I think that this was very jarring and very challenging for European arrivals who were not used to having to negotiate with women or recognize women as fully political, autonomous leaders.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:21:06] There're also nonbinary people. So people who French newcomers struggle to describe yet there's this really terrific account of a very formidable Houma warrior who becomes



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leader. And this person cuts their hair like a man, they dress as a man, they go into battle. They're claimed for leading people at the front of charges and French folks who are coming up and down the Mississippi in the 1690s, write about how formidable of a statesperson this is. And when this person passes of disease just a couple years later, they record that this esteemed, what they're calling female leader, although it's very unclear to me if the people within Houma society would've recognized this person as a man, a woman, someone who's two-spirit, which is just an Indigenous term to kind of reflect nonbinary Indigenous identities. But this is basically the individual they have to contend with, who is the most esteemed, most highly regarded political leader within the nation. And so all of that, you know, French people having to be basically told by Native folks because presumably they've been so rude to Native women and nonbinary leaders that, you know, they've got to offer very basic etiquette instructions to French newcomers saying, you must treat these people similar kinds of esteem, you must give them similar kinds of gifts, like you can't just dismiss all of the women who've showed up at this diplomatic meeting. I think that would really jump out to someone who is an outsider, especially coming from Europe, where women are so not expected to be taking active roles in political negotiations in the same way as they're in the Gulf South.

- Liz Covart:** [00:22:40] I imagine it also must have been pretty jarring for these Petite Nations peoples who had women and nonbinary leaders to see all these bearded, masculine, dirty men get off a ship and try to figure out how to interact and trade with their societies and I know that one of the challenges of studying early Indigenous peoples is that most of the written records that we have of these peoples come from Europeans. So that makes it hard because surely Indigenous peoples all had their own thoughts about the weirdness of Europeans, just as Europeans had issues with what they thought was the weirdness of Native peoples.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:23:15] Oh my goodness, yes. And also, if you can just imagine, this is something I've spent too much time thinking about, but also, you know, that first encounter with a bunch of dudes who've been on a boat for a lot of weeks without bathing, you know, like they're good reasons people were a little dubious about these newcomers. I mean, I'm joking, but the fact that early French colonists did not come with women was a really dire indication to a lot of Native people in the Southeast. And so in 1699 is



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when French colonizers come to settle in the lower Mississippi Valley. But this is not, of course, the first time that Native southerners have encountered Europeans or have known about their presence in the region. They remember Hernando DeSoto and other kind of folks moving through the region. They are, of course, aware of Spanish settlements in Florida and in Mexico, or what's currently Florida and Mexico. British settlements on the seaboard.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:24:09] And before French settlers really, you know, sort of stake out a claim trying to set up settlements in the early eighteenth century, there are huge waves of disease that move through the region and a lot of what Native people are seeing are slave raids. And this is because from the 1670s, 1680s, the growing market for enslaved Indigenous people in Virginia and then in Carolina leads to the wide-scale human trafficking of Native people from throughout the Southeast to English slave markets and out into this sort of Atlantic world. And so for Petite Nations people, large groups of European men who are coming without women, would seem to indicate that these people are probably here to slave or to raid, because almost always small Native nations, lower Mississippi Valley, send at least one woman out with any kind of convoy as a way to indicate that this is a peaceful group, that this is not, you know, a war party.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:25:03] And Juliana Barr has some really wonderful scholarship on this. So one of the first things like when you think about that very first arrival of Pierre d'Iberville and his sort of groups of French colonizers on the coast in lower Louisiana, is that they arrive in Biloxi and Capinan homelands, and these folks flee. They flee into the interior as soon as they see the boats coming. And they assume, presumably, that these are more kind of slave raiders. And so the way that French settlers originally make alliances with Biloxi and Capinan people is that they chase down these fleeing people and they catch an elderly woman who is unable to outrun, you know, these young French men. They sort of drag her back to camp, but instead of binding her as folks commonly would for enslaved Indigenous people, they offer her some cornmeal and they kind of wait for her community to come back to check out what's going on.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:25:57] And from there they sort of embark on diplomatic negotiations and, you know, they ultimately end up, Biloxi people end up offering the French the ability to settle right alongside their

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town, which for them is not so uncommon because there's all these refugees, there's all these other kinds of Native people moving. So they're very used to providing at least short-term refuge for kind of populations, communities, many people who have been displaced by this larger kind of slave trading and disease nexus, I guess, that's rolling through the Southeast. And so this leads to the French, the very first French establishment is at the invitation of the Biloxis, right alongside their town as yet another group of refugees or migrants who are seeking resettlement in the region. But I think that that kind of speaks to the really significant ways that slaving, disease, disruption leads to the creation of this culture whereby Native people prioritize protecting people who have been displaced, who are migrants, who are immigrants, who are in kind of tough situations and who need resettlement. And this will dramatically shape the development of the French colony in lower Louisiana.

**Liz Covart:** [00:27:03] You mentioned that the French attempted to establish trade networks with the Petite Nations once they arrived along the Gulf Coast. Could you tell us more about these trade networks and about the diplomatic networks the Petite Nations had by the time that the French arrived in the late seventeenth century? And I ask, because as you were telling us about the Gulf Coast and what we would see and here, I couldn't help a picture a densely populated Indigenous space. So by the time the French arrived, there must have been quite the amount of networks of trade and diplomacy already established in the region.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:27:38] Yeah, for sure. So Native people are complicated. We continue to be, we were back then. Sometimes we fight with our neighbors, sometimes we get along. But no, I'm, I'm joking. I think, yeah, to your point, there's these really terrific maps that I use while I'm teaching where you can see kind of the movement of prestige goods across North America before European arrival. And this is everything from like feathers and jade and obsidian that's coming up from what's current-day Mexico, orange-wood bows coming from what's present-day Kansas, high-prestige engraved shells coming from Illinois. So, yeah, things are moving all across the North American continent. And as it is now, the Mississippi River was this tremendous artery of trade, right, and movement of people. And so the presence of these smaller Native nations along these trade routes along the coast certainly means that they're exposed to a wide variety of both Indigenous- and then European-made goods. Alejandra



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Dubcovsky has some really interesting work right now on wrecks in Florida and the way that Spanish and English wrecks led to, you know, the Indigenous people in that region having access to European trade goods that could then kind of be moved through the Gulf South. So yes, there are these preexisting, really wide-ranging networks, and one of the things that happens in the lower Mississippi Valley with all these different groups is that people kind of like these Biloxis, who I was talking about inviting in the French, they sometimes settle in these clusters of autonomous nations. And I know this sounds really bizarre, but what this is, is basically two or more separate autonomous nations deciding we're small groups of people, we're going to live right next to each other because this provides for more economic opportunities, better military defense, and we'll sort of have a larger total number of people in this region to defend ourselves against things like raiders, slave traders, et cetera, and to offer kind of market to people who might be passing through the region, but it doesn't require people to sacrifice their own autonomy.

**Elizabeth Ellis:**

[00:29:35]

And how this usually works is that a host nation, the people whose land are the original occupiers, will allow other folks to settle there as long as they broadly respect the laws and ethics of relations that would govern people's settlement. And so what I mean is basically don't go stomping through your neighbor's corn fields don't foul communal sources of water, right? Don't abuse women or children who are not from within your own nation. Kind of govern your own people, respect the people of the other nation and their nonhuman relations. So their water, their plants, their trees, whatever. And this sort of works. And when things become tense at these trading settlements, it's made clear to people who are not the original inhabitants that like it might be time for them to move on before things get too kind of frictionous. And so this leads to clusters, what I call "multinational settlements," where you have these multiple Native nations all living alongside each other. Some of these are more permanent, some of them are less permanent. But it's part of the ways we organize the huge amount of diversity of Native nations. And it provides for a lot of both political autonomy and then flexibility. So when people get upset with leadership, or they don't feel like they want to, kind of, go along with the tax or the policies of their nation, they have the ability to fracture off, migrate out, and find other kinds of communities.



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- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:30:53] And so this is what French people walk into, is this vibrant trade economy with all these different small nations. They truly don't really understand what they're looking at for a long period of time, especially because as you were saying at the top of the interview about Wampanoag people, sometimes Native people are in multiple groups. So Capinan people, one of the first groups the French met, there's some of them who are living by Biloxis, some of them are living at Mobile, some of them decided they want nothing to do with these stinky colonists who've just showed up. And so they're living further inland. So it's a very complicated political order. And before people get after me about saying "stinky French colonists," I should point out that French people thought that Native people, who coated themselves in bear grease to protect against the mosquitoes, also had quite a strong and powerful odor. So yeah, I guess you can just imagine the Gulf South is kind of a fragrant landscape at large with all this bustle and trade people of different backgrounds.
- Liz Covart:** [00:31:47] Now, something you said earlier really struck me, which is even before we have this moment of contact between Iberville and the Native peoples of the Gulf Coast, European diseases were already circulating in the region, and that the peoples of these Petite Nations already had knowledge of other places where Europeans had landed and established colonies, places like Florida. Liz, we need to take a moment of gratitude to thank our episode sponsor. When we get back, I'd love for us to investigate the details of this precontact contact period.
- Hannah Farber:** [00:32:24] Hi, I'm Hannah Farber. I'm an assistant professor of history at Columbia University and my new book, *Underwriters of the United States: How Insurance Shaped the American Founding*, published by the Omohundro Institute, is out now. Insurance is a quirky and strange business that leaves a very light paper trail in formal politics, but insurance has a vast influence on America's commercial affairs and because of that, insurance has a vast influence on American politics. *Underwriters of the United States* talks about the financial machinations that go around a world of warfare and it's about the kinds of things that national figures are doing in their private life. National figures like Alexander Hamilton, Robert Morris, Daniel Webster, we're not just looking at what they say in political affairs, we're looking at the whole commercial world that surrounds them and that makes them money. *Underwriters of the United States* tells that story.



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**Episode 342: Liz Ellis, The Great Power of Small Native Nations**

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- Liz Covart:** [00:33:26] Liz, would you take us a bit deeper into this foreshadowing story, this precontact contact, if you will, of what the Petite Nations know is coming their way with Europeans?
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:33:42] So both Robbie Ethridge and Paul Kelton have really good studies of the way that disease shapes this remaking I'm describing of the Gulf South and of the American Southeast writ large in this period of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. My book opens where we follow this Yazoo explorer. His name is Moncaht-Apé, and he kind of takes off somewhere in the 1680s, 1690s to go learn about the broader histories of the continent. He's sort of like a natural scientist, historian. He wants to know what's going on, and so he leaves and he travels all the way up to New England on his first voyage, he passes alongside French villages in Illinois. He's actually warned by his Chickasaw neighbors and allies to be careful of the *blancs*, to be careful of the whites who are settled there. They're not so friendly. So he's moving along the peripheries of English and French settlements, kind of talking to people, observing what's going on, and as he's scoping out the changes in this continent, at home this first wave of diseases, many of which are carried by slave traders and other kinds of markets throughout the Southeast, decimate his village.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:34:51] And so he gets back home and his wife and children have died either in these slave raids or by diseases, and so much of his community is grieving by the time that he gets home. And then he travels all the way to the West Coast—It's a pretty remarkable story—gets to the Pacific Coast, the Pacific Northwest, and he sees what I think are either Russian or Japanese traders and raiders who are showing up on the coast and stealing children. They're there for wood that they can use to make yellow dye, but they're also taking Native children. And so long before French settlers arrive in the region, a lot of the peoples are aware both of the spread of disease that seems to herald the coming of these flesh and blood colonists, but also the way that slaving and people stealing seems to go hand in hand with settlement. And this remains a real point of contention between French and English and Native people in the Southeast. There are all these accusations leveled by French people that English and then British people just want to enslave Native

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southerners. There're accusations leveled when French people enact rather genocidal policies against Chitimachas, Natchez, Chickasaws, that they're no better, that they're just trying to enslave these people and condemn them to death.

- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:36:01] And so you can see this kind of intellectual connecting of the danger of disease and slavery as being tied to the arrival of European colonists. But again, to go back to this, you know, how do we get these multinational settlements is largely because of the dislocation and forced migration of many, many Native people who're dealing with the twin pressures of the violence of colonization, and then the biological disruptions, the germs, that are spreading across the continent at the same time, breaking apart communities, forcing people to migrate, and forcing communities to be very receptive to taking in outsiders, adopting people who are not born as part of their nations in order to rebuild their populations and survive this kind of onslaught of colonial disease and warfare.
- Liz Covart:** [00:36:45] So even before Europeans landed in the Gulf South, it sounds like these Petite Nations aren't really quite sure what to make of the French, you know? They don't know whether the French come as traders, colonizers, slave raiders. So I think we can form an understanding of why so many Indigenous peoples in the Gulf South just ran away when Iberville and the French arrived in the Gulf of Mexico. Liz, could you tell us even more about this moment of contact? You know, when did Iberville arrive in the Gulf South and what did his arrival mean for establishing relationships between the Petite Nations and the French?
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:37:21] By the point at which French settlement begins in earnest and the lower Mississippi Valley, France has extensive fur-trade markets on settlements in New France, up in what's now Canada, and moving through the Illinois River valley and the Great Lakes. And British settlement has picked up really dramatically over the course of the seventeenth century along the Eastern Seaboard, so that France is becoming very, very nervous both about the expansion of Spanish power in the South, but more importantly about these really rapidly growing English colonies who are trying to expand westward towards the midcontinent. And France is concerned that they're going to be kind of cut off from the Atlantic from the interior if they don't kind of hold onto these possessions. So Louisiana is, yeah, there's rumors of, "Oh, there's gold, there's silver, it's going to

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be super lucrative,” but it’s largely designed to block the expansion of British Empires in the South.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:38:15] And then, secondarily, it’s envisioned as being kind of a supply hub for French possessions in the Caribbean. The far more lucrative sugar islands of Saint Domingue, it’s intent is to do crops and food stores to keep those slave economies going. When French settlers arrive, they complain bitterly of mosquitoes, as we would still probably for lots of Louisiana, they talk about how difficult the environment is—and again, I want to stress that there’re just not all that many French settlers. So through about 1717, which will be almost two decades after French people first start attempting to claim the lower Mississippi Valley as Louisiana, there’s only about four hundred settlers in the whole of lower Louisiana. This is tiny. This is the size of a single Petite Nation. And so what that means for early settlement is that these settlers are super dependent upon the smaller Native nations who they’re living alongside. And kind of the earliest French settlements—I told you that Biloxi, that Biloxi people invited the French to settle alongside them because they’re worried about slave raids, they see economic opportunities—the same thing leads to the origins of Mobile. So Mobilians, Tohomes, Naniabas and Capinans, these are four different nations are living together along the Mobile Bay, and they’re just getting hammered by Alabamas and Talapoosas, people who will become part of the Creek Nation, as well as Chickasaws and other raiders.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:39:36] And so they say to these new French arrivals who have all this high-powered weaponry, why don’t you come settle with us? You know it’ll flood less often. You’re really close to the coast. We’ll set up these kind of service arrangements. We’ll help you provide for yourselves. And the French governor at the time sort of says, you know, we’re really not in a position to refuse these people, because they are the only people who could come to our aid within the locality if anything happens. So they set up a second French settlement there. And the establishment of these earliest French settlements right within these multinational Petite Nations settlements means that Petite Nations economic networks, their political priorities, their societies, really determine and limit the shape of French expansion. So that France is very dependent upon them supplying the settlers with food, providing military support. They kind of can’t do anything without the consent and the support of these Native nations. So



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Native people initially form really integral parts of the plan for the expansion of French power in the Gulf South.

- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:40:37] And of course, again, I want to stress that Native people both have this preexisting system of what I call refugee sanctuary or welcoming of migrants, where they are primed to be able to accept outsiders because this is part of how they deal with the violence and the disruption of the region. And they're super incentivized to take these outsiders because there's some promise that they'll help them defend themselves from raiders. This is marginally effective. It doesn't really fully stop the raids until kind of the slowing down of the market for southeastern captives following the Yamasee War. But it's still a really important part of how these early settlements are developed and why it is that I was saying things like French have to put up with dealing with powerful Native women and these, you know, diplomatic routines that are not comfortable for them and that make them feel very sort of out of their depth
- Liz Covart:** [00:41:28] Now in your book, *The Great Power of Small Nations*, you argue that the Petite Nations of the Gulf South were able to shape European colonization of their homelands. Was the Petite Nations incorporation of the French colonists into their Indigenous spaces and ways of life the way the Petite Nations shaped European colonization of their homelands? Or were there other ways of this work being accomplished?
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:41:52] Yeah, I think this is one of the two really central kind of huge ways that smaller nations shape the development of colonial Louisiana and also limit it. So New Orleans is an exception. New Orleans is formed on Bayagoula and Houma homelands, but it is not one of these invited multinational settlements, but almost everything else is. So Biloxi, Mobile, Natchez, Natchitoches, all of these settlements are at the invitation of small Native nations. And it means that the French settlements there are growing up right alongside the Native people, close around them. Even New Orleans becomes really dependent upon the markets and the economies of Native people like Houmas, Bayagoulas, Chitimachas, who live in the surrounding region. But in a lot of these other places, it's Native and settler societies living cheek by jowl. And I want to stress again, that at places like Natchez, French people join on top of Natchez people who are already living there. And also Tioux and Grigra, two other migrant



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groups who have come into the region who have been offered resettlement by Natchez.

- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:42:58] So they're kind of in no ways unique except for their inability to kind of follow Native protocol, which will lead to some friction and some tension in the 1720s that, you know, comes to really bad outcomes for the French in some places. But that, basically, they're just integrated in a lot of parts of the South to this already existent system. And so that really shapes and defines the geography of the French Empire. The other thing, again, sort of comes back to the numbers thing, where really until the 1780s, 1790s, because there are just so few settlers, they really can't— And this is true for French, this is true for Spanish, and this is true for British settlers in the region—they kind of can't do what they want without the consent and the support of Native nations. So for example, the 1760s right after France cedes Louisiana, following the Seven Years' War, the British try and launched this convoy up the Mississippi River to go provide support in the interior up by Illinois. The British are trying to put down the massive multinational Indigenous resistance movement that we've called Pontiac's War, Pontiacs Movement.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:43:59] And they can't get there because Tunica people decide that they can't cross their Tunica homelands—this is one of these Petite Nations—because they haven't set up a diplomatic exchange, and so they don't have consent to travel the river through this region. And what this means is Tunica people with their Avoyel and Choctaw allies attack a British regiment that's traveling up the river in 1764. And the regiment has to turn around and go back down to New Orleans, which kind of forces negotiations with these smaller nations. This might not be possible if there were many more settlers in the region, but again, I want to come back to the fact that as France is leaving, there are four thousand French settlers in this region, total. So they're really still at the mercy of these small nations. British people complain about being constantly exposed to Native attacks. I mean, it really just until after the American Revolution, it remains a very Native controlled homeland, and so it kind of makes sense that their policies and practice really determine what's happening.
- Liz Covart:** [00:44:54] On the one hand, it sounds like we have a space where Petite Nations are really dictating the policies of interaction between European colonists in the region and with other Indigenous peoples. And on the other hand, this control sounds a bit idyllic.



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Like the French were like, look, the Indigenous inhabitants are a bit annoying, but this kind of absorptive colonial settlement is really working out for us because we don't have a lot of settlers or soldiers in the region. So what I'm saying is it sounds almost like a peaceful coexistence existed between the French and the Petite Nations, like they were working side by side each other to form these settlements. And I, I have to ask, is this an accurate image? Was peaceful coexistence really what was happening in this early Gulf South region?

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:45:40] It would've been a very interesting history and contemporary outcome of everything was quite so peaceful and lovely. No. I want to be clear that, again, there are these Native practices that are designed to support the incorporation of migrants, refugees, adoptees, outsiders. But again, these are all predicated upon that willingness of these new migrants to be good relations, right? To kind of respect the order and respect the people who exist in this region. So in the late 1710s, France transfers the administration of the Louisiana Colony from under the crown and under a couple of colonial-appointed officials to a joint stock company led by John Law, the Company of the Indies. And this is the first time Louisiana sees real investment of funds, of people. They launched sort of this giant propaganda campaign to get people to come to Louisiana, and they're fairly successful. In the late 1710s and 1720s more than six thousand people come, some of whom are forced migrants pulled out of Parisian jails, some of whom come of their own volition, but very few people stay.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:46:45] They just kind of really botch the provisioning and the support for these settlers. But writ large, this still dramatically increases the total population of settlers in the lower Mississippi Valley. So I think the tremendous amount of influx of French settlers really dramatically changes the Louisiana colony. And so in 1726, for example, up at Natchez, which is one of these places where French settlers have settled alongside a Native nation, there's only 150 French settlers and 74 enslaved Africans, and they're living alongside a Natchez population of 1,750 people. So they're a significant population, but they're not huge. However, within just three years, so by 1729, the total population there increases to 400 settlers and 180 enslaved Africans. This is a much bigger chunk of the population. And what's happening, as is happening in many other parts of many of these other shared settlements, is that as France is expanding, they begin to envision a society in the Gulf South that exists on



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Native land, but without the kind of interdependent relationships with Native people that were what was envisioned by Native folks at these joint settlements. So, they are hoping that Louisiana's going to turn into kind of another plantation agriculture-driven colony where they can grow tobacco and make huge amounts of profit. Of course, what they want to do this with is Native land and hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans. So there's only very small numbers at this point, but this is kind of the vision.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:48:18] And so at Natchez, which I'll just use as an example of some of the rising tensions here in the 1720s, French settlers begin to grab more and more land, and they are having their cattle and hogs as part of these economies. They're not kind of policing the movements of those animals, so they're trampling into Natchez cornfields. French settlers increasingly are abusing Natchez women and treating them in ways that would suggest that they're disposable, that they're there for the availability of the colonists, and they're abusing enslaved Africans on their homelands. And this all leads them to kind of stop respecting the social order and the political authority of Natchez people. And so throughout the 1720s, Natchez people try really hard to push back against this. They take action directly against the animals by cutting tails off of cattle and hogs to send messages. They kind of invade and mess up plantations that trespass onto their homelands, and they're trying to send all these messages that say like, you all are not behaving in a way that is acceptable here, you cannot keep doing this. And the French just won't listen. They won't comply. There's some conflicts in the 1722, in 1723. Things get really, really bad by 1729 when the commander at Natchez attempts to dispossess one of these Natchez villages completely. He says, basically, you all in the village of White Apple, I need you to get off of your land because I want to put a tobacco plantation there.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:49:45] If I had to use an example of like what settler colonialism is in practice, this is almost perfectly removal of Native people from Native land to found a new society with the land, but without the Native people involved on that space. And so Natchez people at this point are sort of like, no more. This is too much. This is going to lead to our enslavement, to our death, to our subjugation, to French people. This is the end. And so ultimately what they do is they launch a surprise attack against their French neighbors as a way to force them out of the settlement. And this is kind of a last resort after the French refused to listen for years



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and years or to comply by Natchez standards. And this war has really significant consequences for the colony. This is probably the most dramatic version of the friction between smaller Native nations and French settlers on their homelands. But I think it is a good example of the ways in which these settlements, even if I sound like, you know, they've got beautiful ideals, people living sort of in harmony alongside each other with the freedom to move or to come ss they please, as stuff works out, if people don't kind of comply with that system and they're not able or willing to leave when stuff gets frictious, be extremely violent. And that war led to the death of several hundred French colonists, thousands of Natchez and Indigenous people, and the ultimate enslavement of about four hundred Natchez people, three hundred of whom were shipped off into the French Caribbean and many others who were dispersed throughout the Southeast.

I

- Liz Covart:** [00:51:12] I was hoping we were going to talk about the Natchez War of 1729 a bit, which is an event you discuss in some detail in your award-winning *William and Mary Quarterly* article and in your book, *The Great Power of Small Nations*. So Liz, would you tell us about the Natchez War and why you find this war to be such a fascinating event?
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:51:31] Yeah, absolutely. I think that this is one of those tremendously important events that's been largely overlooked, kind of in the historiography and the way we think about the development of the outcomes, the struggle between empires and early North America. And so, as I said, this is this really brutal, bloody war in Louisiana, and I'll tell you first about what it does in Louisiana, and then I'll kind of talk more broadly about what happens writ large. I want to be clear though that the people who have the worst outcomes from the war are the Native people who live in and around Natchez by the conclusion of the war, which formally goes from 1729 to 1731, although in the book I argue that it kind of transforms and expands after 1731. More than half of the Native people who lived in the region surrounding Natchez are dead or displaced. Basically, nobody who is a neighbor of Natchez and France survives intact because the very close nature of French and Native relationships in this region means that all of the surrounding nations are kind of pulled into this violent vortex that expands and expands and expands as

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France solicits support and Natchez people solicit support. But it also has really significant consequences for the colony writ large.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:52:44] The Natchez War really scares the pants off of most people, most settlers living in this region because all of these settlements that are right alongside Native communities, people see ways in which similar kinds of things have the potential to happen. They've just experienced all this violence, and it kind of leads to the consolidation of the colonial population in New Orleans after the war in the 1720s. The second thing it does is to revert control of the colony to the crown. This has been so catastrophic for the Company of the Indies that it goes back to French control. There is only one more transatlantic shipment of enslaved Africans to Louisiana after the end of this war, and that's a fairly small shipment, so it really curtails the trade and enslaved people in lower Louisiana. It curtails immigration to Louisiana, and it basically destines lower Louisiana to kind of fail or be in a position to be overtaken by other settlers by the 1760s. What I think is most significant is that in the process of this war, as the French settlers realize they cannot defeat the Natchez by themselves, and they're soliciting help from all these surrounding neighboring nations, they ask Choctaws, who are the most powerful people in this region at this time period, to assist them and Choctaws kind of waffle and then they decide to support the French, and they play a really instrumental role in securing French victory. And what that does with Choctaw victory in the Natchez War is to ensure the dominance of Choctaw power in the Southeast. This has really significant consequences because it means that the French really can't do anything that the Choctaws disapprove of, and they feel tremendously at their mercy.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:54:25] This makes them really, really uneasy, and so feeling like they've just bungled this war. There's a series of bloody outcomes. There're still Natchez in the region who are raiding French settlements. Everybody's kind of watched the Choctaws stomp all over French settlers. They feel the need to redeem their reputation in the lower Mississippi Valley to restore faith in the French colony. It's also happening at the same time that French colonists further north in the Great Lakes and Illinois region just finished bungling the Meskwaki Wars. So these are a series of conflicts that span from the late seventeenth through the early eighteenth century whereby France really mishandles a series of alliances and allow Illinois and Anishinaabe and other folks in



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the region to raid Meskwaki, sometimes called Foxes. Long story short, France is blowing it on a couple of different levels and this makes their Native neighbors lose confidence in the French Empire. So where this is relevant is that France needs another conflict and needs a victory with a local Native nation to restore faith. And what the Natchez war does is provides them with a prime opportunity to launch another one of these wars against Native people in the North American interior.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:55:38] When Natchez people flee following this tremendously bloody conflict, they're again relying on this expectation that they'll be able to find sanctuary, refuge with other Native nations. And so they go and seek refuge with several of their allies across the Southeast, including Chickasaw people, Cherokee people, Creek people. Natchez folks today are still in South Carolina where they settled alongside Peedee. And within the Cherokee Nation they would identify themselves as "Natchey," their communities who trace their descent to these kinds of practices of refuge. France sees the Chickasaws harboring of Natchez refugees as an act of war and as an act of defiance of French policy that is exterminatory. I mean, it's a genocidal war designed to enslave and get rid of all these Natchez people. And so France tries to use this as an excuse to declare war against the Chickasaws, saying that they've betrayed their alliance with France, which was always very tenuous to begin with. They launched these two massive raids in 1736, in 1739 against the Chickasaws. And what this does is this creates another series of conflicts that pull in Illinois people, Choctaw people, Petite Nations people. It basically drags all these Indigenous folks back into another imperial conflict. And the Chickasaws really [00:57:00] heroically resist French assaults on their villages, both in 1736 and 1739. And some of this is the bungling of French provisioning and plans. But a lot of this really is brilliant Chickasaw strategic incentives and the distaste that Native people have for attacking people who are just providing refuge to Natchez folks in crisis.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:57:21] And so after France really loses the 1736 and 1739 wars, they're not able to destroy the Chickasaw, they're not able to take tons and tons and tons of Chickasaw slaves, although they do enslave many Chickasaws. This kind of really undercuts Indigenous support for the French, both in Illinois and in lower Louisiana, and leaves them in a position such that when they're approaching the Seven Years' War, they don't have the same kind of





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tremendous commitment and support from their Native partners as they might have at the very beginning of the eighteenth century. That's a long way to say that I think the Natchez War kind of touches off this series of events that really destabilizes France in the interior of the continent by the midcentury and puts them in this position where they're not able to hold on Louisiana territory, and the war absolutely ensures the ascendancy of Choctaws who will become the dominant force in the region throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century.

- Liz Covart:** [00:58:18] We've just scratched the surface of all the stories and details you cover in your book, *The Great Power of Small Nations*. But one of the points you argue in your book is that Indigenous history and the power dynamics that Indigenous peoples created in the early Gulf South have really been rewritten and mostly erased from early American history books. So Liz, I wonder if you could tell us why this history has been forgotten, rewritten, erased, and why you believe historians must uncover and recover the Indigenous history of the early Gulf South and incorporate that history into our mainstream narratives of early America.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:58:56] I think one of the kind of complaints across the board from contemporary Native people is just that we feel like Americans don't understand their histories and are not aware of these same kind of legacies of colonization and violence in the way where a lot of this stuff feels really recent and really resonant to Native people. And I think that this erasure of Native pasts is also part of the erasure of Native presents, such that it still seems anomalous, right, for Native people to exist in the contemporary moment or for the descendants of Tunicas and Chitimachas and Houmas to remain in Louisiana controlling land as distinct Native communities to this day. And so I think that going back to this early history to understand not just that there are a tremendous amount and variety of people here, to understand the legacies of violence, but also to think really seriously about the alternative societies and ways of being that Native people were building in the Gulf South—the American interior, across the continent—is absolutely essential.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [00:59:58] To this day, there are all of these myths of vanishing Indians that are supposed to explain the alleged disappearance of Native people across the Gulf South that really are how people think about Indigenous pasts. So for example, in the Pascagoula post office, I mean Pascagoula, Mississippi, there's a portrait of the



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legend of the singing river, which is supposed to be about how all of the Pascagoulas drown themselves in a river because of some star-crossed Romeo and Juliet torn lovers story where everybody then kind of mass suicided. And that's just completely absurd. I mean, to think that the reason that places in the Deep South carry these place names like Tensas, like Pascagoula, like Biloxi, without there being any kind of connection to contemporary Native people, is really just absurd. Biloxi people migrated and moved across the southeast in response to the onslaught of settlement following the American Revolution, and so Biloxi descendants are with Tunica-Biloxis, who still remember these kind of multinational tribal origins, they're down in the bayous of Southern Louisiana as part of the Biloxi-Chitimacha communities down by Point-a-Chenes and Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes. There's Native people who have remained all through the region, and I think this kind of erasure of Native pasts makes it really hard to understand what has happened to the descendants of these Native nations and how they've continued to shape the Gulf South and continue to insist that these homelands are their lands and that they ought to have continuing rights to care for and manage and be in those spaces in ways that do really unsettle political claims at the American state.

- Liz Covart:** [01:01:43] We Should move into the “Time Warp.” This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently. So Liz, given your interest in the Natchez War, I thought it only appropriate to ask, in your opinion, what might have happened if the Natchez War had never happened? How might the diplomacy between Gulf South Indigenous peoples and the French have been different?
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [01:02:27] This is super interesting. So I think one of the things that's kind of hard for me to wrap my head around about this, right, is like for the Natchez War to not have happened, French settlers would've had to have been good relations, right? So in in Indigenous parlance, we often say that the opposite of a settler is a relation, right? Somebody who shows up and respects Native sovereignty, who is in relation to an Indigenous government and systems of being in ways that support that kind of Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous nations in relation to settler governments that contest those spaces. So if French people had



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managed not to transgress and not to set up these kind of plantation societies that were dispossessing Native people, I do wonder if Louisiana would be speaking French right now. Right? This is one of those key moments that really disrupts the expansion of the French Empire in the South.

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [01:03:19] It disrupts the growth and the restoration of Indigenous societies following on these waves of disease and decades of slave rating. I think even if we jump forward in time, to think about the end of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, folks really did not at that point believe that the US was destined to expand from coast to coast, and that the only kind of future for much of this continent would be as part of this American republic, this United States of America. I think a lot of people thought that groups like the Creek Nation, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Cherokees would remain as autonomous republics in the South. And so in a future that looks like that, where the French Empire is holding strong through their partnerships with Native nations, and we have the endurance of Native communities, Native nations in the Southeast, I think you could see a much more multinational territory in what looks like North America. Now, I don't mean a causal, like if the French didn't lose the Natchez War, then we'd all be speaking Mobilian instead of English, whatever else. But I do think that the kind of what-if of what if sellers had really participated in Indigenous political orders and conducted themselves the way that other Indigenous nations in these multinational settlements did, would lead to a very different kind of landscape of power and endurance, especially in that critical era after the American Revolution when waves of settlers begin crashing sort of through the Southeast in a way that really demographically transformed the region.

**Liz Covart:** [01:04:54] Liz, your book, *The Great Power of Small Nations*, is out in the world. So what are you researching and writing about now?

**Elizabeth Ellis:** [01:04:59] Oh goodness. Yeah. So I've just finished this project. I'm now kind of working on this book on tattoos. So actually if any of your listeners have suggestions, I would be delighted for references or other kinds of things. This is building on English scholars like Sarah Rivett, and Birgit Brander Rasmussen, as well as Mairin Odle. And this is kind of looking at the purpose of early American Indian writing and tattoos. One of the things that really stood out to me is that when we think about today, contemporary, right, the way we think about American Indian

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people, we often think about these as like ethnic minorities within the US state or matters of race, or you know, what percentage of your body is your Indian percentage of your body and your blood. But for Native people, we really historically thought of ourselves as tied together through bonds of relationship. And these things are really flexible. So people could be made into relations and they could be naturalized to be part of nations. And folks marked themselves as belonging to those nations in ways that were legible to outsiders.

- Elizabeth Ellis:** [01:06:02] So for example, rather than identifying people primarily based on their skin tone, Native people would've known outsiders and been able to affiliate them based on their dress, their hairstyle, and importantly their body paint and tattoos. These were the kinds of things that really marked difference for Native people, more so than skin tone. Again, because if you think about the adoption of all these outsiders, there wouldn't be a clear kind of biological way to say, you know, this person is one of us and this person that's not. And so I'm beginning to work on and look at this, the practice of Native American tattoos and sort of writing on folks' bodies as a way to think about belonging, exclusion, and how that kind of shapes early North America. But as you can hear, it's pretty early in process.
- Liz Covart:** [01:06:44] If we do have ideas about tattoos or more questions about the Indigenous history of the early South, how can we get in contact with you?
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [01:06:52] Absolutely. I think that you can probably find me pretty easily on Princeton's website, part of the history department. Certainly, send me an email, and that would probably be the best way to get in touch with me. And seriously, I would be so grateful for anyone with any kind of sources or suggestions.
- Liz Covart:** [01:07:10] Elizabeth Ellis, thank you for joining us and for taking us through some of the very interesting early history of the Indigenous Gulf South.
- Elizabeth Ellis:** [01:07:16] Thanks so much for having me, Liz. This has been a pleasure. I'm glad to get to have this conversation.
- Liz Covart:** [01:07:21] As Liz mentioned, one of the complaints Native Americans have about Americans in general is that we don't understand our



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histories, which means we're largely unaware of the legacies of the colonization and violence wrought on Native peoples, legacies that feel really recent and resonant for Native Americans today, and violence that in some ways still hasn't ended. But by talking with Liz and scholars like her about the histories of Native American and Indigenous peoples, we're becoming more aware of these legacies and how those legacies impact Native American lives today. The twin legacies of colonization and violence began to impact Native American lives in the Gulf South years before Pierre d'Iberville and his men made landfall. As was related, trade and diplomatic networks connected the more than forty distinct Indigenous nations of the Gulf South with other Indigenous nations in the Southeast, North, West, and in Mexico. European diseases and trade goods followed these networks and reached Native Americans in the Gulf South long before Europeans arrived and before Europeans arrived to colonize the region, they arrived to steal Indigenous peoples from their homes so they could sell them into slavery and colonies like Virginia. So by the time Pierre d'Iberville and his men arrived to establish a colony near Biloxi, Mississippi, the Indigenous peoples of the Gulf South had long dealt with European violence and the side effects of their colonization in other North American spaces.

**Liz Covart:**

[01:08:45]

Now, another important point Liz made for us is that most Native American nations were not large, powerful nation-states. Instead, they could be quite small, ranging in size from a few hundred people to around 1,500 or 2,000 people. And while most Indigenous nations were not strong and powerful as say the Choctaws were by the mid-eighteenth century, they did wield power. As Liz related, the Biloxi, Tunica and Chitimacha peoples used Native trade and diplomatic practices to curb and limit French colonization of their homelands. Yes, the French established colonies in New Orleans, Biloxi and other locales, but the Indigenous peoples of the Gulf South kept the French from straying too far inland and from establishing colonies on large swaths of territory within their homelands. But this limitation lasted only briefly in the grand scheme of history. The Natchez War and other wars of colonialism often ended in the death and dispossession of Native peoples. Knowing that the history of violence and colonialism began in the late fifteenth century with the arrival of Christopher Columbus and extends into our own present day is important.



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**Liz Covart:** [01:09:50] It helps us understand how Native Americans experience the colonial period and the founding of the United States. It shows us how Indigenous peoples played a role in resisting and shaping colonization and removal policies, and it gives us a better idea of how Indigenous histories have been buried and erased, all because they are complicated and violent. But Native American peoples are still here. They have resisted and persisted, so they do not vanish. They still live in North America, and they still continue to shape American culture and diplomacy and the different ways we manage and use our land on our shared continent. You'll find more information about Liz, her book, *The Great Power of Small Nations*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, [benfranklinworld.com/342](http://benfranklinworld.com/342). If you'd like to learn more about Native American histories and read Indigenous voices, you should check out Birchbark Books at [birchbarkbooks.com](http://birchbarkbooks.com). Birchbark Books is my go-to place when I'm looking to increase my knowledge of Native American history or read novels and other nonfiction works by Indigenous authors.

**Liz Covart:** [01:11:00] They carry a really wide selection and their store is Native owned. Again, this is Birchbark Books at [birchbarkbooks.com](http://birchbarkbooks.com). Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts, so if you enjoy *Ben Franklin's World*, please tell your friends and family about it. Production assistance for this podcast comes from The Omohundro Institute's digital audio team, Joseph Adelman, Holly White, Ian Tonat, and Dylan Holzer. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the AirWave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit [airwavemedia.com](http://airwavemedia.com). Finally, what other aspects of Indigenous history fascinate you? What would you like to hear more about as we continue to explore Native American histories? I'd love to know. So let me know, [Liz@benfranklinworld.com](mailto:Liz@benfranklinworld.com). *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of the Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation