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Vanished Native American worlds yield panoramic views at Plymouth Bluff Environmental Center.

At the Plymouth Bluff Environmental Center in Columbus, Mississippi, it's all about the views. First, there's the breathtaking view from the 70-foot high bluff overlooking the old Tombigbee River channel: Blue water, verdant woods, azure sky. Equally stunning at this 190-acre educational and recreational facility is the view of history. Artifacts curated at the Center's museum include fossils from the Cretaceous Period, an era more than 60 million years ago when the whole area lay submerged under an inland sea. Another museum artifact, a mastodon jawbone, bears witness to the time when those waters receded and great beasts like mammoths and mastodons lumbered across the landscape.

The most fascinating history, however, is that of the people, and the Native peoples, first of all: the politically astute Choctaw who settled in the Plymouth Bluff area, and the fearless Chickasaw, also known as the Muscogee or Creek, who lived slightly to the north but came here to trade on the Tombigbee.

Many in those tribes may have regarded Hernando DeSoto and his party as a mere curiosity when the conquistador's party crossed the Tombigbee here in 1540. But by the turn of the 18th century with Spanish, British and American powers fighting for dominance and territory, the world of the Indian Nations had become an international powder keg that would detonate spectacularly during second phase of the War of 1812.

A civil war rocks and rips apart a nation—the Creek nation.

The War of 1812 catapulted Plymouth Bluff to the center of the area's first civil war—not the war between the Blue and the Gray, but a civil war within the Creek nation, pitching the so-called Red Sticks, named for their red painted war clubs and medicine sticks, against other Creeks who preferred to assimilate with Anglo Americans.

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In the midst of the divide between Creeks and Anglo Americans stood John Pitchlynn, who straddled both civilizations with one foot in each as an Anglo American who had joined the Choctaw nation, successively marrying two mixed-race Choctaw wives. An interpreter to George Washington during the Revolutionary War before being made Chief Interpreter to the Choctaw Nation, Pitchlynn set up his homestead on Plymouth Bluff in 1810, and his son Peter (who went on to become Chief of the Choctaw Nation after the tribe's removal to Oklahoma) would later remember his time at Plymouth Bluff as idyllic, living in a "log mansion," herding cattle, and hunting deer and alligator, all in a paradise almost lost during the War of 1812. By then John Pitchlynn had fortified the homestead with palisades, and soon it became a critical U.S. military meeting and supply point.

Blazing war fires, and a staunch friendship and alliance:

In addition to Pitchlynn's fortifications and the aid of the U.S. military there was one more not-so-secret weapon that kept Plymouth Bluff from harm. The Choctaw Nation, a steadfast ally of America, provided key defense. Years later, Peter remembered:

I can without the least mental effort see the old homestead as she appeared during the war, and the war fires blazing on her hills, the war dance, the war talks, and many a brave...long dead now rise up in my mind. What brave noble fellows they were. They had come to the protection of my father, and family, and they would have fallen and died around our little fort ere they would have allowed a Muskoke [sic] reaching us with their tomahawks.

Yet if Plymouth Bluff and the Choctaws braved their way through the War of 1812, they were no match for the onward march of time. John Pitchlynn founded the town of Plymouth Bluff in 1832 only to see it eclipsed and dwindle within a decade under the shadow of the development of the nearby settlement in Columbus. And the Choctaws were removed to Oklahoma by the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830.

War fires give way to the spark of imagination and innovation:

Today, as visitors explore the four miles of nature trails at Plymouth Bluff they may well be able to imagine those war fires brightly burning. However, where there was once war there is now peace of mind and tranquility in this unique refuge. In fact, here, many have found the spark of imagination for a new idea or a new view of the future. While an important place of preservation of natural and Native American history, the 190-acre complex with its conference center and cabins also serves as a favored retreat and meeting point for educational and corporate groups, as an inviting wedding and reunion destination, and as a haven for individuals just looking to recharge with a rewarding recreational getaway. From high on the bluffs, the views continue to intrigue and inspire.

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