

DEFINING MOMENTS AMERICAN INDIAN REMOVAL AND THE TRAIL TO WOUNDED KNEE



Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom

*Omni*graphics

P.O. Box 31-1640
Detroit, MI 48231

Chapter Two

A VANISHING WAY OF LIFE



When I was a boy, I saw the white man afar off, and was told that he was my enemy. I could not shoot him as I would a wolf or a bear, yet he came upon me. My horse and fields he took from me. He said he was my friend—he gave me his hand in friendship; I took it, he had a snake in the other.

—Wild Cat, Seminole, 1841

After the United States successfully waged its war of independence and freed itself from the control of the British crown, the new nation sought to reassure Indian tribes that a new era of peaceful coexistence was at hand. Representatives of the U.S. government made these claims even when they engaged in activities that posed a clear threat to indigenous peoples. The 1787 Northwest Ordinance, for example, formally opened the entire Northwest Territory/Ohio Country to white settlement and specified how various parts of the region could become states (modern-day Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin were all created out of these lands).

In crafting this ordinance, the U.S. Congress declared that “the utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians: their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity, shall from time to time be made for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them.”¹ As land speculators, settlers, and surveyors poured into the region, however, the government failed to honor its commitment to the Indians. Instead, authorities

“[Once] there was no white man on this continent,” Tecumseh declared. “It then all belonged to red men, children of the same parents, placed on it by the Great Spirit that made them, to keep it, to traverse it, to enjoy its production, and to fill it with the same race. Once a happy race. Since made miserable by the white people, who are never contented, but always encroaching.”

pressured tribes into handing over their traditional grounds piece by piece. Some Indians managed to hang on to fragments of their once-vast territories despite the white flood. Others, though, were swept entirely away from the lands of their ancestors.

This grim drama played out in similar fashion again and again. Over the next half-century, the United States absorbed vast areas of western land. It acquired some of this territory through treaties with European powers, such as the 1803 Louisiana Purchase from France, the 1819 purchase of Florida from Spain, and the 1846 acquisition of the Oregon Country from England. At other times it used brute force to take the land, as in the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War that brought California and the Southwest under U.S. control. U.S. officials and lawmakers then turned their attention to tribes that made their homes in these regions—and who were completely oblivious that the land beneath them was being bought and sold by white men thousands of miles away.

With each territorial acquisition, new waves of white settlers moved onto the land. And just as they had done during the colonial era, American Indians responded to the white incursions in different ways. Some bands reluctantly fled further west or up into Canada, searching for lands far from white settlements and migration routes. Other northern tribes, faced with a choice between “exodus and life on individual allotments surrounded by whites,”² managed to keep a grip on small sections of their ancient homelands. Finally, some Indians took up weapons in desperate bids to stop the white invasion.

The most famous advocates of armed resistance to white settlement in the early nineteenth century were Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh. These brothers from the Shawnee nation led a military campaign that unified thousands of warriors from different Midwestern tribes against the white invaders. This formidable movement began around 1805 and aroused widespread anxiety in white frontier communities by 1808. Undeterred by U.S. military efforts to crush the rebellion, Tecumseh recruited warriors from nations throughout the upper Midwest from 1809 through 1812. “Once ... there was no white

man on this continent,” he declared. “It then all belonged to red men, children of the same parents, placed on it by the Great Spirit that made them, to keep it, to traverse it, to enjoy its production, and to fill it with the same race. Once a happy race. Since made miserable by the white people, who are never contented, but always encroaching.”³

The resistance eventually became known as Tecumseh’s War and Tecumseh’s Rebellion in recognition of the Shawnee warrior’s gradual emergence as its leading figure (see “Tecumseh Calls for Indian Unity against the White Invaders,” p. 159). Charismatic and smart, Tecumseh became known not only for his battlefield heroics, but also for his refusal to allow the slaughter of captured Americans. But although he gained a measure of British military support after the War of 1812 erupted between Britain and the United States, Tecumseh’s grand alliance fell apart after his death in battle in October 1813. “The tragedy of Tecumseh was twofold,” wrote historian Jake Page. “In urging Indian people to put aside their age-old differences, he was ... ahead of his time; in trying to carve out a separate Indian country in the Ohio Valley in the face of a rapidly growing white presence, he was too late.”⁴

Other tribes fought against the white invaders as well. Despite occasional successful raids against settlements and victories in skirmishes against white soldiers, all of these campaigns ended in defeats that left Indian nations in bloody tatters. The Black Hawk War of 1832 in the upper Midwest, for example, claimed the lives of hundreds of women, children, and elderly members of the Sauk and Fox tribes after warriors from those nations fought back against white incursions onto their lands.



The famed Shawnee warrior Tecumseh led a formidable Indian uprising in the Ohio River Valley in the early nineteenth century.

Ralph Waldo Emerson Condemns Indian Removal

Indian removal policies were not universally popular with white Americans. Some prominent Southerners, including Tennessee Congressman Davy Crockett, condemned such acts as immoral and unfair. Efforts to push the Cherokee and other nations from their ancestral lands were even less popular in the North. In the following excerpt from an 1836 letter to President Martin Van Buren, the famous Massachusetts writer Ralph Waldo Emerson explains the strong opposition to Cherokee removal that existed in some parts of white America:

The newspapers now inform us that, in December, 1835, a treaty contracting for the exchange of all the Cherokee territory was pretended to be made by an agent on the part of the United States with some persons appearing on the part of the Cherokees; that the fact afterwards transpired that these deputies did by no means represent the will of the nation; and that, out of eighteen thousand souls composing the nation, fifteen thousand six hundred and sixty-eight have protested against the so-called treaty. It now appears that the government of the United States chooses to hold the Cherokees to this sham treaty, and are proceeding to execute the same. Almost the entire Cherokee Nation stand up and say, "This is not our act. Behold us. Here are we. Do not mistake that handful of deserters for us;" and the American President and the

Indian Dislocation in the South

There were fewer major American Indian uprisings in the South than in the North during the early 1800s. The larger Indian nations in this part of the country recognized that whites, who had already moved into the South in large numbers during the second half of the eighteenth century, had the power to wipe them out if war broke out. As a result, they tried to find a path that would allow them to stay on their ancestral lands without arousing white hostility and violence. Leading tribes like the Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek (also known as Muskogee) turned to strategies of "assimilation"—the adop-

Cabinet, the Senate and the House of Representatives, neither hear these men nor see them, and are contracting to put this active nation into carts and boats, and to drag them over mountains and rivers to a wilderness at a vast distance beyond the Mississippi....

We only state the fact that a crime is projected that confounds our understanding by its magnitude, a crime that really deprives us as well as the Cherokees of a country for how could we call the conspiracy that should crush these poor Indians our government, or the land that was cursed by their parting and dying imprecations our country, any more? ... Will the American government steal? Will it lie? Will it kill? — We ask triumphantly. Our counselors and old statesmen here say that ten years ago they would have staked their lives on the affirmation that the proposed Indian measures could not be executed; that the unanimous country would put them down. And now the steps of this crime follow each other so fast, at such fatally quick time, that the millions of virtuous citizens, whose agents the government are, have no place to interpose, and must shut their eyes until the last howl and wailing of these tormented villages and tribes shall afflict the ear of the world....

Source: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Letter to Martin Van Buren, April 23, 1838. In *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vol. 3. New York: Hearst's International Library, 1914, p. 501.

tion of European-style religious, cultural, and political practices. Members of these nations accepted Christianity, turned to European farming practices, opened mission schools for instruction in the English language, and drafted tribal laws and constitutions closely patterned after those of the whites.

Most of these efforts to ward off the seizure of their lands failed, however. Citizens of newly created states like Tennessee (1796), Mississippi (1817), Alabama (1819), Florida (1821), and Arkansas (1836) joined with the white people of the original Southern states in demanding the removal of tribes that stood in the way of gold mining, tobacco and cotton growing, and other

forms of economic development. White Southerners rationalized these demands by dismissing Indians as “savages” unworthy of the land upon which they lived (similar racist sentiments were also used to excuse the enslavement of Africans in the South).

Indian removal proposals also became popular in the Northern states and territories, especially in the wake of Tecumseh’s Rebellion. As the white outcry grew for a solution to the “Indian problem,” politicians responded by instituting sweeping new Indian removal policies. “The hunter state [of the Indian] can exist only in the vast uncultivated desert,” declared President James Monroe in his 1817 State of the Union address. “It yields to the more dense and compact form and greater force of civilized population; and of right it ought to yield, for the earth was given to mankind to support the greatest number of which it is capable, and no tribe or people have a right to withhold from the wants of others more than is necessary for their own support and comfort.”⁵

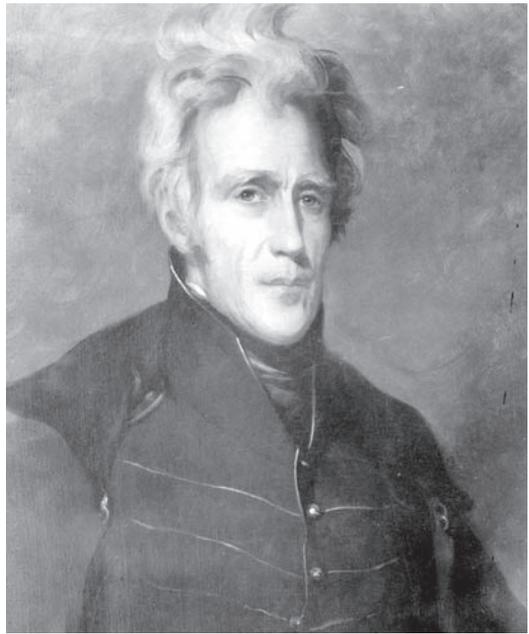
These sentiments angered and frustrated American Indians who had labored mightily to find a path of peaceful coexistence with whites. Some Indians gloomily concluded that the whites who had invaded their lands would simply never be satisfied until all tribespeople had been removed from their sight. “Brothers! I have listened to many talks from our great white father,” lamented the Creek Chief Speckled Snake in 1829:

When he first came over the wide waters, he was but a little man ... very little. His legs were cramped by sitting in his big boat, and he begged for a little land to light his fire on.... But when the white man had warmed himself before the Indians’ fire and filled himself with their hominy [dried corn], he became very large. With a step he bestrode the mountains, and his feet covered the plains and the valleys. His hand grasped the eastern and the western sea, and his head rested on the moon. Then he became our Great Father. He loved his red children, and he said, “You must move a little farther, lest by accident I tread on thee.” ... Now he says, “The land you live upon is not yours. Go beyond the Mississippi; there is game; there you may remain while the grass grows and the rivers run.”

Brothers! I have listened to a great many talks from our Great Father. But they always began and ended in this—“Get a little farther; you are too near me.”⁶

From 1816 to 1850 more than 100,000 American Indians from 28 tribes were deported from their ancestral homelands to territories west of the Mississippi River.⁷ These deportations were carried out according to language contained in dozens of treaties that native leaders signed with heavy hearts. In cases where chieftains refused to sign despite the overwhelming pressure on them, U.S. officials simply forged their names or expelled the bands at gunpoint. White negotiators also secured the cooperation of some tribal leaders through outright bribery.

America's relentless campaign of officially sanctioned robbery opened great expanses of new land for white development. But it also ripped apart Indian cultures that had prospered for hundreds of years. "Generation after generation of Native American families came to know only the sorrows and terrors of exile," wrote historian Peter Nabokov. "All their worldly goods on their backs, the Indian refugees suffered harassment from unfriendly whites along the way. Starvation and disease were their constant companions as they walked along unfamiliar roads to country they had never seen. Sometimes friendly Indians gave them shelter; sometimes enemy tribes took the opportunity to attack them."⁸



President Andrew Jackson viewed American Indians as troublesome obstacles to U.S. empire building.

Andrew Jackson Targets Southern Indians

Many tribes suffered greatly during this period, but the Cherokee nation almost certainly ranks as the best-known victim of U.S. Indian removal policies. Cherokee culture had thrived in the southeast for thousands of years prior to European contact. When whites swept into their territories, the Cherokee agreed to cede large tracts of land to the U.S. government. Members also took up all sorts of "civilized" ways, including European-style forms of farming, government, law, and religious practice, to stay in the good graces of

the whites that surrounded them. In the end, though, all of their desperate efforts were not enough to stem white demands for their remaining lands.

The single greatest blow to the Cherokee nation was the election of Andrew Jackson, a southern planter, slave owner, and war hero, to the presidency in 1828 (see Jackson biography, p. 134). Jackson possessed a deep well of hostility toward all Indians, and he was eager to help his fellow southern planters gain access to the so-called “cotton frontier”—Indian lands suitable for growing the valuable crop.

From the very beginning of his presidency, Jackson made Indian removal a top priority of his administration (see “Andrew Jackson Praises Indian Removal,” p. 162). His declarations on this subject aroused criticism from lawmakers and newspapers in the North, but his stance enjoyed broad support in the South. By February 1830 both the Senate and the House of Representatives (which were led by Southerners at the time) passed bills calling for the removal of all Indians from lands east of the Mississippi River. Three months later Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act. This ruthless piece of legislation opened up all remaining Indian territories in the South to white settlement—and it formally authorized the president to relocate all eastern tribes to reservations west of the Mississippi.



Cherokee Chief John Ross waged a valiant—but ultimately unsuccessful—legal and political campaign to keep the Cherokee nation on their ancestral lands.

Cherokee Removal

Over the next several years the Cherokee nation made a valiant stand against removal under the leadership of Chief John Ross (see Ross biography, p. 143). Despite several clear victories in U.S. courts, however, the tribe suffered a fatal legal blow in December 1835, when several Cherokee representatives signed the Treaty of New Echota. Under the terms of this treaty, the Cherokee accepted U.S. government terms for removal of the entire nation from its long-held lands in the East to a reservation in the Oklahoma Territory.

Ross and other Cherokee leaders charged that the treaty was invalid. They noted that the Cherokees who signed the

Treaty of New Echota had no legal authority to do so, and they pointed out that the same U.S. government proposal had already been rejected by the Cherokee National Council.

The Jackson administration ignored these protests. The Treaty of New Echota paved the way for the removal of the Cherokee, so U.S. authorities treated it as a completely legitimate agreement. Ross responded to these developments with a mixture of outrage and mourning, but the federal government ignored his entreaties (see “Cherokee Chief John Ross Denounces Indian Removal Policies,” p. 166).

On May 26, 1838, federal troops moved to enforce the Treaty of New Echota. They evicted thousands of Cherokee from their homes and forced them to travel a thousand miles to official reservation land in eastern Oklahoma. An estimated 4,000 tribal members died on the journey from disease and starvation. The ordeal became known among the Cherokee as the “Trail of Tears” and “The Trail Where They Cried,” and it ranks today as one of the most shameful episodes in American history.

The Trail of Tears

Jackson’s successor, President Martin Van Buren, assigned General Winfield Scott to oversee the forced removal of the Cherokee. Although Scott ordered the 7,000 U.S. troops and state militia members under his command to show the Indians “every possible kindness, compatible with the necessity of removal,”⁹ many soldiers disobeyed his orders and treated the Cherokee brutally. Troops often arrived at Cherokee homes without advance warning and rounded up the residents at gunpoint. In many cases, families did not even have time to pack their belongings. White looters sometimes followed the soldiers to Cherokee homesteads, collected all the valuables, and then destroyed the property. The removal process swept across the Cherokee Nation quickly, and by early June the troops had rounded up an estimated 15,000 Indians. “I fought through the Civil War and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee Removal was the cruelest work I ever knew,”¹⁰ declared a Georgia soldier who participated in the removal action.

Three groups of Cherokee, totaling around 3,000 people, left immediately for Oklahoma Territory. They traveled by barge and steamship on what came to be known as the “water route”: northwest on the Tennessee River

from Ross's Landing (present-day Chattanooga) to the Mississippi River, south to the Arkansas River, and west to Fort Smith, Arkansas. River levels were low during the height of summer, making navigation slow and difficult. Once they arrived at Fort Smith, the Cherokee had to travel over land in extreme heat with little food or water. Between three and five people died each day from exhaustion, dehydration, and illness.

Meanwhile, federal troops herded more than 12,000 Cherokee to 31 forts in Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Alabama. After several weeks, most Cherokee were transferred to 11 internment camps in Tennessee to await removal to Oklahoma. Conditions at these facilities were crowded and unsanitary, and the Cherokee prisoners suffered terribly. Families were often separated, their meager possessions were stolen, they suffered from hunger and illness, and they were mistreated by guards. Some Cherokee were forced to live in these conditions for up to five months, and more than 1,000 people died from disease or starvation in the camps.

In the midst of these struggles, Chief John Ross approached General Scott and requested that the Cherokee be allowed to postpone removal until fall and lead their own groups on the journey. Scott granted his request but required the Cherokee to remain in the internment camps until travel resumed. The first of 12 wagon trains left the Cherokee Agency near Rattlesnake Springs, Tennessee, in October 1838. Although the land routes varied, many groups traveled northwest past Nashville, crossed the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, then proceeded southwest across Missouri and Arkansas to Oklahoma.

The 800-mile journey was an arduous one for the poorly equipped Cherokee. Heavy rains and hundreds of wagons left the roads muddy and rutted, food was scarce, and the weather grew bitterly cold with the onset of winter. Thousands of Cherokee found themselves trapped between the icy Ohio and Mississippi Rivers during a harsh January freeze. Most did not have enough warm clothing, and some did not even have shoes or moccasins. Many people succumbed to disease or died of exposure. One survivor remembered the harrowing ordeal: "Long time we travel on way to new land. People feel bad when they leave Old Nation. Women cry and make sad wails. Children cry and many men cry...But they say nothing and just put heads down and keep on go towards West. Many days pass and people die very much."¹¹

By March 1839 the last Cherokee survivors of the Trail of Tears had straggled into Oklahoma. Ross immediately went to work to reunite the



An artist's rendering of the 1838 Trail of Tears, in which the Cherokee Nation was forced by the U.S. government to leave their home in the American Southeast and relocate in Oklahoma Territory.

demoralized and divided tribe. The various factions came together to draw up a new constitution and form the United Cherokee Nation. In 1841 a new capital was established in Tahlequah. By the 1850s the Cherokee Nation once again had its own roads, businesses, newspaper, and public school system. Meanwhile, around 1,000 Cherokee in Tennessee and North Carolina escaped removal. Some lived on land owned by whites or protected by treaty, while others simply managed to hide. They gained federal recognition in 1866 as the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and established a tribal government in Cherokee, North Carolina.

Although the Cherokee managed to move forward following the Trail of Tears, they continued to feel the impact of this tragic episode for generations. "I know what it is to hate," explained Cherokee survivor Samuel Cloud, who was nine years old when he accompanied his family on the journey to Okla-

homa. "I hate those white soldiers who took us from our home. I hate the soldiers who make us keep walking through the snow and ice toward this new home that none of us ever wanted. I hate the people who killed my father and mother. I hate the white people who lined the roads in their woolen clothes that kept them warm, watching us pass. None of those white people are here to say they are sorry that I am alone. None of them care about me or my people. All they ever saw was the colour of our skin. All I see is the colour of theirs and I hate them."¹²

Notes

- ¹ "Northwest Ordinance." Transcript. *Ohio History Central: An Online Encyclopedia of Ohio History*. Available online at <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=1462&nm=Northwest-Ordinance-Transcript>.
- ² White, Richard. "Expansion and Exodus." In *The Native Americans: An Illustrated History*. Edited by Betty Ballantine and Ian Ballantine. Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1993, p. 298.
- ³ Quoted in Drake, Samuel Gardner. *Biography and History of the Indians of North America: From Its First Discovery to the Present Time*. Boston: Antiquarian Institute, 1837. Book V, p. 121.
- ⁴ Page, Jake. *In the Hands of the Great Spirit: The 20,000 Year History of American Indians*. New York: Free Press, 2003, p. 249.
- ⁵ Monroe, James. First Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 12, 1817. *The American Presidency Project* [online]. Available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29459>.
- ⁶ Quoted in O'Brien, Sharon. *American Indian Tribal Governments*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993, p. 124.
- ⁷ Nabokov, Peter. *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492-2000*. 1978. Revised ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 148.
- ⁸ Nabokov, p. 145.
- ⁹ "General Winfield Scott's Order to U.S. Troops Assigned to Cherokee Removal," May 17, 1838. Available online at <http://georgiainfo.galileo.usg.edu/scottord.htm>.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Mooney, James. *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee*. New York: Kessinger, 2006, p. 130.
- ¹¹ National Park Service. "Stories," Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, n.d. Available online at <http://www.nps.gov/trte/historyculture/stories.htm>.
- ¹² Quoted in Rutledge, Michael. "Forgiveness in the Age of Forgetfulness." Available online at <http://www.cherokeehistory.com/law.html>.