

The Cherokee Alphabet, The Cherokee Press, The Adoption of the National Constitution, and the Warnings of Conservatives to Discard the “White Man’s Ways.” From James Mooney, *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, 1897-98: in Two Parts—Part I*. The materials may also be found in James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, Dover Press.

The invention of the [Cherokee] alphabet [by Sequoyah, known as George Gist or Guess to whites] had an immediate and wonderful effect on Cherokee development. On account of the remarkable adaptation of the syllabary to the language, it was only necessary to learn the characters to be able to read at once. No schoolhouses were built and no teachers hired, but the whole Nation became an academy for the study of the system, until “in the course of a few months, without school or expense of time and money, the Cherokee were able to read and write in their own language.”¹ An active correspondence began to be carried on between the eastern and western divisions, and plans were made for a national press, with a national library and museum to be established at the capital, New Echota. The missionaries, who had at first opposed the new alphabet on the ground of its Indian origin, now saw the advisability of using it to further their work. In the fall of 1824 Atsi or John Arch, a young native convert, made a manuscript translation of a portion of St. John’s gospel...In September, 1825, David Brown, a prominent half breed preacher, who had already made some attempt at translation in the Roman alphabet, completed a translation of the New Testament in the new syllabary, the work being handed about in manuscript, as there were as yet no types cast in the Sequoyia characters....

In 1827 the Cherokee council having formally resolved to establish a national paper in the Cherokee language and characters, types for that purpose were cast in Boston, under the supervision of the noted missionary, Worcester...Early in the next year the press and types arrived at New Echota, and the first number of the new paper, *Tsa’lagi Tsu’lehisannun’hi*, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, printed in both languages, appeared in February 21, 1828.... Elias Boudinot (Galagi’na, “The Buck”), an educated Cherokee, was the editor, and Reverend S. A. Worcester was the guiding spirit who brought order out of chaos and set the work in motion. The office was a log house...After a precarious existence of about six years, the *Phoenix* was suspended, owing to hostile action of the Georgia authorities, who went so far as to throw Worcester and Wheeler into prison. [See materials on the decision of the U. S. Supreme Court, authored by John Marshall, concerning Worcester’s arrest, Unit 3, under Texts.] Its successor, after the removal of the Cherokee to the West, as the *Cherokee Advocate*, of which the first number appeared at Tahlequah in 1844, with William P. Ross as editor. It is still continued [i.e., in 1897] under the auspices of the Nation, printed in both languages and distributed free at the expense of the Nation to those unable to read English – an example without parallel in any other government. [The paper ran until 1906, when the Cherokee government was dissolved. For details and an index of its articles, see http://anpa.ualr.edu/indexes/cherokee_advocate_index/cherokee_advocate.htm.]

In addition to numerous Bible translations, hymn books, and other religious works, there have been printed in the Cherokee language and syllabary [the newspapers], the *Cherokee Messenger* (periodical), *Cherokee Almanac* (annual), Cherokee spelling

¹ G.C. in Cherokee Phoenix; reprinted in Christian Advocate and Journal, New York, September 26, 1828.

books, arithmetics, and other schoolbooks for those unable to read English, several editions of the laws of the Nation, and a large body of tracts and minor publications.... Besides this printed literature, the syllabary is on constant daily use among the non-English-speaking element, both in Indian Territory and in North Carolina, for letter writing, council records, personal memoranda, etc. What is perhaps strangest of all in this literary evolution is the fact that the same invention has been seized upon by the priests and conjurors of the conservative party for the purpose of preserving to their successors the ancient rituals and secret knowledge of the tribe, whole volumes of such occult literature in manuscript having been obtained among them by the author.²

In 1819 the whole Cherokee population had been estimated at 15,000, one-third of them being west of the Mississippi. In 1825 a census of the eastern Nation showed: native Cherokee, 13,563; white men married into the Nation, 147; white women married into the Nation, 73; negro slaves, 1,277. There were large herds of cattle, horses, hogs, and sheep, with large crops of every staple, including cotton, tobacco, and wheat, and some cotton was exported by boats as far as New Orleans. Apple and peach orchards were numerous, butter and cheese were in use to some extent, and both cotton and woolen cloths, especially blankets, were manufactured. Nearly all the merchants were native Cherokee. Mechanical industries flourished, the Nation was out of debt, and the population was increasing.³

Simultaneously with decrees establishing a national press, the Cherokee Nation, in general convention of delegates held for the purpose at New Echota on July 26, 1827, adopted a national constitution, based on the assumption of distinct and independent nationality. John Ross, so celebrated in connection with the history of his tribe, was president of the convention which framed the instrument. Charles R. Hicks, a Moravian convert of mixed blood... was elected principal chief, with John Ross as assistant chief. With a constitution and national press, a well-developed system of industries and home education and a government administered by educated Christian men, the Cherokee were now justly entitled to be considered a civilized people. [Readers may wish to compare the foregoing passages with Unit 3 and http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/1_ch18.htm. Use “Cherokee” on a find function to locate the relevant passages.]

The idea of a civilized Indian government was not a new one. The first treaty ever negotiated by the United States with an Indian tribe, in 1778, held out to the Delawares the hope that by a confederation of friendly tribes they might be able “to form a state, whereof the Delaware nation shall be the head and have a representation in Congress.”⁴ Priber, the Jesuit, had already familiarized the Cherokee with the forms of civilized government before the middle of the eighteenth century. As the gap between the conservative and progressive elements widened after [the American] Revolution the idea grew, until in 1808 representatives of both parties visited Washington to propose an arrangement by which those who clung to the old life might be allowed to remove to the

² ... The largest body of original Cherokee manuscript material in existence, including hundreds of ancient ritual formulas, was obtained by the writer among the East Cherokee, and is now in possession of the Bureau of American Ethnology, to be translated at some future time.

³ Brown letter (unsigned), September 2, 1825, American State Papers: Indian Affairs, II, pp. 651, 652, 1834.

⁴ Fort Pitt treaty, September 17, 1778, Indian Treaties, p. 3, 1837.

western hunting grounds, while the rest should remain to take up civilization and “begin the establishment of fixed laws and a regular government.”⁵ The project received the warm encouragement of President Jefferson, and it was with this understanding that the western emigration was first officially recognized a few years later. Immediately upon return of the delegates from Washington the Cherokee drew up their first brief written code of laws, modeled agreeably to the friendly suggestions of Jefferson.

By this time the rapid strides of civilization and Christianity had alarmed the conservative element, who saw fit in the new order of things only the evidences of apostasy and swift national decay. In 1828 White-path (Nun’na-tsune’ga), an influential full-blood and councilor, living at Turniptown (U’lun’yi), near the present Ellijay, in Gilmer county, Georgia, headed a rebellion against the new code of laws, with all that it implied. He soon had a large band of followers, known to the whites as “Red-sticks,” a title sometimes assumed by the more warlike element among the Creeks and other southern tribes. From the townhouse of Ellijay he preached the rejection of the new constitution, the discarding of Christianity and the white man’s ways, and a return to the old tribal law and custom—the same doctrine that had more than once constituted the burden of Indian revelation in the past. It was now too late, however, to reverse the wheel of progress, and under the rule of such men as Hicks and Ross the conservative opposition gradually melted away. White-path was deposed from his seat in council, but subsequently made submission and was reinstated. He was afterward one of the detachment commanders in the Removal, but died while on the march.

In this year, also, John Ross became the principal chief of the Nation, a position which he held until his death in 1866, thirty-eight years later. In this long period, comprising the momentous episodes of the Removal and the War of Rebellion [the Civil War], it may truly be said that his history is the history of the Nation.

And now, just when it seemed that civilization and enlightenment were about to accomplish their perfect work, the Cherokee began to hear the first low muttering of the coming storm that was soon to overturn their whole governmental structure and sweep them forever from the land of their birth....

⁵ Cherokee Agency treaty, July 8, 1817... The volume of Cherokee laws, compiled in the Cherokee language by the Nation, in 1850, begins with the year 1808.