

The Cherokee Nation
In the Nineteenth Century:
Racial Tensions and the Loss
of Tribal Sovereignty

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Summary

During the nineteenth century indigenous communities that had survived European colonization, but were isolated within white societies, struggled to maintain control of the lands they still occupied and to fend off encroachment by settlers. The Cherokee Tribe in the Southeastern United States is a case in point. Located within the boundaries of several States within the Federal Union, but with no political standing either within those States or the Union itself, it had to confront the problem of how to maintain its tribal identity and a measure of tribal autonomy. Its status was determined by treaties of the type usually negotiated between nation states, treaties which involved the loss of some tribal lands in return for annuities or cash, and assurances that the Tribe's occupancy would be permanently guaranteed by the United States.

In the early decades of the century, the mixed blood leaders of the Tribe who understood the white world due to their access to education and their links with white relatives, saw knowledge as the key to the future of the Tribe. They created a system of free tribal schools, introduced white systems of law and politics, and developed a thriving agricultural economy. White contemporaries referred to the Cherokees and four other Tribes in their vicinity as civilized because they had achieved a high degree of acculturation to white norms. Their leaders argued that they were meeting the expectations of the white community by creating a civil society and an agricultural economy comparable to that of their white neighbors. They also pointed to the guarantees of limited tribal autonomy given by the Federal Government in treaties, and asked that those guarantees be respected.

That did not protect them from expropriation when white settlement spilled into their lands. In the 1830s they were forcibly moved to an area west of the Mississippi and forced to rebuild their economy and political institutions, only to have their prosperity destroyed once again by their support of the Confederacy in the Civil War. They rebuilt for a second time, only to face another expropriation at the end of the century, this time by a Federal Government encouraged by influential reformers who saw the destruction of the tribal system as essential if Indians in general were to survive and be incorporated in the wider American community.

The Cherokee experience has long been characterized as the unjust destruction of the culture of a group that had already adapted to white mores. What has been less obvious was the degree to which the group kept control of its tribal identity, even when under duress. It did so by restricting intermarriage with African Americans, while taking a more flexible approach to intermarriage with whites. Many mixed bloods had been slave owners and shared the racial values of the Southern white communities around them. In the late nineteenth century, Cherokee discrimination against African Americans was part of their adaptation to the modern world, because it prevented them being consigned to the lowest rung of the social ladder.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any University; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Roderick C. Essery

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