

# Cherokee Slaveholders and Radical Abolitionists



JOHN RIDGE,  
A CHEROKEE.

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In 1825, David Brown, a young Cherokee leader, wrote to the editor of the *Family Visitor* in Richmond, Virginia. Brown was keen to demonstrate just how far his people had advanced in adopting "civilization," and his letter, which was subsequently reprinted throughout the eastern United States, included a wealth of information about the Cherokee Nation. Among other things, Brown noted that there were 1,277 "African slaves" owned by Cherokee Indians, a figure he gleaned from a recent census. Concerned that some of his readers might be displeased to learn of Indian slaveholding, he offered the following explanation: "You perceive that there are some African slaves among us. They have been, from time to time, brought in and sold by white men; they are, however, generally well treated, and they much prefer living in the nation to a residence in the United States." Even better: Brown assured antislavery readers that Cherokee slaveholders would soon "cooperate with the humane efforts of those who are liberating and sending this race to the land of their fathers."

Abolitionists joined the Indian cause because they saw in removal the influence of the slaveholding South.

Three years after Brown's letter was published, the Cherokee Nation faced a grave threat to its sovereignty and its landholdings. The election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1828 famously signaled a new era in U.S. Indian policy, one that had dire consequences for thousands of Native Americans. Once in office, Jackson urged Congress to pass federal legislation authorizing him to sign removal treaties with all Indians living east of the Mississippi River, thus freeing up millions of acres of land for white settlement. The states most eager for such legislation were in the South, not coincidentally a region that had offered Jackson significant support precisely because he promised to make Indian removal a top priority of his administration. Georgia was particularly eager for the federal government to make good on its 1802 promise to extinguish Indian land titles within its borders, which included a significant portion of the Cherokee Nation. But Jackson's plan did not go unchallenged. In 1829, as both houses of Congress prepared their own version of what would become the Indian Removal Bill, reformers throughout the northern United States joined with Native Americans to fight its passage.

The antiremoval movement counted many prominent politicians and reformers among its ranks as well as thousands of ordinary men and women. A deeply sectional issue, Indian removal found little support in the northern United States, the region of the country where hostility to President Jackson and his policies was strongest. Antiremovalists were united in their conviction that removal was immoral, and they often lamented the international disapproval such a shameful act of oppression would bring upon the United States. They also insisted that Indians were sovereign and had a legal right to their homelands, a right repeatedly established through numerous treaties. Rather than support removal as Jackson did, the federal government was bound to defend Indians against the greed of those eager to dispossess them of their land. Most importantly,

antiremovalists believed that Anglo-Americans had a moral duty to bring Christian civilization to Native Americans, a project that would be greatly hampered by removal.



An ambitious political leader, lawyer and renowned orator, John Ridge was also a wealthy planter. This portrait was painted by Charles Bird King in 1826 when Ridge was in Washington serving as secretary for a Creek treaty delegation. It was during this trip that Ridge penned his letter to Albert Gallatin. "John Ridge, A Cherokee," drawn, printed and colored by J. T. Bowen's Lithographic Establishment, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1838, on page 176, History of the Indian Tribes of North America, with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs: Embellished with One Hundred and Twenty Portraits from the Indian Gallery in the Department of War, at Washington, Vol.II, by Thomas L. McKenney, Esq. and James Hall (Philadelphia, 1842). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

The fight over the Indian Removal Bill immediately preceded the radicalization of the antislavery movement in the early 1830s. This was no accident, as several historians have noted. Many reformers who supported the American Colonization Society and other moderate antislavery activities in the 1820s had been radicalized by their involvement with the antiremoval cause. Antiremoval activism convinced many antislavery reformers to reconsider the colonization of free blacks to Africa. They found themselves increasingly unable to justify their support for one policy (colonization) that bore such strong similarities to another (removal) which they strongly opposed. By 1831, leading abolitionists, including, most famously, William Lloyd Garrison, were denouncing the gradualism of colonization in favor of immediate emancipation, a crucial shift brought about, at least in part, by the debate over Indian removal in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

Abolitionists joined the Indian cause because they saw in removal the influence

of the slaveholding South. "One would think that the guilt of African slavery was enough for the nation to bear," one writer lamented in 1829, "without the additional crime of injustice to the aborigines." Although the Indian Removal Bill applied to nearly all Indians living east of the Mississippi River, southern slaveowners were clearly the most eager to obtain fertile Indian land, and abolitionists feared that removal would hasten the westward expansion of slavery at the expense of national honor.

But abolitionist support was also driven by concern for the Indians themselves, particularly the Cherokees, whose highly publicized progress in civilization underscored for many Americans the cruelty of compulsory removal. Context was crucial for civilization, and antiremovalists lamented that removal to the West would have a deleterious effect on the Cherokees' continued progress. "It appears to us that no situation could be more deplorable for those Indians who have made progress in civilization," abolitionist editor David Lee Child wrote in his *Massachusetts Journal* in 1829, "than to be planted where they will have Indians untamed and untamable on the one side, and [unsavory white settlers] on the other." The implementation of a federal removal policy, he suggested, would irreparably harm the process of civilizing the Indians by taking them beyond the reach of beneficial white influence and assistance. The environment of the West was an unsuitable place for civilization to flourish.

Making Indians "civilized" had been a central component of federal U.S. Indian policy since George Washington's administration, but it was not formalized until the passage of the 1819 Civilization Act, which provided funds for missionary organizations eager to participate in the conversion of "savages." "Civilization," it was commonly understood, was the only way for Indians to avoid extinction—the inevitable fate of uncivilized peoples who came into contact with more advanced cultures. What exactly "civilization" entailed was a matter of debate in the nineteenth century, but most people agreed that to be civilized, Indians would have to be guided by Christian morality, live as settled farmers, and abide by a written system of laws and government. Most importantly, Indians needed to acknowledge and embrace private property, including individual landownership. In 1789, no less a figure than Henry Knox, Washington's Secretary of War and the architect of early national Indian policy, argued that the key to civilizing Indians was "to introduce among [them] a love for exclusive property."

By the late eighteenth century many southern Indians, including some Cherokees, had acquired a particular kind of private property: black slaves. Slaveholding among Indians, however, predated the arrival of Europeans, as Native Americans of the precontact Southeast had captured and enslaved one another for centuries. Southeastern Indians were also deeply involved in the lucrative colonial Indian slave trade, which gradually transitioned into primarily an African slave trade after the Yamasee War of 1715-18. As Theda Perdue argued in her classic study of the subject, Cherokees involved in this trade were initially only interested in selling slaves captured in warfare, but the capitalist model of individual wealth accumulation practiced by their European,

and later Anglo-American, trading partners encouraged Indians to see these slaves as desirable property in their own right. Most Cherokees did not own slaves, nor did they radically alter their traditional ways of living to conform to the standards of American civilization, but those who did were part of a growing class of wealthy and politically powerful elites who lived on large plantations like their white neighbors. And it was this elite class with whom antiremovalists, including abolitionists, had the most contact in print and in person.



John Ross served as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation during the tumultuous removal era. Like other Cherokee slaveholders, when Ross and his family traveled west in 1838-39 on the Trail of Tears, they took their slaves with them to Indian Territory. "John Ross, A Cherokee Chief," hand-colored lithograph by John T. Bowen after a portrait by Charles Bird King, Philadelphia, 1843. This lithograph was placed between pages 176 and 177 of the *History of the Indian Tribes of North America, with Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs: Embellished with One Hundred and Twenty Portraits from the Indian Gallery in the Department of War, at Washington, Vol. III*, Thomas L. McKenney, Esq. and James Hall (Philadelphia, 1844). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

On the face of it, Indian slaveholding was a potential liability during the fight against removal, for many of the Cherokees' most loyal and vocal supporters were ardent opponents of slavery. In fact, one of the papers that reprinted Brown's letter was the *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, edited by the antislavery Quaker Benjamin Lundy. From the late 1820s through the late 1830s, abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic fought vigorously against Indian removal, attending meetings, signing their names to petitions, and writing editorials condemning the actions of those eager to violate the rights of Indians in the name of expansion and slavery. Why, then, did abolitionists support Indians who they knew owned slaves?

Throughout the debate over Indian removal in the 1830s, abolitionist support of the Cherokee cause was contingent upon a romanticized picture of Indian slaveholding. As part of their support for the Cherokee Nation's fight against removal, abolitionists found themselves in the unusual position of acting as apologists for Indian slaveholding, mounting a defense that drew heavily from the testimony of Cherokee leaders. Abolitionists accepted such testimony as fact, even when they had good reason to doubt its truthfulness, because it reinforced their own ideas about Indians, slavery and civilization.

Such a rendering of Cherokee slaveholding was exemplified in the letter that Cherokee leader David Brown wrote to the *Family Visitor*. The basic outlines of Brown's letter were already familiar to reformers, many of whom had read similar accounts in official missionary reports and travel narratives. First, he was careful to emphasize that white Americans bore the responsibility for introducing slavery to the Indians, whose lack of civilization had left them vulnerable to the adoption of such vices. Second, he asserted that Indians were more benevolent masters than their white counterparts and, consequently, that slaves preferred to live in the Cherokee Nation. Finally, he insisted that Indians were likely to emancipate their slaves in the near future (which, as he suggested, would be done through African colonization, still a radical enough antislavery position in 1825). Framing Cherokee slaveholding in this way was a successful rhetorical strategy used by Cherokee leaders during the removal crisis to reassure their antislavery supporters that although some Indians owned slaves, black chattel slavery was qualitatively different among Indians than among whites.

Indian leaders did not always feel compelled to explain either their acceptance of slavery or their ownership of slaves. Before the rise of the radical antislavery movement in the late 1820s and early 1830s, Cherokee slaveowners often proudly referred to their use of slave labor, which they deftly linked to their simultaneous progress in civilization. In 1826, John Ridge, a Cherokee political leader and wealthy slaveowner, responded to a query from Albert Gallatin about the progress of civilization in the Cherokee Nation. Using recent census data that indicated, among other things, a large and growing population of black slaves, Ridge stated proudly that Cherokee slaveowners lived as well as their white counterparts. Their houses and furniture were well made, he declared, and "[s]ervants attend at their meals, & the same rules and etiquette is observed at table as in the first families of the whites." Though he did not explicitly defend slavery in his letter to Gallatin, John Ridge did not feel compelled to justify the Cherokees' acceptance of black chattel slavery as David Brown had the year before. In Ridge's estimation, Indian slaveholding did not need to be explained away, for it provided clear and indisputable evidence of the increasing prosperity and progress among the elite class of which he and his family were a part. It was also a testament to the Cherokees' fundamental equality with whites. Though at present most Cherokees remained in a lower stage of civilization, antiremovalists argued that all Cherokees, and Indians more generally, possessed the inherent capacity for progress and eventually full civilization. The few Cherokees who had rapidly

advanced in civilization were not anomalies, as pro-removalists often contended, but rather the vanguard who could serve as models for uncivilized Indians, Cherokee or not.

The Cherokees' success in garnering the majority of the antiremoval movement's attention, in casting themselves as *the* Indians who faced unjust removal, can be attributed in large part to the creation of their own newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*, in 1828. Printed in both English and Cherokee under the editorship of John Ridge's cousin, Elias Boudinot, the *Phoenix* uniquely enabled the Cherokees to communicate with their supporters on both sides of the Atlantic. Boudinot established exchanges with numerous other editors including many abolitionists because he was well aware that removal's defeat depended upon the support of reformers who lived far beyond the boundaries of the Cherokee Nation. Boudinot used the *Cherokee Phoenix* to keep an international network of supporters apprised of the progress of civilization underway in the Cherokee Nation, for it was evidence of progress that revealed the true injustice of removal. Boudinot regularly published articles and editorials that illustrated the necessary improvement, occasionally including material that contained evidence of Indian slaveholding. For example, in 1828 Boudinot reprinted laws that had been passed by the Cherokee National Council four years earlier. Two of the laws pertained to slavery: one outlawed "intermarriages between Negro slaves and Indians, or whites," while the other barred slaves from owning livestock. Because laws and formal government structures were considered fundamental to civilized society, they served as fine evidence for the Cherokees' civilizing project even when those laws pertained to slavery. Given the growing opposition to slavery in the North and in England, Boudinot refrained from writing or printing articles that explicitly justified slavery. Still, careful readers of the *Phoenix* could clearly see that some Cherokees owned slaves, and that the laws of the Cherokee Nation protected the property rights of Indian slaveholders while restricting the rights of black slaves.

Surprisingly, evidence of Indian slaveholding did not diminish abolitionist support for the antiremoval movement. In fact, abolitionist involvement only increased as time passed. Even after passage of the Indian Removal Act in May 1830, abolitionists continued to support Indian rights, often folding the plight of Indians into their condemnation of black chattel slavery. When William Lloyd Garrison launched his radical antislavery newspaper *The Liberator* in 1831, for instance, he incorporated these interconnected issues into its second masthead, which debuted on April 23, 1831. The image included two pieces of paper printed with the words "INDIAN TREATIES" beneath the feet of bidders at a slave auction. In his introduction to the new masthead Garrison called attention to this part of the scene: "Down in the dust, our Indian Treaties are seen."





Though best known for his antislavery radicalism, William Lloyd Garrison was involved in a number of antebellum reform causes including temperance, Sabbatarianism, and antiremoval. "Wm. Lloyd Garrison," photograph. Courtesy of the American Portrait Print Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

It was not that abolitionists approved of Indian slaveholding so much as they saw it as an undesirable, but inevitable, part of progress. They understood that civilization was itself fraught with danger. If improperly tutored in its ways, Indians might unknowingly adopt the white man's vices as well as his virtues. Abolitionists believed, as did most Americans, in the myth of the "noble savage," whose innocence of civilization was the source of his virtuous purity, but also his greatest weakness, for it left him vulnerable to the introduction of unwanted vices, including, in this instance, slavery. In arguing that slavery was the result of white influence, David Brown had implicitly appealed to this myth in his letter. Moral responsibility could only be expected of fully civilized people, not partially civilized Indians. Antislavery reformers latched on to this theory, for it not only explained how Indians became slaveholders, but offered hope that with time and under the guidance of missionaries and reformers, they might progress enough to abandon civilization's vices. Partially civilized Indians might be slaveowners; fully civilized Indians would become emancipators.

The antiremoval movement failed to stop the Indian Removal Act. Nonetheless, Principal Chief John Ross and the majority of the Cherokee Nation remained firm against removal, despite increasing pressure from Georgia to sign a removal treaty. In an attempt to harass the Cherokees into signing, Georgia passed laws in the 1820s and 1830s to extend its jurisdiction over the Cherokee Nation, a clear refutation of the Cherokees' assertion of sovereignty. To prove the unjustness of Georgia's actions, the Cherokees took their case before the U.S. Supreme Court twice, first in 1831 and again in 1832.

The second case, *Worcester v. Georgia*, was a crucial test of the Cherokees'

claim to sovereignty. It began in 1830 when Georgia passed a law requiring all whites living in the Cherokee Nation to take an oath of allegiance to the state. Missionaries who had been living and working among the Cherokees for many years and who supported the Indians in their rights, refused to take the oath (which had largely been implemented to reduce what Georgians perceived as undue missionary influence). In response, Georgia arrested eleven missionaries in the summer of 1831, convicted them of violating state law and sentenced them to four years of hard labor in the state penitentiary. All but two were eventually released. Samuel Worcester, a close personal friend of Elias Boudinot, and Elizur Butler, a doctor, willingly agreed to let themselves be martyrs for the antiremoval cause so that the Cherokee Nation could get a second hearing before the U.S. Supreme Court. Cherokee leaders believed that a victory there would be sufficient to prove their right to retain their homelands.

As *Worcester v. Georgia* was being heard, Elias Boudinot and John Ridge undertook a speaking tour of the northeastern United States. Their purpose was two-fold. The Cherokee Nation was having financial difficulties and to keep the *Cherokee Phoenix* in print the men needed to solicit donations from supporters. They also wanted to ensure that reformers who had signed petitions and attended meetings in opposition to the Indian Removal Bill were still committed to antiremoval. Cherokee leaders like Ridge and Boudinot believed that favorable public opinion was crucial to the success of their continued resistance, which they hoped to garner with a series of public lectures in cities that had had significant antiremoval activity in the prior campaign.

In early January of 1832 Boudinot and Ridge left Washington for Philadelphia where they met with a number of prominent supporters. From there the two cousins travelled north to New York City, then on to New Haven, Hartford and finally Boston, in each city lecturing before large and enthusiastic crowds of supporters. They arrived in Boston in late February where they gave two public lectures, the first on February 29 at the Federal Street Church, and the second at the Old South Church on March 3. As with the other gatherings, these meetings were attended by many well-known ministers, reformers, politicians and intellectuals including Lyman Beecher, Leverett Saltonstall and Ralph Waldo Emerson. William Lloyd Garrison was in attendance at the second meeting, and he wrote in the next issue of the *Liberator* that John Ridge "rivetted the attention of the audience while he delineated the rise, progress and present condition of his nation." Garrison found much to praise in Ridge's speech, seeing it and Ridge himself as clear evidence of the Cherokees' particular aptitude for and adoption of civilization. "He speaks the English language with singular precision, using no superfluous words and rarely violating the rules of grammar." Garrison was so impressed by Ridge's speech that he reprinted it in its entirety in a subsequent issue of the *Liberator*. Those in attendance at this meeting were also treated to the heartening news that the Supreme Court had, that very day, ruled in favor of Cherokee sovereignty and ordered that the missionaries be released.

Aware of the increasing radicalism of antislavery reformers, who continued to constitute a significant portion of the antiremoval movement, Ridge and Boudinot carefully avoided mentioning the ownership of slaves and plantations by Cherokees, choosing instead to highlight other accomplishments such as the invention of a Cherokee syllabary and the adoption of a written constitution. Despite their caution, an ill-timed advertisement in the *Cherokee Phoenix* turned slavery into a point of contention, threatening the carefully cultivated alliance of antislavery and antiremoval interests so crucial to the Cherokee cause.



The Cherokee Phoenix, printed from 1828 until 1834, was the first American Indian newspaper. It made use of the recently created Cherokee syllabary, printing columns in both Cherokee and English. Elias Boudinot, who edited the Phoenix from 1828 until 1832, resigned the position after he abandoned the antiremoval cause. Masthead of the Cherokee Phoenix, New Echota, Georgia, edited by Elias Boudinot, printed weekly by Isaac H. Harris, Vol. I, No. 20, July 9, 1828. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In January of 1832, a white slaveowner named Thomas Hollingsworth placed an advertisement offering a twenty-dollar reward for “a Negroe Woman by the name of Lucy.” In addition to offering a physical description, Hollingsworth noted that Lucy, “having been raised in the Cherokee Nation—speaks the Cherokee Language.” Lucy had ties to the Cherokee Nation as a consequence of once having lived there and Hollingsworth clearly believed she might have returned to be closer to friends or relatives. A second runaway slave advertisement was placed on February 4, 1832, by William Orr, who offered a twenty-dollar reward for a young man named Jack. It was not the first time evidence of Cherokee involvement in slavery had surfaced in print, nor were these the first or only advertisements for runaway slaves that were printed in the *Cherokee Phoenix*. What was different in 1832 was the unprecedented response the advertisements provoked in several eastern newspapers, which quickly ran articles noting their publication.

Several of the newspapers that responded to the slave advertisements used the opportunity to admonish abolitionists for their hypocritical support of slaveholding Indians. Two abolitionist editors also responded, perhaps in part to explain their continued support of the Cherokees in light of such glaring evidence of Indian involvement in slavery. On March 28, 1832, an article entitled “Cherokee Phoenix” appeared in the *Christian Soldier*, a Boston antislavery newspaper edited by Oliver Johnson. Johnson expressed his particular dismay with the advertisement for Jack, which he considered a betrayal of the antislavery movement’s unwavering support for the Indians’

antiremoval cause.

*We sympathize deeply with the persecuted Cherokees, and admire the firmness with which they resist the attempts of their cruel oppressors to deprive them of their dearest rights. But, in the midst of their own sufferings, can they be indifferent to the wrongs of their brethren, of a still darker hue, who are groaning under the yoke of servile bondage? And will they, while making their appeal to us...and while we are extending to them the arm of protection, assist in tightening the chains of the negro slave?*

Johnson's article highlights the inevitable tension that arose from supporting slaveholding Indians. Like other abolitionists, Johnson was sympathetic to the Cherokees' plight, but he was uncomfortable when confronted with direct evidence of their willingness to participate in the perpetuation of chattel slavery.

Johnson chastised the Cherokees for their participation in the capture and return of fugitive slaves in terms that reflected the paternalism characteristic of white-Indian relations since the colonial era. In official correspondence federal officials frequently rendered Indians as "children" in need of protection and parental guidance from their "Great White Father," without which they would fall prey to the influence of unsavory whites. Johnson adopts this tone, directly questioning the Indians' capacity to understand the moral implications of their actions. Here, the civilized Johnson gently scolds the partially civilized Boudinot for his choice to publish the advertisement in question: "Does not our Cherokee brother know, that by publishing this advertisement he becomes a participator in the guilt of man-stealing? And is he willing to countenance the wickedness of those who make merchandize of the bodies and souls of their fellow-men?"

Johnson's commentary also reveals his rather naïve view that the Cherokees, though participants in the Southern labor system of chattel slavery, had not also adopted its racial attitudes. Johnson suggested that as nonwhite peoples being oppressed by southern whites, Indians should naturally feel empathy for enslaved Africans, "their brethren of a still darker hue." But his suggestion would have greatly offended Cherokee leaders whose claim to civilization increasingly rested in part upon *not* being black. In 1829, Boudinot himself had denounced Georgia's disregard for Cherokee rights by stating that "Indians...are red, not black, and therefore cannot be treated with gross injustice like negro slaves." Rather than see their fates intertwined with African descended women and men, Cherokee leaders used an emerging racial hierarchy to distinguish themselves from blacks, whether free or enslaved.

Johnson did not directly condemn the ownership of slaves by Cherokee Indians; rather, he criticized their willingness to support the institution of slavery through the publication of runaway slave announcements in the *Cherokee Phoenix*. From Johnson's perspective, the Cherokees had unwittingly been compelled to assist white slaveholders in their determination to capture fugitive slaves;

that Indians themselves owned slaves was a fact that did not warrant his attention in this particular instance.

Although the Supreme Court's decision in *Worcester v. Georgia* greatly encouraged the Cherokees and antiremovalists, their initial joy quickly turned to disappointment. Within a very short time it became clear that the state of Georgia would not heed the court's ruling, nor did President Jackson have any intention of compelling it to do so. Unwilling to concede defeat, a Cherokee delegation that had been in Washington since late December continued to meet with supporters there.



Elias Boudinot, a portrait, artist and date unknown. Courtesy of the Research Division of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City.

Following the lectures in Boston, John Ridge and Elias Boudinot parted ways. Ridge gave two more lectures in Worcester and South Lee, Massachusetts, and then returned to Washington to assist the Cherokee delegation in their increasingly futile efforts to have the Supreme Court's ruling upheld. On April 3 he wrote from Washington to Chief John Ross to report on their successful tour, which had raised nearly \$2700. Boudinot, meanwhile, traveled alone to Salem for a final lecture, and then returned to Boston for an important meeting: On March 28, he went to speak to fellow editor William Lloyd Garrison. But Boudinot had not come to talk about Indian removal or the Supreme Court case, as might be expected given the present circumstances. Boudinot and Garrison had another topic to discuss: the recently published runaway slave advertisement for Jack. Slavery, not removal, was the reason for their meeting.

Garrison included his account of the meeting with Elias Boudinot in the next issue of the *Liberator*, printing it beneath the *Christian Soldier* article. Ordering the two articles in this way provided concerned antislavery readers with an explanation for Cherokee slaveholding, straight from a representative of the Cherokee Nation. "In our interview with Mr. Boudinot, the editor of the Cherokee Phoenix," Garrison wrote, "he stated that he was not the proprietor of

the paper, and consequently not responsible for the insertion of the advertisement referred to above." Furthermore, Boudinot "readily acknowledged the criminality of advertising human beings in this manner" which led Garrison to confidently declare that Boudinot would "immediately exert his influence" to end the practice of doing so in the *Phoenix*.

"We were not aware," Garrison continued, "until [Boudinot] informed us of the fact, that although some of the Cherokees are owners of slaves, slavery is unknown to the constitution and laws of the Cherokee nation, and is sanctioned only by custom." Finally, and most crucially, Boudinot asserted his own antipathy toward slavery, claiming that slavery was not universally accepted by the Cherokees and that it would soon be abolished among them. As Garrison happily reported to his readers, "[Boudinot] deprecated its existence, and joined with us in hoping that there might soon be moral power enough to overthrow it."

What is immediately evident from Garrison's account of their conversation is that Boudinot took the opportunity to construct a fable about slavery in the Cherokee Nation. Nearly everything he told Garrison at this meeting was untrue, or at best, a careful distortion of the truth. In an attempt to dodge responsibility for printing the advertisement in question, Boudinot asserted that he was not the proprietor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*. It was true that Boudinot did not oversee its publication at the time, but only because he was not in New Echota, the capital of the Cherokee Nation, where he edited and printed the paper. While in the East on the speaking tour, Boudinot had left the responsibility of editing the *Cherokee Phoenix* to his brother, Stand Watie, who was in charge when the advertisement in question was printed. But this one exception did not negate the many other times Boudinot had published similar material in the *Cherokee Phoenix*. He had presided over the insertion of such advertisements since 1828; not until Oliver Johnson and William Lloyd Garrison raised the issue did Boudinot feel compelled to explain their existence. Furthermore, while it was true that a minority of the Cherokees were slaveowners, those Indians who did own slaves were generally the most wealthy and politically influential citizens of the Nation, including Boudinot himself: Though Garrison did not know it, Boudinot and his family had been, until very recently, renting the services of a slave named July from his owner, a wealthy Cherokee slaveholder named George Lowrey.

Most outrageous of all was Boudinot's claim that the legal system of the Cherokee Nation did not protect slavery. Nothing could have been further from the truth. In 1827 the Cherokee Nation had written its own constitution, which included numerous provisions protecting the interests of slaveholders, including barring slaves and their descendants, free or enslaved, from holding office or voting. Many other laws including those against interracial marriage attest to the legal and political institutionalization of black chattel slavery in the Cherokee Nation. In 1828 Elias Boudinot had printed the Cherokee Constitution in its entirety in three concurrent issues of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, so faithful readers such as William Lloyd Garrison were well aware

that protection of private property, including slaves, was guaranteed by the Cherokees' legal system.

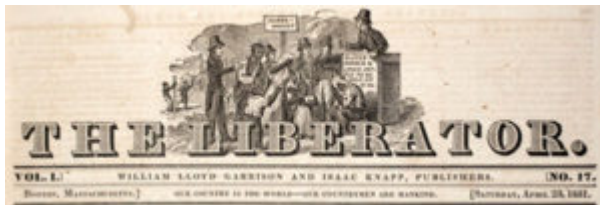
Finally, Boudinot had to explain how the Cherokees had become slaveowners. Unlike David Brown, who had argued that the institution of slavery had been imposed upon the Cherokees by white outsiders, Boudinot took a different approach, putting the blame for their acceptance of black chattel slavery squarely on Indian "custom." In a rare acknowledgement of an historical precedent for Indian slaveholding, Boudinot's assertion that slavery was "sanctioned only by custom" suggested that it was a remnant from the Cherokees' "savage" past. He continued by stating that the recently passed laws and constitution of the Cherokee Nation—which were part of the Cherokees' "civilized" future—did not contain any provisions respecting slavery. By referring to slavery as a "custom," Boudinot implied that it would eventually disappear like other "savage" practices that the Cherokees had successfully expunged through the process of civilization now underway. In many issues of the *Cherokee Phoenix* Boudinot had led his readers to draw a similar conclusion about the disappearance of older, "savage" Cherokee customs and their replacement with "civilized" practices.

Garrison was well aware that he was being misled. He had been an avid reader of the *Phoenix* for many years, often reprinting articles from it in the *Liberator*. He had had ample opportunity to read the laws of the Cherokee Nation that pertained to slavery as well as its proslavery constitution, all of which appeared in the *Phoenix* under Boudinot's editorship, to say nothing of the many advertisements for runaway slaves and slave auctions that had been printed in the paper since its founding. He could not have missed the periodic references to Cherokee slaveholding.

American history is full of unlikely alliances, but this conversation reveals one of the most surprising of the antebellum era. William Garrison, a radical abolitionist not known for his willingness to compromise on the issue of slavery, was making common cause with Elias Boudinot, a representative of a slaveholding Indian nation. Furthermore, Garrison willingly played along as Boudinot spun an elaborate story about slavery among the Cherokees that both men knew to be almost entirely untrue. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, Garrison nonetheless accepted Boudinot's explanation without question, and lent it credibility by printing it in his paper. Subsequent issues of the *Liberator* fail to mention the controversial slave advertisement, and the abolitionist editor continued to express his support for the Cherokees throughout the 1830s, printing antiremoval editorials, memorials and petitions in his paper long after many antiremovalists and even Boudinot himself had given up the cause.

Boudinot's motivation in creating such a fiction is not hard to surmise. Although his impression of the meeting in Boston is unknown, Boudinot's responses to Garrison's queries clearly show that he was all too aware of the Cherokees' perilous situation in the spring of 1832. The recent resolution of *Worcester v. Georgia* had exhausted the tribe's legal options and resulted in a

weakening of support for the antiremoval movement. In light of Georgia's refusal to follow the Supreme Court's ruling, many antiremovalists began to see the futility of further resistance and they encouraged the Cherokees to negotiate the best possible removal treaty. Not long after they returned home in May, Elias Boudinot and John Ridge, deeply dismayed by the disintegration of the antiremoval movement, also concluded that removal, though undesirable, was inevitable. By the end of 1832 even the two imprisoned missionaries had conceded defeat, and they ended their legal case by asking for and receiving a pardon from the governor of Georgia. But in March of 1832, at his meeting with Garrison, Boudinot still believed that preventing removal was possible so long as the Cherokees had the continued support of northern reformers, particularly influential leaders of the radical antislavery movement. Fearful that the Cherokee Nation would lose a crucial remaining source of support, Boudinot rendered Indian slaveholding in a way that soothed abolitionist anxieties raised by the slave advertisement.



The second masthead for William Lloyd Garrison's *Liberator* clearly illustrated his conviction that Indian removal and black chattel slavery were deeply intertwined issues. Masthead of *The Liberator* (second version, used beginning April 23, 1831), Boston, Massachusetts, Vol. I, No. 17, Saturday, April 23, 1831. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Abolitionists accepted that Cherokee slaveholding—at least in the short term—was compatible with and even evidence of civilization. The Cherokees' adoption of black chattel slavery, and the larger cultural, legal and political changes it wrought, proved their inherent capacity for progress. Because abolitionists did not believe slavery to be the basis of a civilized society, Indian slaveholding had to be merely an intermediary stage, not the end result of the process of civilization. But abolitionists needed reassurance that Indian slaveholding was different from white slaveholding, an assurance that Cherokee leaders happily provided. In the face of mounting evidence that slavery was growing in the Cherokee Nation and that the Cherokee elite was committed to its preservation, abolitionists like Garrison were willing co-conspirators in this charade. But their continued participation in this pretense was contingent upon what Elias Boudinot and other prominent Cherokees told them: that Indian slaveholding was marginal, different from that practiced by whites, the result of forces beyond their control, and, most crucially, temporary.

In their fight to end slavery, radical abolitionists found themselves in the strange position of not only allying with slaveholders, but even on occasion



defending slaveholding, a feat made possible by the skillful rhetorical work of Cherokee leaders determined to retain their homelands and maintain their national sovereignty.

## Further reading:

For more about the history of slavery among the Cherokees, a good place to begin is Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville, 1979), which traces the transition from indigenous forms of bondage to race-based chattel slavery. Another early study of black chattel slavery among the Cherokees is Rudi Halliburton, *Red Over Black: Black Slavery Among the Cherokee Indians* (Westport, Conn., 1977). Recent interest in the history of Indian slaveholding and the experiences of Indian-owned slaves has resulted in a proliferation of many excellent books. For those about the Cherokees in particular, see Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of An Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley, 2005), Fay Yarbrough, *Race and the Cherokee Nation: Sovereignty in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 2008), and Celia Naylor, *African Cherokees in Indian Territory: From Chattel to Citizens* (Chapel Hill, 2008). The most recent addition to this growing field is Christina Snyder's fascinating study of the varieties of captivity and slavery among the Indians of the Southeast, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge, 2010).

The first historian to explicitly link the rise of radical antislavery to the Indian removal debate is Mary Hershberger, in her excellent article, "Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s," *Journal of American History* 86 (June 1999), 15-40. For another interesting perspective on the intersection of antislavery and antiremoval concern in the antebellum U.S., see Christine Bolt, "The Anti-Slavery Origins of Concern for the American Indians," in *Anti-Slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Antsey*, ed. Christine Bolt, and Seymour Drescher (Folkestone, UK, 1980), 233-253. For the particular role that women played in the intersection of these two movements, see Alisse Portnoy, *Their Right to Speak: Women's Activism in the Indian and Slave Debates* (Cambridge, 2005). Finally, for how abolitionists thought about the interconnectedness of slavery and Indian removal, see Linda Kerber, "The Abolitionist Perception of the Indian," *Journal of American History*, 62 (Sept. 1975), 271-295.

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