

The Paradox of Progress: Cherokee Acculturation and Removal in the 19th Century

During the late-18th and early-19th centuries, the acculturation and assimilation of Native Americans living east of the Mississippi was viewed as a viable alternative to removal. Through a gradual process of education and Christianization, it was believed that Native Americans could be made fit to live within “civilized” white society. Once fully acculturated, the Natives and their tribal lands could then be peaceably absorbed into the United States and help the fledgling nation and its economy to grow and strengthen. Whether out of a genuine desire to adopt white cultural norms, a fear of removal, or some combination of the two, many of the Native American tribes living east of the Mississippi opted to participate in the acculturation process; the Cherokee stand out among them as having been particularly successful in their efforts.

This paper will examine the results of Cherokee acculturation and the effects they had on white-Cherokee relations leading up to the forcible Cherokee removal in 1838. Perhaps counterintuitively, it is my belief that acculturation was not the benign alternative to removal that it was and is presented as. Rather, it aggravated tensions between the Cherokee and white Americans while also causing political rifts and instability within the Cherokee Nation. In turn these factors led to increased popular support for Indian Removal policy among white Americans and weakened Cherokee resistance while facilitating and exacerbating the harsh conditions of the actual removal process. To understand how and why Cherokee acculturation had these effects, it is first important to understand two things: the history and reasoning behind acculturation as an alternative to removal and the way race, in regards to citizenship, was conceived during the antebellum period. The ideological dissonance between the two bridges the gaps of the obscured path from Cherokee acculturation to Cherokee removal.

Francis Paul Prucha provides a useful overview of acculturation efforts in chapter 5 of his seminal work *The Great Father*. He points to Thomas Jefferson as the “chief theorist”¹ of acculturation but notes that the belief that Native Americans should be civilized was commonly held even prior to the formation of the United States; a 1776 resolution called for the “propagation of the gospel, and the cultivation of the civil arts among the [Indians].”² Of course, “civilization” to white Americans, as Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green state in *The Cherokee Removal*, “was not an abstract concept” but meant “contemporary American culture.”³ All future uses of “civilization” and its derived terms will refer to this particular definition. Jefferson and his peers believed that Native Americans were fundamentally equal to whites and their apparent uncivilized state was a result of their environment rather than any inherent defect. In their minds then, white Americans had a responsibility to guide the Native Americans towards civilization and protect them from destruction, the believed to be inevitable fate of an uncivilized people that came into contact with a civilized one.⁴ Early efforts by the government to civilize Native Americans through the provision of agricultural equipment and livestock began with George Washington in the 1790s and expanded through the 1820s.⁵ This was not only the fulfillment of a moral obligation but also a step in a long-term plan to peacefully acquire Native American lands termed “expansion with honor” wherein the newly-civilized Native Americans would willingly cede their lands to accommodate the growing white American population.⁶

The Enlightenment-influenced approach to acculturation was not the only one that existed though nor was it the most important. Prucha notes the enormous impact of evangelical Christianity on

¹ Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians*, (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 139.

² Ibid 140.

³ Theda Perdue, and Michael D. Green, *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 11.

⁴ Prucha, *The Great Father*, 137.

⁵ Ibid 140, 143.

⁶ Perdue, *The Cherokee Removal*, 10.

Native American policy. Christian missionaries along with government agents would become the most important disseminators of Western culture among the Native Americans.⁷ Missionary efforts tended to be centered on moral education and conversion. It was understood by both the government and the church that Christianity was intrinsic to civilization and therefore was a necessary component of acculturation.⁸ A majority of acculturation efforts by both the government and the church were carried out under the auspices Thomas L. McKenney, Superintendent of Indian Trade, later Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and devout evangelical Christian. McKenney, as described by Prucha was an ardent believer in acculturation who worked closely with missionary societies to establish a network of school for Native Americans and lobbied the federal government to increase funding for civilization efforts which he defended passionately from critics of acculturation.⁹ By 1830, frustrated by his lack of success, McKenney began to support voluntary removal west as a means for Native Americans to preserve themselves from white encroachment and complete the acculturation process in peace.¹⁰

Based on McKenney's stance in 1830, we can see that at least by that time, acculturation was not incompatible with removal. The notion that Native Americans should be removed westward and then peacefully acculturate was known as benevolent colonization among its white supporters. Nicholas Guyatt provides us with an overview of the reasoning behind benevolent colonization. As Prucha had noted, many Americans believed in the equality or at least the potential for equality between all races. What he does not mention except in regards to Thomas McKenney is that most white Americans also believed whites and non-whites could not coexist in the same place. Guyatt argues that unlike McKenney whose belief in this notion was the product of his own failures, most white Americans were

⁷ Prucha, *The Great Father*, 142.

⁸ Ibid 146.

⁹ Ibid 149-152.

¹⁰ Ibid 154.

simply uncomfortable with the idea due to deep-seated racial prejudices.¹¹ He claims that benevolent colonization was therefore a way to resolve a paradox in beliefs and not reflective of a “mature racism”¹² among whites. A case could reasonably be made then that acculturation and removal were concurrent, synergistic approaches to dealing with the Native American question by the 1820s. As such, acculturation might be seen as synonymous with removal meaning the advancement of acculturation was necessarily also the advancement of removal. However, it should be acknowledged that by the 1820s the Enlightenment view of equality was beginning to give way to the idea that racial differences were inherent and immutable.¹³ Given how prevalent this mode of thinking had become by the 1830s, it is perhaps more logical to treat the relationship between acculturation and removal as causal rather than complementary as this paper will do.

These new, rather sinister, understandings about intrinsic racial difference emerged concurrently with the rethinking of white identity and citizenship. That non-white people became thought of as inherently inferior at the same time white supremacy essentially became law is unlikely to be a coincidence. Prior to the Jacksonian period of American politics beginning in the 1820s, voting rights and therefore full citizenship was linked to what Robert Wiebe calls “individuation through industry”¹⁴ also known as landownership and was therefore exclusive to the middle and upper class landed gentry with some exceptions made for urban master craftsmen. This was a version of aristocratic rule which Wiebe does not believe should be considered democratic. However, this political system proved to be unsustainable as the number of landowners and craftsmen decreased throughout the early

¹¹ Nicholas Guyatt, “The Outskirts of Our Happiness: Race and the Lure of Colonization in the Early Republic,” *Journal of American History*, no. 4 (200): 988.

¹² *Ibid* 987.

¹³ Theda Perdue, “Indian Removal,” *History Now* 28 (Summer 2011), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed October 20th, 2014. <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/american-indian-history/essays/indian-removal>.

¹⁴ Robert Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 14.

years of the 19th century thanks to demographic and market pressures.¹⁵ In order to re-enfranchise the growing population of wage laborers and “[raise] all whites to the position of true social and political that they deserved, as freeborn Americans,”¹⁶ voting rights were gradually extended by state governments to all white men exclusive of economic status.¹⁷ By explicitly limiting full citizenship to white men, these new voting laws completely shut out people of color where previous ones might have allowed for the inclusion of an exceptional few among them. So while this new definition of citizenship did not affect the actual ability of non-whites to participate in the political process to any great extent, it established an implicit racial hierarchy backed by the force of law wherein whiteness was a qualification not only necessary for citizenship but also personhood.

The subtle dehumanization of non-white people under the revised definition of citizenship was what allowed for the formation of benevolence, a key institution of white antebellum culture and a primary motivator in civilian efforts to acculturate the Cherokee.¹⁸ In her introduction to *The Grammar of Good Intentions*, Susan Ryan offers an analysis of antebellum benevolence that is useful to understanding certain aspects of antebellum race relations which in turn will help illuminate how Cherokee acculturation would have increased popular support for removal. According to Ryan, benevolence during the antebellum period was viewed as the responsibility of the privileged towards the degraded, who were looked upon as the “most dangerous elements”¹⁹ of the United States. This belief echoed that of the politicians who posited that the civilized had a duty to the uncivilized. Uplifting them would minimize their threat to white, middle-class society. Benevolence though, required its practitioners to consciously separate themselves and maintain a mental distance from their

¹⁵ Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006) 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 22

¹⁷ Wiebe, *Self-Rule*, 15.

¹⁸ Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

beneficiaries based on distinctions of class, race, or both. In the case of the Cherokee, this was possible because voting laws had drawn rigid boundaries between them and white Americans.

White American efforts to acculturate the Cherokee, whether fueled by benevolence or political considerations proved to be highly successful, probably more successful than was imagined possible or even desired given the insidious racism of the antebellum period. By the 1820s, Cherokee society greatly resembled white society, particularly southern society.²⁰ Residents of New Echota, the capital of Cherokee territory, compared their settlement favorably to thriving northern cities like New Haven and Baltimore.²¹ In a speech delivered in 1826, Elias Boudinot, prominent Cherokee leader and proponent of acculturation, exhorted white Americans to reconsider their thinking of the Cherokee as savages citing the immense progress they had made in civilization up until that point. He listed the amounts of livestock and industrial materials the Cherokee possessed as signs of their economic development and the noted presence of books, schools, and Bibles as well as shifting social mores as evidence of Cherokee advancement in education and morality.²² If Boudinot's statements were accurate, the material wealth and moral character of the Cherokee nation by 1826 would have seemed considerably great to white Americans of the time. Boudinot's hope was to convince white Americans that the Cherokee should not be removed or otherwise exterminated because doing so would destroy that progress, something he believed that white Americans would not want on their conscience especially given how closely Cherokee society was then mirroring white society. In the context of benevolence, this was not an unreasonable belief on Boudinot's part; the benevolence which motivated acculturation efforts was at least partially the result of white American guilt over their roles in perpetuating unjust social

²⁰ Mary Young, "The Cherokee Nation: Mirror of the Republic," *American Quarterly*, 33, no. 5 (1981): 509.

²¹ *Ibid* 507.

²² Elias Boudinot, "An Address to the Whites" (speech, Philadelphia, May 26th 1826), National Humanities Center, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/triumphnationalism/expansion/text3/addresswhites.pdf>

institutions.²³ However, white guilt itself was a product of the period's powerful, systemic white supremacy. Assuaging that guilt through benevolence was not intended to dismantle that racial hierarchy but to soften its presence in white American minds, thereby allowing for its continued existence. Boudinot's plea therefore represented a fundamental misunderstanding of the values of white America.

Protecting white identity and the racial hierarchy was of far greater importance than protecting the interests of minority groups like the Cherokee which Boudinot had yet to recognize in 1826. The perpetuation of slavery in the South might be taken as *prima facie* evidence of this fact. Ironically, the reasons Boudinot gave for why the Cherokee should not be removed, their level of acculturation and in particular the wealth they had amassed, were direct threats to the white supremacist framework and consequently, were reasons to support rather than reject removal policy. This was another instance of serious misjudgment on Boudinot's part that indicates a level of naïveté about race and politics in antebellum America. What he had failed to realize was the resentment that the presence of prosperous, civilized Cherokee people would have fostered in white southerners and the cognitive dissonance it would have introduced that challenged the racial hierarchy established by the redefined terms and conditions of citizenship.

The new strain of racist thinking that emerged alongside revised voting laws during the 1820s posited that acculturation efforts were a waste of time and that there would never be place in civilized society for Native Americans.²⁴ Compared to them, white men were the naturally superior group for whom political participation was a birthright.²⁵ However, the United States was not yet so far removed in time from the previous wealth-based political hierarchy that anxieties over class and status would

²³ Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions*, 5.

²⁴ Perdue, *The Cherokee Removal*, 15.

²⁵ Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 34.

have ceased to exist. Large plantation owners could be secure in their positions on the top of the racial and social totem pole with their wealth as their guarantor. Even small slaveholders could ease their fears through their domination over their slaves. However, two-thirds of white southern households owned no slaves at all and lived their lives teetering on the edge of poverty.²⁶ For these poor white southerners, the ideological and political distinctions between them and non-whites like the Cherokee were the only things that allowed them to maintain their pride and dignity amid the turbulent antebellum economy. Cherokee prosperity due to acculturation called the validity of the racist beliefs that upheld white identity into question.

In addition to Boudinot's 1826 speech, the wealth of the Cherokee Nation in the 1820s and 1830s can be gauged by the claims of material loss Cherokee households and individuals registered with removal agents in 1838. The wealthiest of the Cherokee elite registered losses of extensive real property and commercial businesses valued at over ten –thousand dollars in exceptional cases. Others of lower economic were forced to leave behind respectable amounts of personal goods and livestock.²⁷ If acculturation efforts were truly a waste of time and Native Americans were incapable of civilization, surely such a level of material wealth would have been impossible. This was a direct refutation of the principles on which white supremacy was based which challenged the notion that whiteness ought to be prerequisite for citizenship. It is not difficult to imagine the combination of shame and resentment the majority of white southerners felt while witnessing the successes of a supposedly inferior race juxtaposed with their own failures. Removal would have been the most viable resolution to this insecurity of identity as it would eliminate visible Cherokee defiance of racial norms thus allowing for the unchallenged continuation of the white supremacist framework.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

²⁷ Young, *The Cherokee Nation*, 517-518.

The results of Cherokee acculturation also went beyond basic physical manifestations of wealth and economic growth to include the abstract reconceptualization of group identity and nationhood which was threatening in its own way. By 1810, the Cherokee had shed their previous understanding of collective identity which was based on a traditional clan system and had begun to think of themselves as being members of a sovereign Cherokee Nation.²⁸ This shift was not only another step in the acculturation process as Cherokee society grew to increasingly resemble white society, but also a defense mechanism intended to unify and strengthen the Cherokee people so they could better protect themselves from the enormous pressures being exerted on them by the United States and its citizens to either completely abandon their Native American identities or their ancestral lands.²⁹ In 1827, the Cherokee completed the transition to nationhood when they adopted a new constitution that explicitly declared the Cherokee Nation to be a sovereign state and laid claim to specific tracts of land. This was decidedly not the end goal that white American proponents of acculturation policies had had in mind. Thomas Jefferson had envisioned the Native Americans completely giving themselves and their land over to the United States once they had been educated in the white way of life.³⁰ He and others of like mind had not anticipated that acculturation would actually empower the Cherokee to become a culturally and geographically distinct nation in its own right with all the trappings of legitimacy in place thanks to what they had learned from their white teachers.

A separate, sovereign Cherokee Nation with its own constitution threatened the authority of the United States government at both state and federal levels. Not only that but it would also leave highly desirable land in Cherokee hands, the exact opposite of what all Native American policies were

²⁸ Cynthia Cumfer, *Separate Peoples, One Land: The Minds of Cherokees, Blacks, and Whites on the Tennessee Frontier*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 17.

²⁹ *Ibid* 232.

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson to William Henry Harrison, February 27th 1803, in *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) 22.

attempting to achieve. By encouraging acculturation among the Cherokee and exposing them to Western political structures, the government and the people of the United States had essentially handed the Cherokees a weapon they could use to fight off white encroachment. While little has been written that directly points to negative white response to Cherokee acculturation as a factor in removal, several scholars have made note of this irony.³¹Of course, the Cherokee were not guaranteed any victories in the battle for their rights. Their constitution and legal savvy were double-edged swords that could offer them temporary reprieve and a sense of security but also provoked the wrath of a powerful enemy. The 1827 constitution represented a particularly bold affront to the power of both state and federal governments. An 1829 letter from Secretary of War John Eaton to a Cherokee delegation explained how the constitution had aggravated the Cherokee's relationship with the state of Georgia and President Jackson's response to the situation. Notably, the Cherokee Nation was involved in two Supreme Court cases against Georgia in 1831 and 1832 over their sovereign status which went on to affect the nature of removal policy as a whole. While the 1827 constitution was not the beginning of tensions between Georgia and the Cherokee, it should be seen as a catalyst in their relationship that galvanized support for removal.

Eaton was eager to portray Georgia and the United States as victims in their dealings with the Cherokee while maintaining the power dynamics of the relationship. He described Georgia as acting with "mildness and forbearance"³² in her 1802 agreement with the federal government to cede tracts of her land in exchange for Cherokee lands as soon as they could be peaceably obtained. Eaton blamed the Cherokee's adoption of the 1827 constitution and their declaration of sovereignty for causing Georgia to abandon her "forbearance" and take up a more aggressive stance. Georgia governor George

³¹ Cumfer, *Separate Peoples, One Land*, 232; Perdue, "Indian Removal."

³²John Eaton to Cherokee Delegation, April 18th 1829, *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) 45.

Gilmer had written multiple letters to Congress agitating for removal citing the violation of Georgia's sovereignty by the Cherokee Nation.³³ His use of this sort of rhetoric was consistent with the notion that the United States and white Americans in general were paternalistic benefactors. The Cherokee in this case took on the role disobedient children who were actively working against themselves. Framing the situation in this manner made Cherokee sovereignty appear like a foolish mistake by a group of myopic naïfs. Eaton went on to encourage the Cherokee on behalf of Andrew Jackson to voluntarily remove themselves to escape Georgia's rightful assertions of control. Removal here was presented as an ideal solution being offered by a generous and sympathetic government to an undeserving people. President Jackson and other advocates of removal were described as holding only "friendly feelings"³⁴ towards the Cherokee and were said to have their best interests at heart. Once settled west of the Mississippi, the Cherokee could then be free of their conflicts with Georgia and live and advance their society in peace. While this was an actual viewpoint held by supporters of benevolent colonization, it rings a bit false when attributed to President Jackson, the man who had spoken so lowly of Native Americans in his address to Congress. Eaton's use of these arguments for removal might then be seen as a façade intended disguise the federal government's ruthless expansionism and less-than-noble intentions towards the Cherokee. However, because Eaton utilized this kind of disingenuous rhetoric, he managed to establish a direct causal link between acculturation and removal that actually did have some basis in reality.

After stripping away its paternalistic veneer, what remains of Eaton's letter is an unambiguous condemnation of Cherokee sovereignty and a push towards removal in response. Its assertions that the 1827 constitution was an insult to Georgia's powers as a state were probably true given the provisions

³³ Theda Perdue, "The Conflict Within: The Cherokee Power Structure and Removal," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 73, no. 3 (1989): 467.

³⁴ Eaton to Cherokee Delegation, 46.

of the 1802 treaty mentioned as well as the antebellum focus on states' rights and belief in white American hegemony. This letter and the earlier one from the Cherokee delegation to Eaton contained evidence enough to suggest that tensions with Georgia had heightened following the constitution's adoption. It is not a stretch then to say that those tensions inflamed existing pro-removal sentiment in Georgia and within the federal government. Eaton's push for removal might have been insincere about its intentions but reflected a genuine increase in desire for removal. That increase was not due to concern but anger and fear over the growing legitimacy of the Cherokee Nation, its defiance of the United States' power, and the implications that held for land acquisition.

The political threat posed Cherokee sovereignty and the social and ideological threats posed by Cherokee prosperity converged in another, highly personal, highly inflammatory arena. In an 1803 letter to U.S. Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins, then-President Thomas Jefferson articulated a vision for Native American acculturation and assimilation wherein whites and Natives would "blend together...intermix, and become one people."³⁵ These words appear to euphemistically refer to interracial sex. Here, Jefferson and by extension, Hawkins, acknowledge that if Native Americans were to be fully integrated into white society, intermarriage was inevitable. That Jefferson relied on such indirect language to convey this indicates both his own reluctance to address this fact and recognition of the wider disapproval of intermarriage, particularly between white women and men of color. In a period of codified white male supremacy like the early 19th century, relationships between white men and women of color carried overtones of dominance that nullified most of the potential threat they might have posed to the established racial hierarchy; the opposite was a disruption of that hierarchy. White womanhood was a sacred pillar of white identity and protecting it was integral to white masculine

³⁵ Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Hawkins, Feb. 18th 1803, *Documents of United States Indian Policy*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) 45.

identity in particular.³⁶ Therefore, a Native American man becoming involved with a white woman could have easily been construed as an actively hostile rebellion against the power-holding social elite as well as against the accepted norms of racial behavior. Because of this, even the most liberal-minded whites were liable to hold certain deep-seated racial prejudices when it came to issues of sex and marriage. So great was the disapproval and fear of interracial sex that a new derogatory term for it, "miscegenation," was coined in 1863 as part of Democratic smear tactics.³⁷ Despite its racist connotations, I will be using the term "miscegenation" in my discussion of white-Cherokee relationships to reflect certain attitudes towards interracial sex. The town of Cornwall, Connecticut provides a good example of how white communities reacted to relationships between Cherokee men and white women.

In 1824 and 1826, Cornwall was rocked with scandal when the daughters of two of its prominent white families married Cherokee men. Both couples had come together through the town's Foreign Mission School. Established in 1817 and closed in 1826 or 1827 due to loss of community support following the two marriage scandals, the Foreign Mission School was established to gather so-called heathens in white, European-American territory to immerse and educate them in Christianity and Western culture.³⁸ Here, it is helpful to think of the Foreign Mission School as an institution founded in the tradition of antebellum benevolence. John Ridge and Elias Boudinot, the Cherokee men in question, were both promising students at the school whose teachers praised them for their aptitude and willingness to acculturate as well as respectable members of Cherokee society.³⁹ It was believed by the school and its supporters that the two as well as their fellow students would return to their homes and act as missionaries of sorts to spread civilization among their own people. This was the ideal outcome

³⁶ Theresa Strouth Gaul, *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 11.

³⁷ Sidney Kaplan, "The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864," *The Journal of Negro History*, 34, no. 3 (1949): 277.

³⁸ Gaul, *To Marry an Indian*, 4.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 6-7.

that “benevolent” antebellum northerners were working towards rather than full assimilation of the Cherokee through intermarriage as Jefferson had previously envisioned. Ross and Boudinot shattered that ideal when they chose white rather than Cherokee women as their wives. By doing so, they were closing some of the unspoken social distance established by white political supremacy between benevolent and the beneficiary; something similar occurred when the Cherokee elite began to appear uncomfortably prosperous to white Americans. Benevolence, as previously stated, was partially an assertion of superiority and could safely be practiced only if that distance existed since otherwise it would “threaten the identity of the giver,” and “ultimately, make helper and helped the same.”⁴⁰ The problem was that the distance that sustained benevolence was incompatible with the Enlightenment and evangelical Christian vision of an integrated white-Native American society that Jefferson and others had put forth since it was predicated on inherent racial differences. If acculturation was therefore untenable on this basis, removal was the only remaining alternative.

Following the announcement of Boudinot and Gold’s engagement in 1825, a flurry of letters were exchanged by members of Gold’s family who almost unanimously expressed extreme disapproval at the news. Notably, it is Gold’s male relatives who were the harshest in their responses, indicative of their masculine responsibility to protect white womanhood and uphold their race but also their relative inability to empathize with the feminine. Stephen Gold, Harriett’s brother, went so far as to join the townspeople of Cornwall in burning effigies of his sister and Boudinot to condemn the engagement.⁴¹ As white men, Gold’s male relatives held political power and were responsible for constructing and maintaining the hierarchy.⁴² Therefore, their testimonies are of particular interest since they express the feelings of those who had the most ability to influence political and social situations. The contents of the

⁴⁰ Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions*, 19.

⁴¹ Gaul, *To Marry an Indian*, 1.

⁴² *Ibid*, 31.

letters they wrote reveal the depth of anti-miscegenation attitudes and racial prejudice among even the most benevolent and apparently liberal-minded white American men.

A short letter dating June 11th, 1825 to his sister Flora Vaill and brother-in-law Herman Vaill, Stephen Gold revealed to them that Harriett and Elias had become engaged. His shock is made extremely apparent in less than a page of writing. In the first sentence, Gold declared that “Harriett is gone” and punctuates the news with “O!! dear!!!”⁴³ He also reported that Board of Agents for the Foreign Mission School were “as white as sheets” when they heard about the engagement. It seems to have been an entirely unexpected event that was met with dread rather than excitement. A few weeks after news of the engagement had been spread among members of the Gold family and the community of Cornwall, Daniel Brinsmade, brother-in-law of Harriett Gold sent another letter to Flora and Herman Vaill. By this point, the initial shock and inability to process events that characterized Stephen Gold’s letter had likely worn off, allowing Brinsmade to articulate an actual objection to the engagement. He writes: “I have not words to express my indignation at the whole proceeding – the whole family are to be sacrificed to gratify if I may so express it the animal feeling of one – of its members.”⁴⁴ Here, Brinsmade use of the term “animal feeling” attributes a certain baseness to his sister-in-law’s choice to marry a Cherokee man which reveals some of his racial prejudice. Terms like “animal” and “savage” were often used to describe Native Americans and paint them as inferior. Brinsmade was ostensibly not a typical bigot who would use this kind of racialized language. As an agent of the Foreign Mission School he would have been aware of how civilized students of the school, Boudinot among them, were.⁴⁵ His

⁴³ Stephen Gold to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, June 11th, 1825, *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839* ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 81.

⁴⁴ Daniel Brinsmade to Herman and Flora Gold Vaill, June 29th 1825, *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839* ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 89.

⁴⁵ Gaul, *To Marry an Indian*, 5.

response makes sense though if we consider that Brinsmade, as an agent of the school, believed in benevolence and therefore believed in a fundamental divide between races even if their equality in achievement suggested otherwise. Brinsmade's letter also made known that the reputation of the entire Gold family would suffer and that he, as a man, was highly aware of that fact. As with the burning of the effigies and the town of Cornwall's general response to the engagement, this was evidence of just how unacceptable Harriett Gold and Elias Boudinot's impending union was; it was so egregious that it was capable of spreading its taint through mere association.

The most forceful response to the engagement came from Herman Vaill, Harriett's brother-in-law who the two letters above were addressed to. Vaill was assistant principal at the Foreign Mission School and had personally taught Elias Boudinot meaning he, like Brinsmade, was a believer in benevolence and was familiar with Boudinot's character and accomplishments. Unlike Brinsmade though, Vaill was extremely careful not to reveal his own latent racial prejudices; he commends Boudinot for his "talents, for his diligence in study... [and] for his hopeful piety."⁴⁶ Constrained by his public stance on racial equality, Vaill was forced to resort to other rhetorical tactics to dissuade Harriett from going through with her marriage. Vaill's letter advanced two primary arguments: firstly, by marrying a Cherokee man, Harriett was betraying the missionary cause and secondly, the union would bring shame upon the Foreign Mission School and vindicate its opponents. In regards to his first argument, Vaill never managed to provide an adequate explanation as to how the marriage would betray the missionary cause which proves that his Christian moralizing was merely a pretense, probably to disguise his racial prejudice. His second argument is familiar; the notion that the union would bring shame to those associated with the couple was put forth by Brinsmade as well. It was an accurate observation as well. Vaill had been witness to the fallout from the previous year's marriage of John

⁴⁶Herman Vaill to Harriett Gold, June 29th, 1825, *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold & Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839 ed.* Theresa Strouth Gaul (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 92.

Ridge to a white woman and could have accurately predicted how the Boudinot-Gold wedding would affect the school's reputation. What is most interesting about Vaill's second argument though is his point that the engagement would play into the hands of "the enemy."⁴⁷ It is not explicitly stated who "the enemy" is but it can be reasonably inferred that Vaill meant opponents of the school and therefore opponents of acculturation since he states that they had "prophesied ill of the cause of Missions."⁴⁸ More revealing is that Vaill immediately follows this with "they have prophesied ill concerning you."⁴⁹ This suggests that there had already been misgivings about the potential for miscegenation concerning Harriett and possibly other white women involved with the school.

The marriage of Elias Boudinot and Harriett Gold would not have been as threatening to the white-constructed social infrastructure if the Cherokee had not been so acculturated and if the Cherokee Nation was not so dangerously close to legitimating their sovereignty. To understand why, it is helpful here to compare reactions to white-Cherokee relationships and reactions to black-white relationships. Martha Hodes writes that liaisons between black men and white women during the era of slavery were treated with toleration by most Southern whites. She makes a distinction between tolerance and mere toleration as white women who took black partners were still subject to criticism and ostracism by their communities even if they were not persecuted outright.⁵⁰ Even this small level of grudging acceptance was only possible due to the legal framework of slavery. Black men under slavery were part of an official inferior class and virtually devoid of agency. As slaves then, they posed very little threat to white identity and the racialized southern power structure. However, in the years following emancipation and the America Civil War, toleration gave way to hostility. Hodes notes that during this

⁴⁷ Ibid 97.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Hodes, Martha. *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the 19th-Century South*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) 3.

period, white southerners had to rely on the distinctions between black and white rather than free and slave to uphold their racial caste system. It was then that relationships between black men and white women began to pose a real social threat because of the way they blurred already tenuous racial boundaries. It should be emphasized here that the special status of white women was crucial to constructing white identity.⁵¹ Consequently, “white people fastened on the taboo of sex between black men and white women with newfound urgency.”⁵² It is evident then that the more equal people of color were with white Americans, the more their participation in intermarriage threatened dominant notions of white supremacy. The Cherokee as a whole had never been enslaved by white Americans and while they were barred from citizenship, they were still ostensibly an autonomous people rather than a deferential underclass. Their “progress” in civilization along with their 1827 constitution put them on par with whites in a manner that went beyond what emancipation would do for the status of black Americans post-Civil War. Intermarriage between white women and Cherokee men was therefore incredibly dangerous during the antebellum period especially considering that slavery was still holding one racial dichotomy in place.

The Boudinot-Gold marriage likely increased paranoia over miscegenation within the town of Cornwall. The closing of the Foreign Mission School shortly afterwards suggests that this was indeed the case. After all, two Cherokee men had met and married white women through the school over the course of three years, it was only matter of time before it happened again. Acculturation had given non-white men sexual access to white women and it had the potential to continue doing so. Closing the school was the first logical step towards preventing further instances of miscegenation. Of course, it was also a tacit withdrawal of support for acculturation by the community. Again, these were northerners who believed in benevolence and ostensibly believed that the Cherokee were capable of civilization.

⁵¹ Gaul, *To Marry and Indian*, 11.

⁵² Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, 147.

That they were willing to give up these beliefs as soon as their white identity was threatened indicates just how deep their racial prejudices ran and how important whiteness was during the antebellum period. It might also be used as a yardstick for how anti-miscegenation sentiments would have impacted attitudes towards the Cherokee on a wider scale. If they were strong enough for northern liberals to reject acculturation as a viable way of dealing with the Cherokee, they certainly would have been strong enough to strengthen support for removal in the South where whiteness and the racial hierarchy were of greater-than-normal importance. This is significant as Cherokee territory was after all, firmly situated in the South and many of the Cherokee Nation's conflicts over removal were with the state of Georgia. Fear of miscegenation would have only fueled the already existing desire for removal among the white southerners that the Cherokee had the most contact with while eroding the resolve of their defenders.

While acculturation did much to inflame white-Cherokee relations and turn white Americans against the Cherokee, it also turned the Cherokee against themselves thus weakening the Nation and leaving it susceptible to political attacks from the United States government. The socialization of Elias Boudinot and men like him among white Americans was one source of the Cherokee Nation's internal weakness as were the 1827 constitution and Christian missionary efforts. Following their marriage, Boudinot and Gold returned to New Echota where he wrote and spoke extensively against removal. His 1826 address demonstrated that he was still naively optimistic about the future of the Cherokee and the goodwill of white Americans. This changed abruptly in 1832; after returning home from a fundraising trip around America, Boudinot signed a petition in support of removal.⁵³ It is unclear exactly what brought about this change of heart but it is commonly agreed that Boudinot recognized the inevitability of removal. Mary Young argues that this realization was caused by Boudinot's close encounters with white racism during his time spent amid white society both in Cornwall and his later travels. This

⁵³ Bethany Schneider, "Boudinot's Change: Boudinot, Emerson, and Ross on Cherokee Removal," *ELH*, 75, no. 1 (2008): 152.

allowed him to understand the depths of anti-Cherokee prejudice in way that the less acculturated could not.⁵⁴ Alternatively, Theda Perdue claims that Boudinot's newfound support for removal was caused by his inability to accept his own Cherokee identity after succumbing to external social pressures from white Americans and the United States government in general.⁵⁵ Either way, Boudinot's acculturation is acknowledged as a significant factor in his decision to support removal. This understanding can reasonably be applied to other pro-removal Cherokee who, like Boudinot, participated in the acculturation process.

While it is likely that many of the Cherokee among the pro-removal faction acknowledged the inevitability of removal the way Boudinot did to some degree, most of them did not have the same level of exposure to white society. The measure of pro-removal sentiment that this might preclude can be accounted for by the economic inequality of the Cherokee Nation and the reinforcement thereof by the 1827 constitution, both products of a more general and widespread form of acculturation. In general, the poorer Cherokee were the least willing to remove. They made up a majority of the Cherokee population and their anti-removal stance was supported by Principal Chief John Ross and most other members of the elite Cherokee leadership. If these wealthy men wanted to retain their power within the Cherokee Nation, they were required to respect majority interests even if they did not necessarily benefit them.⁵⁶ However, they also sought to protect their status through the constitution which officially concentrated political power in the hands of the economic elite.⁵⁷ Under the power of the constitution, the ruling class could govern the economy of the Cherokee Nation in accordance with their own interests effectively shutting out large segments of the population from positions of power. Divisions among class lines were reinforced by the plurality of Protestant missionary efforts that each

⁵⁴ Young, *The Cherokee Nation*, 521-522.

⁵⁵ Schneider, *Boudinot's Change*, 156.

⁵⁶ Young, *The Cherokee Nation*, 518-519.

⁵⁷ Perdue, *The Conflict Within*, 474

targeted different economic segments of the Cherokee population.⁵⁸ This rigid class separation did not go unnoticed. The new economic structure of the Cherokee Nation introduced by acculturation efforts had fostered a desire for wealth and privilege among certain groups that might not have existed before. These groups, who Theda Perdue calls the “rising middle class” of the Cherokee, were wealthier than “common Indians” but were still unable to access the upper echelons of Cherokee society and resented that fact.⁵⁹ It was this middle class who “saw in the removal issue an opportunity to usurp political authority and win and reap rewards and concessions from the United States.”⁶⁰ The Cherokee middle class, products as well as victims of economic acculturation, therefore formed the backbone of the pro-removal faction.

It was the existence of this pro-removal faction that led to the 1835 signing of the Treaty of New Echota which officially ceded all Cherokee lands to the United States government. The Treaty of New Echota provided the legal basis for the forcible removal of the Cherokee in 1838 and its signing is rightfully looked upon as the act that sealed Cherokee removal. The United States government was aware that the Cherokee Nation was divided on the issue of acculturation and took advantage of the presence of a minority political faction and some ambiguous wording of a Cherokee council decision to push the Treaty of New Echota through.⁶¹ In its preamble, the treaty established the small delegation of pro-removal Cherokee as a recognized decision-making body of the Cherokee Nation and declared them to be fully empowered to sign a treaty on behalf of their people.⁶² This was not the case as John Ross later made explicitly clear in his petition to Congress protesting the Treaty of New Echota; the

⁵⁸ Schneider, *Boudinot's Change*, 172-173.

⁵⁹ Perdue, *The Conflict Within*, 479-482.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 483.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 485.

⁶² Treaty with the Cherokee, 1835, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties Vol. II Treaties*, ed. Charles J. Kappler (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1904), 439-440.

delegation had not been authorized to represent the Cherokee Nation.⁶³ Of the twenty-five signees, at least two-thirds could be considered to be a part of the Cherokee middle class who presumably supported removal as a means of personal gain. This was not a coincidence; the government had identified members of the middle class as the most open to removal and specifically targeted them for negotiations.⁶⁴ The contents of the treaty seem to have been formulated to appeal directly to this group of acculturated Cherokee as they protected the values of the most acculturated while providing for future opportunities for economic advancement.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the treaty also included an article that implicitly allowed for the utilization of force to remove the Cherokee following a two-year grace period during which the Cherokee had the opportunity to voluntarily remove themselves.⁶⁶ Because the Cherokee Nation did not recognize this as a valid treaty, many did not remove themselves prior to the 1838 deadline and were rounded up and forced westward under brutal conditions wherein thousands perished from cold, starvation, and illness. Had acculturation not divided the Cherokee among themselves, the level of adversity they faced during their removal might have been avoided. If the Cherokee Nation remained united in their stance towards removal they could have negotiated better terms than the ones provided by the Treaty of New Echota. They could have accepted the need to voluntarily remove if a treaty was signed that had the full support of the Cherokee Nation, and bypassed the hardships that resistance created for them in 1838. While it is impossible to know how Cherokee history might have been different had acculturation not had the weakening effects it did, these are not unreasonable speculations.

⁶³ John Ross to Congress, September 28th 1836, *The Papers of Chief John Ross, vol 1, 1807-1839* ed. Gary E. Moulton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

⁶⁴ Perdue, *The Conflict Within*, 486-489

⁶⁵ Treaty with the Cherokee, 442-444

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 446.

Traditional narratives point to American expansionism and economically-motivated land hunger in the early 19th century to explain Cherokee removal. This is certainly an accurate understanding of circumstances but it is also one that ignores the removal-encouraging effects of Cherokee acculturation on white Americans as well as the Cherokee themselves. Acculturation created a Cherokee Nation that no one had though possible. It was a nation of Cherokee men who could rival their white counterparts in wealth, education, and piety. It was a nation that could make a legitimate claim to self-rule and a nation that defied unspoken social taboos. That was terrifying to white Americans. In their efforts to conquer the Cherokee through civilization, they had created a monster that threatened their identities and challenged their government. The only effective weapon they had to defend themselves and their worldviews was removal. In a cruel irony, one of many in the saga of acculturation and removal, Cherokee factionalism from acculturation is what made removal possible.

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