

Cherokee leaders speak

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As you read...

We don't have many opportunities to read the words of American Indians from the eighteenth century. Too often, we have trust a white translator or to infer what they were thinking from other people's descriptions. In these passages, though, we can see directly how the Cherokee saw the colonists and their revolution.

Dragging Canoe

In 1775 Richard Henderson, in negotiating the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals, took control from the Cherokee of lands in the area of present-day Kentucky. Dragging Canoe, Cherokee warrior, shortly thereafter addressed the fate of his people:

We had hoped that the white men would not be willing to travel beyond the mountains. Now that hope is gone. They have passed the mountains, and have settled upon Cherokee land. They wish to have that usurpation sanctioned by treaty. When that is gained, the same encroaching spirit will lead them upon other land of the Cherokees. New cessions will be asked. Finally the whole country, which the Cherokees and their fathers have so long occupied, will be demanded, and the remnant of Ani-Yunwiya, the Real People, once so great and formidable, will be compelled to seek refuge in some distant wilderness. There they will be permitted to stay only a short while, until they again behold the advancing banners of the same greedy host. Not being able to point out any further retreat for the miserable Cherokees, the extinction of the whole race will be proclaimed. Should we not therefore run all risks, and incur all consequences, rather than submit to further loss of our country? Such treaties may be alright for men who are too old to hunt or fight. As for me, I have my young warriors about me. We will have our lands. I have spoken.

Corn Tassel

At the signing of the Treaty of Long Island of Holston in 1777, Cherokee chiefs ceded areas east of the Blue Ridge in North Carolina as well as additional lands in Tennessee and Virginia. Corn Tassel, a venerable chief from the Overhill Towns, addressed Virginia commissioners and responded to demands that even more land be ceded:

Thus, you marched into our towns; they were left to your mercy; you killed a few scattered and defenseless individuals, spread fire and desolation wherever you pleased, and returned again to your own habitations....

Again, were we to inquire by what law or authority you set up a claim, I answer none! Your laws extend not into our country, nor ever did. You talk of the law of nature and the law of nations, and they are both against you. Indeed, much has been advanced on the want of what you term civilization among the Indians; and many proposals have been made to us to adopt your laws, your religion, your manners and your customs....

You say: Why do not the Indians till the ground and live as we do? May we not, with equal propriety, ask, Why the white people do not hunt and live as we do?...

This is not a mere affected injury; it is a grievance which we equitably complain of and it demands a permanent redress. The great God of Nature has placed us in different situations. It is true that he has endowed you with many superior advantages; but he has not created us to be your slaves. We are a separate people!

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