

Letter from Chief John Ross of the Cherokee, Georgia, 1836

My Dear Sir,

Your interest in relation to our fortunes is very kind and liberal, and I sincerely thank you for it. You say you hope I shall not be offended at your questions, and that I will believe you have no sinister views in writing to me, to clear up certain doubts which have been forced upon you, concerning my movements in Cherokee affairs. Instead of being annoyed, I thank you for the opportunity which you have given me, through these doubts, of endeavoring, briefly, to explain, not only our position, but some portions of my own conduct connected with it, which have been grossly, but purposely, misrepresented.

I wish I could acquiesce in your impression that a Treaty has been made, by which every difficulty between the Cherokees and the United States has been set at rest; but I must candidly say, that I know of no such Treaty. I do not mean to prophesy any similar troubles to those which have, in other cases, followed the failure to adjust disputed points with Indians; the Cherokees act on a principle preventing apprehensions of that nature—their principle is, “endure and forbear,” but I must distinctly declare to you that I believe, the document [Treat of New Echota] signed by unauthorized individuals at Washington, will never be regarded by the Cherokee nation as a Treaty. The delegation appointed by the people to make a Treaty, have protested against that instrument “as deceptive to the world and a fraud upon the Cherokee people.” You say you do *not* see my name appended to the paper in question, but that you regard the omission as a typographical mistake, because you *do* find my name among those who are mentioned in it as the future directors of Cherokee affairs.

I will answer these points separately: and first,

My name is not, by mistake, omitted among the signers of the paper in question; and the reasons why it is not affixed to that paper, are the following:

Neither I nor any other member of the regular delegation to Washington, can, without violating our most sacred engagements, ever recognize that paper as a Treaty, by assenting to its terms, or the mode of its execution. They are entirely inconsistent with the views of the Cherokee people. Three times have the Cherokee people formally and openly rejected conditions substantially the same as these. We were commissioned by the people, under express injunctions, not to bind the nation to any such conditions. The delegation representing the Cherokees, have, therefore, officially rejected these conditions themselves, and have regularly protested before the Senate and House of Representatives, against their ratification. The Cherokee people, in two protests, the one signed by twelve thousand seven hundred and fourteen persons, and the other by three thousand two hundred and fifty persons, spoke for themselves against the Treaty, even previous to its rejection by those whom they had selected to speak for them.

With your impressions concerning the advantages secured by the subtle instrument in question, you will, no doubt, wonder at this opposition. But it possesses not the advantages you and others imagine; and that is the reason why it has encountered, and ever will encounter opposition. You suppose we are to be removed through it from a home, by circumstances rendered disagreeable and even untenable, to be secured in a better home, where nothing can disturb or dispossess us. *Here is the great mystification.* We are not secured in the new home promised to us. We are exposed to precisely the same miseries, from which, if this measure is enforced, the United States' power professes to relieve us, but does so entirely by the exercise of that power, against our will.

If we really had the security you and others suppose we have, we would not thus complain. But mark the truth and judge for yourself.

White men obtain their title to property, between one and another, by what is called *fee simple*. I have discovered that many of those who have voted in favor of this pretended Treaty, have done so under the impression that they were voting lands to us in *fee simple*—especially as we are to be compelled to pay for those lands the sum of five hundred thousand dollars—having already paid for a portion of them, by exchange, what is equivalent to the full amount of their intrinsic value. But the difference between the right by which the state of Georgia and other states hold lands, is a very, very material difference from that for which we Cherokees shall have paid, according to this arrangement, at the smallest estimate, calculating the valuation of the exchange at government prices, and adding to the sum to be paid in money—*seven millions of dollars!* Seven millions for lands without a real title! For this sum, I admit, the United States do promise that they will “cause a patent, or grant, to be made and executed” to us for the aforesaid tract of land, but it is always on the proviso, “that such land shall *revert* to the United States, if the Indians become extinct, or abandon the same.” Now, the use of this very phrase, *revert*, is an evidence that the United States do not consider that there is an absolute property given in the soil allotted to the Indians, in payment for their valuable country; the United State retains the absolute property in her own hands, only allowing to the Indians a far inferior right of occupancy to that which they have ever been admitted to possess where they now are, and where they were born. The pretended Treaty expressly avows that it is under the law containing the clause above quoted, and other similar laws, that the transfer is made; and the Indian title is to be subject, not only to these laws already existing, but to such laws as may be made hereafter; and to which laws, present and prospective, the Indian regulations for self-government must be equally subordinate. Now, in addition to the inconveniences and insecurity inevitable, from the vagueness of the laws already in operation, those future ones, to which this pretended Treaty makes the Indians blindly promise submission, may entirely extinguish, not only the right of occupancy, but of self-government. For example. Suppose it should suit the policy of the United States, hereafter, to pass a law organizing a territorial government upon the Cherokee lands, west? That law necessarily destroys the character of the Cherokee nation as a distinct community; the nation becomes legally extinct; the lands revert to the United States, and the Cherokee people are bound, by assenting to the conditions of the pretended Treaty, to acquiesce

in this law providing a plausible pretext for their annihilation. And should they demur, what is the result? An article in the pretended Treaty expressly stipulates, that military posts, and military roads may, anywhere, and at any time, be established by the United States, in the new country, set apart for the Indians. Hence, anyone who might complain of any act of the United States as unauthorized by the right construction of the pretended Treaty, would be as liable to ejection for the purpose of creating a military post at the malcontent's abode in the Cherokee country west—as now he actually is, and long has been, under similar circumstances, in the Cherokee part of Georgia—and were vexations to become universal, as they have in Georgia, the region might, in the same manner, be filled with soldiers, and the existence of the Cherokee nation become at once extinguished by laws to which the people will be said themselves to have assented. That there is no disposition ever to interfere thus, is attempted to be proved by reference to an article of the pretended Treaty, excluding intruders and white men; but this very article is clogged with a worse than neutralizing condition—a condition pregnant with sources of future disquiet—a condition that it is not to prevent the introduction of useful farmers, mechanics, and teachers, under which denomination some future Executive of the United States may find it convenient, hereafter, to overwhelm the original population, and bring about the Territorial Government, by which the Cherokees will be regarded as legally extinguished, and the country of their exile as *reverting* to its real proprietor, the United States. Thus will the favorite theory, which has been ascribed to the President [Andrew Jackson], be fully realized. This policy will *legislate the Indians off the land!*

That all these things are possible, is proved by the present posture of affairs in the region of our birth, our sacred inheritance from our fathers. It is but a few years, since the apprehension of scenes like those from which the United States acknowledges her incompetency to protect us, even under the pledge of Treaties, would have been regarded as a morbid dream. But a State has already been created on the boundary of the retreat set apart for the exile of the Indians—the State of Arkansas; another State, and an independent one—a new republic, made up of many of the old foes of the Indians—Texas, is rising on another boundary; and who shall say how soon these, and other new bordering states, may become as uneasy from the Indian neighborhood, as the old ones are now? It was at one time thought that the United States never could declare she was unable to keep the Treaties of former days. It is less possible that she may hereafter experience the same difficulty in keeping those of the days in which we live? Especially, as in the present instance, she may be called upon, not only to defend those Treaties from violation by her own citizens, but by the people, though of the same origin, belonging to a new, a warlike, and an independent republic.

To proceed to your second remark: that you find my name among those enumerated in the pretended Treaty, who are to form a Committee for the Regulation, under that instrument, of Cherokee affairs.

It is true, my name is in that list, and at the head of the thirteen members named by the United States Government; but it was never placed there with my sanction. I disclaim the act, as I

disclaim the instrument which contains the act. If ever I hold an office in the nation of my compatriots, it must be from *their* election, not the nomination of the Executive of another country; and the insertion of my name among the thirteen in question, ranks with the other unauthorized proceedings of an irresponsible and self-constituted opposition to the legalized authorities of the nation. If I have objected to the pretended Treaty, not only as made with persons whom the nation will not recognize as its representatives, but as exchanging relations in some degree defined, for those utterly and dangerously undefined; as rendering a distressed people entirely dependent upon the policy or the caprices of successors to a government which has not respected that people's dearest rights; I certainly would not render myself the accomplice of what I look upon as wronging those whose interests are more precious to me than my own. I will now turn to the portions of your letter, more immediately touching my own character; and at the head of these I find what you call, on the misrepresentation of Mr. [John F.] Schermerhorn, my having agreed to bind "my people" to sell the Cherokee nation, on certain terms, from which I afterwards capriciously departed.

I must here beg leave to observe that I have never yet been placed in a position which could render *my* individual decision conclusive upon any matters of this nature, nor could I ever wish for such responsibility. The Cherokee people are not "my people;" I am only one of their agents and their elected chief: It is I who serve under them, not they under me. At the time of the transaction to which you allude, the delegation, of which I was a member, had ample powers to make a treaty for a partial cession of the country, with security in the residue; but we had no authority for the extension of our discretionary power to any treaty for an entire sale of the country; such a suggestion was not contemplated by the people and it would consequently be impossible for us to decide upon such, without a reference to those who sent us. I myself was only one among many. I could not, by my single act, bind even my associates to any promise of an entire sale, nor of course to any *award*, even had such an *award* been made, for the amount to be paid for an entire sale; I could only, with them, submit such an offer, if made, to the people. The facts of the case to which you allude, however, are these:

During the congressional session of term before last, (1834-35) while the legally constituted delegation from the Cherokee nation was at Washington, an unauthorized delegation, consisting mostly of the same members who appeared there, equally unauthorized, last winter, and signed the paper pretending to be a treaty, were intriguing to be admitted into secret negotiations with the United States' Government, while the delegation of which I was a member, were conducting theirs openly. It was said the party first mentioned came at the instance of the government, but of this there was no proof. Mr. Schermerhorn, at the same time, was seeking to obtain a promise from the regular delegation, that they would meet him as a commissioner; affirming that he was in the confidence of the President, and if such a promise were given, he was certain to be appointed. Receiving no encouragement from the legal delegation, he is understood to have gone over to Mr. [John] Ridge and his friends, and to have opened negotiations with them. Soon after, it was understood that the President refused to entertain the proposition for which we had discretionary power, namely, that for a partial cession of the country, with security in the residue.

It was understood, too, that he would not only require an absolute sale, to which our discretionary power did not extend; but that he also refused, on the score of the alleged extravagance of the sum demanded, to entertain our proposition of an absolute sale for twenty millions, in the event of its approval by the people, for whom, on this particular point, we had no authority to act finally. An impression had already got abroad that Mr. Ridge and his friends had, anterior to this, signified to the Executive their readiness to make a treaty at four millions of dollars, or less. But the President had repeatedly said he would go as far as the Senate would permit. The negotiation being about to fail, the legal delegation concluded to ask that the President would submit the whole matter to the Senate and take their advice as to what ought to be done, under all circumstances. It appeared to me and my associates that the Senate on adequately investigating the value of the country, would do us justice. The delegation was hence impelled to comply with a sudden oral request that they would sign a promise on the spot, to abide by the “award” of the Senate and to submit that “award” for the approval of the nation; but the promise, on our part was given under an express understanding, through the Secretary of War [Lewis Cass], that the Executive would submit the case for the consideration of the Senate, and, had he done so fully and fairly, we should have had nothing to object, whatever might have been the result: because the United States’ Executive, in thus referring the matter to the Senate, would have been bound by the result, which the delegation could then have laid before the people for their decision; and we are confident that a result thus obtained must have been grounded upon proper examination, not only into the real value of the country, but all the attending circumstances. But we waited and waited and waited and nothing was attempted. We heard, indeed, that immediately after the signature by us of the paper in question, conferences were held by Messrs Ridge, [Benjamin F.] Currey, [Elias] Boudinot, and Schermerhorn, at the White House, which led to changes in the views of the Executive. We also heard that the President had been advised, at one time, to meet the Senate and consult with them, (as was done by President [George] Washington in reference to the former Cherokee Treaty of Holston [1791].), and thus fix upon the sum to be paid for our country; and when we heard that, we felt satisfied there would be a fair examination, and justice might be expected; but we afterwards were told, that the President had been induced to abstain from communicating with the Senate at all in relation to the matter, under the impression, if the Indian question were settled in consequence of such conference, that the opposition would ascribe the settlement, not to the President, but to the Senate, the majority of whom then differed with him in politics. When we were given reason to fear the question had been made to degenerate into a mere party question, we were, indeed, apprehensive that our hopes of a speedy settlement would be defeated. The session was now drawing to a close. On the 3d of March, 1835,—the morning of the 4th being the time for adjournment—hearing nothing more from the Executive, we found ourselves compelled, late at night, to memorialize the Senate. Our memorial was referred to the Committee on Indian Affairs. This Committee made a sudden and a brief report, recommending the purchase of the Cherokee country, upon such terms as should cover its intrinsic value. It had before this been communicated to the Senate, by the Secretary of War, that Mr. Ridge and his party, had agreed to treat for four millions, or less. A resolution was submitted, at midnight, just as the Senate were

about to separate, that, in their opinion, the President ought to allow a sum not exceeding five millions. This resolution, proposed in a hurry, was carried in as great a hurry, and, though *a mere opinion*, not pledging either the President or the Senate to any consequent action, it was represented to us as an “*award*,” and we were told we had engaged ourselves to be bound by it, notwithstanding we knew it would not be considered as binding on anyone else. Nevertheless, though so far from an *award*—nevertheless, though it was even *less than an opinion*, because it was given without evidence or reflection—we thought fit to lay it before the people as distinctly as if it had really been the “*award*” which we had been induced to promise we would lay before them. Accordingly, at the next Council, I submitted the proceedings to the convened nation, who unanimously protested, in open assembly, against any Treaty on the basis of the five millions, under any circumstances; and, therefore, had I been ever so much disposed to regard the *opinion* as an *award*, the VETO OF THE NATION settled the matter finally, and would have *nullified* any proceedings of mine to the contrary.

I will simply add, that the pretended Treaty, executed last session, is substantially on the terms, and made with the irresponsible party, of which I have here sketched the origin. The sketch I have given, I hope, explains to your satisfaction, the truth concerning the often repeated slander against me, of having actually made a Treaty, upon certain conditions, from which I afterwards receded.

I will now proceed to the other charge against me, which you mention as having been made by Mr. Schermerhorn, namely, that I have no right to interfere in Cherokee affairs, because I once accepted a reservation on terms which made me a citizen of the United States, and thus disqualifying me for office in the Cherokee country, rendered my continuance there in power as Principal Chief, an usurpation. You observe that it is also asserted by Mr. Schermerhorn that I actually expatriated myself from the nation, by quitting the place of my birth to reside in the United States, and hence lost my privileges as a Cherokee.

It would be enough, perhaps, for me to mention the fact, that this silly pretense has been put on and put off so frequently by the government agents, as it happened to suit their purposes to consider me a chief or no chief, that an abandonment of the charge can always be produced as an offset against every assertion of it. But it is more satisfactory to me to go fully into it and to show its shallowness as well as its malevolence.

There was a tract of land given to my ancestors by the Cherokee nation. In the year 1819 the United States thought proper to secure six hundred and forty acres of that tract to me, as a *special* reservation. Some other grants were made at the same time, under express conditions, but mine, (as were one or two others,) was *untrammelled by conditions*, and hence denominated “*special*.” I did not reside on it when granted. It was known that I did not. It was known I never had resided on it. My residence had, for some time, been at Rossville, near the Lookout Mountain, within the charter limit of Georgia; a part of the nation which the United States aver is beyond the jurisdiction of any United States’ Treaty. The Treaty conveying away these lands,

contained a condition that all persons to whom *reservations* were made should give notice that they would *continue to reside* on the land secured to them. As it was so well known that I did not reside at the reservation in question, and never had resided there, it was therefore obvious that I could not *continue* what I had never *begun*. As a point of etiquette, however, I was advised that some communication in reference to my reservation might be expected; and finding all my neighbors were writing to the Agent [Return J. Meigs] to comply with forms, and to prevent any disturbance from the subtleties of technical distinctions, I followed their example, and gave notice [June 17, 1819], *not* that I meant to *continue to reside* on the reservation where I had never resided, but that it was my intention to *continue to occupy and enjoy permanently* the land reserved to me by the Treaty of 1819. I considered myself as standing nearly in the position of an alien, especially authorized to hold lands in a foreign country, without forfeiting his allegiance to his own. I distinctly stated, at the same time, that I was “fully convinced the condition of that same Treaty did not immediately apply to special reservations;” and that I only gave this notice to comply with forms, and forms not understood by me as affecting the spirit in which that treaty had conveyed mine and one or two others. In so doing, I made no change of residence. I did not remove out of the nation, and become a citizen of the United States. I never have left the limits of the Cherokee nation, excepting when sent to school as a boy, and engaged in business in early youth and manhood, first in the situation of clerk to a merchant, and afterwards on my own account. Since then, whenever I have left the nation, it has been to transact the affairs of the nation. Nevertheless, Mr. Schermerhorn thinks he has succeeded in proving something against me, when he quotes one of our laws, where it is stated “the authority and claim of our common property, shall cease with the persons who shall think proper to remove themselves without the limits of the Cherokee nation.” The reverend politician then triumphantly says, Mr. John Ross complied with the conditions of the Treaty of 1819; how could he comply with that condition and retain lands withdrawn from his country unless he ceased to live in his country? In ceasing to live in his country, he forfeited his rights of citizenship there, and, by so doing he ceased to be a Cherokee, and necessarily became a citizen of the United States! This is splendid reasoning, no doubt; but supposing the circumstances assumed as facts, to be true, how does the case then stand? To those who took reservations under the article which Mr. Schermerhorn says, made them, by implication, citizens of the United States, the United States found it inconvenient to confirm the rights which they promised. The United States were pledged to protect the reserves from intruders; and yet intruders came and forcibly drove many of the reserves from their reservations, and the marauders were sustained by the authority of a border state! Hence the reserves become homeless. They had no resource but to return to the domain of their brother Indians; and thither they did return, and they were welcomed. In the meantime, they instituted suits before the Circuit Courts of Georgia for the recovery of their lands. The appeal succeeded. But Georgia, instead of re-instating them, memorialized Congress for an appropriation to *buy out the reserves*, because she had already *lotteried away* these very lands, assuming them to be hers under a promise of prospective possession from the United States. An appropriation was made and the entire spirit of the arrangement was changed by the capricious legislation of alleged *expediency!* and thus, to alter the application of a remark by Mr. Schermerhorn, the

relations between the United States and the reserves, “became resolved into their original elements,” by the non-compliance of the United States with the conditions under which a modification of those relations with some, at least, might have been intended.

Thus you will perceive that Mr. Schermerhorn has made an inference of his own from a treaty article, to suit his own purposes; and assuming that purposely erroneous inference to be a fact, has then proceeded to try us by it, as though it were a fact; and, tried under such a law, and such a judge, what true Cherokee could look to be acquitted?

Of another attempt—the attempt of which you speak to deny the authority of the Cherokee government, because, when the intolerance of Georgia rendered the observance of the letter of the Cherokee laws a penal offense in that part of the Cherokee country coming within the charter limits of Georgia—certain changes in the forms defined by our Constitution became necessary, I shall say but little. That attempt to divide and slander us has also emanated from the Reverend Mr. Schermerhorn. It was intended to break down our chiefs and government. The people saw and understood it, and determined to preserve both without changing the spirit of our laws, though they were forced to modify the mode of their fulfilment. In troubled times, this has so often been done everywhere, that for precedents it is not necessary to look very deeply into history. Nor is it any novelty in collisions between states or individuals, to attempt the crushing of the individual by whom either may be thwarted. In the United States this has occurred even in reference to its greatest man. Some measures of the Ambassador of the French Republic, being opposed by [George] Washington, Mr. [Edmond Charles] Genet, and the vain and wrong-headed Ambassador in question, endeavored to break down the great Washington himself, and that in the very bosom of his own country. The American people laughed at Genet, and loved Washington all the better for his contempt of the impertinence. It is unnecessary to enlarge upon the ridiculous unworthy figure which Mr. Schermerhorn will make in future history, as a reverend clergyman going with a pious, though somewhat rubicund face, upon a political embassy into an Indian country, and there attempting to gain his purpose by dividing the nation against itself, and getting up a party to overthrow the constituted authorities and meet his particular views. He was imitating Genet in a smaller sphere; a Genet in clerical robes, with a military guard, alternately preaching honesty and intriguing to mystify a plain people by the subtleties of political negotiation. In reference to us, however, Mr. Schermerhorn has rendered his own arts impotent, and that by his own acts. Though he has sometimes disavowed our authority, he and his associates have generally immediately afterwards treated with us under a formal acknowledgement of that authority, and they have done so up to a very recent date, extending far beyond that of their latest disavowal.

I will here take occasion to touch upon two points in reference to our negotiations, which do not seem to be understood by the American people. One impression concerning us, is, that though we object to removal, as we are equally averse to becoming citizens of the United States, we ought to be forced to remove; to be tied hand and foot and conveyed to the extreme western frontier, and then turned loose among the wild beasts of the wilderness. Now, the fact is, we

never have objected to become citizens of the United States and to conform to her laws; but in the event of conforming to her laws, we have required the protection and privileges of her laws to accompany that conformity on our part. We have asked this repeatedly and repeatedly has it been denied.

The other point to which I would advert is this: a charge that the whole scope of my policy has been to get the money of the nation into my own hands. *This is a monstrous misrepresentation.* The funds of the nation never have been in my hands. They have been with the councils of the nation, as the funds of the United States are with the representatives of her people. For the propriety of *this* course we have always contented—for nothing more. We have wondered when we have heard objections made against our opposition to the policy of the United States in wishing to take our own funds away from our own councils and to place them under the entire control of agents of the American Government—a *policy at length accomplished the pretended treaty of this spring!* So far from ever wishing the control of our national funds, I would not take such control, even were it offered to me, which, by the laws of the nation, it never can be. But I will maintain to the last, that the United States ought not to give our money into the hands of frontier agents—often, in all countries, more deserving suspicion, and more liable to temptation, because less under *surveillance*, than any other public officers whatever, can be. The funds of the nation are our own funds—they consist of money paid for the purchase of our own lands, and that on forced and speculative, and consequently very inadequate terms; and being the property of the nation, and property remaining after severe sacrifices on our part—as the property of the nation it is right that those funds should be under the control of the councils of the nation.

I must bring my letter to a close. I fear it has already wearied you. But it gratifies me to find any one desirous of looking earnestly into the true state of the Cherokee question, and I wish to afford all such enquirers every satisfaction. You have already perceived that the singular attitude into which our affairs have been thrown by the mere trickery of party, emanated entirely from the subservience of irresponsible Cherokees to the policy, backed by the power of the administration. It is a remarkable fact that even so lately as February 9, 1836, Mr. John Ridge joined the regular delegation in a solemn protest against the dishonesty of this course, although three days previous, February 6, 1836, his father Major Ridge, who had arrived at the head of the counterfeit delegation of the got up party, had communicated under it to the real representation of the people; and yet, with no new facts before him, on the 25th of March, 1836, this same Mr. John Ridge, in a letter of condolence to the reverend politician, Mr. Schermerhorn, returns to the opposition, and violently vituperates his recent associates and *the whole* course of their proceedings and their policy; a vituperation in which he necessarily must be understood as including himself; this being only his fourth entire revolution in politics within as many months: varying as often as the moon, without the excuse of lunacy for his changes.

In conclusion I would observe, that I still strongly hope we shall find ultimate justice from the good sense of the administration and of the people of the United States. I will not even yet believe that either the one or the other would wrong us with their eyes open. I am persuaded they have erred only in ignorance, and an ignorance forced upon them by the misrepresentation and

artifices of the interested. You yourself are aware to what an extent these artifices have been carried. You are aware that the Seminole outbreak and the Creek troubles, have been insidiously spoken of as connected with our condition; and although I myself never saw a Seminole Indian, and there is no intercourse whatever between our nation and theirs; although with the Creeks, also, we have far less communication than the state of New York has with Canada, nevertheless there have been some persons malevolent enough to wish the Cherokees extirpated because the Creeks and Seminoles have risen, and very many others uninformed enough to join the war cry against us, under the sweeping denunciation that being all Indians, we ought alike to suffer! The Cherokees, under any circumstances, have no weapon to use but argument. If that should fail, they must submit, when their time shall come, in silence, but honest argument they cannot think will be forever used in vain. The Cherokee people will always hold themselves ready to respect a *real* treaty and bound to sustain any treaty which they can feel that they are bound to respect. But they are certain not to consider the attempt of a very few persons to sell the country for themselves, as obligatory upon them, and I and all my associates in the regular delegation, still look confidently to the effect of a sense of justice upon the American community, in producing a real settlement of this question, upon equitable terms and with competent authorities. But, on one point, you may be perfectly at rest. Deeply as our people feel, I cannot suppose they will ever be goaded by those feelings to any acts of violence. No, sir. They have been too long inured to suffering without resistance, and they still look to the sympathies and not to the fears, of those who have them in their power. In certain recent discussions in the representative hall at Washington, our enemies made it an objection against me and against others, that we were not Indians, but had *the principles of white men*, and were consequently unworthy of a hearing in the Indian cause. I will own that it has been my pride, as Principal Chief of the Cherokees, to implant in the bosoms of the people, and to cherish in my own, *the principles of white men*! It is to this fact that our white neighbors must ascribe their safety under the smart of the wrongs we have suffered from them. It is in this they may confide for our continued patience. But when I speak of *the principles of white men*, I speak not of such principles as actuate those who talk thus to us, but of those mighty principles to which the United States owes her greatness and her liberty. To principles like these even yet we turn with confidence for redemption from our miseries. When Congress shall be less overwhelmed with business, no doubt, in some way, the matter may be brought to a reconsideration, and when the representatives of the American people have leisure to see how little it will cost them to be just, we are confident they will be true to themselves, in acting with good faith towards us. Be certain that while the Cherokees are endeavoring to obtain a more friendly consideration from the United States, they will not forget to show by their circumspection how well they merit it; and though no doubt there are many who will represent them otherwise, for injurious purposes, I can assure you that the white people have nothing to apprehend, even from our sense of contumely and unfairness, unless it be through the perverse and the treacherous maneuvers of such agents as they themselves may keep among us. I have the honor to be, Dear Sir, Most truly yours,

John Ross

"Our Hearts are Sickened": Letter from Chief John Ross of the Cherokee, Georgia, 1836

By President Andrew Jackson's election in 1828, the only large concentrations of Indian tribes remaining on the east coast were located in the South. The Cherokee had adopted the settled way of life of the surrounding—and encroaching—white society. They were consequently known, along with the Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw, as one of the "Five Civilized Tribes." "Civilization," however, was not enough, and the Jackson administration forced most of these tribes west during the first half of the 1830s, clearing southern territory for the use of whites. Chief John Ross was the principal chief of the Cherokee in Georgia; in this 1836 letter addressed to "the Senate and House of Representatives," Ross protested as fraudulent the Treaty of New Echota that forced the Cherokee out of Georgia. In 1838, federal troops forcibly displaced the last of the Cherokee from their homes; their trip to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) is known as the "Trail of Tears."

[Red Clay Council Ground, Cherokee Nation, September 28, 1836]

It is well known that for a number of years past we have been harassed by a series of vexations, which it is deemed unnecessary to recite in detail, but the evidence of which our delegation will be prepared to furnish. With a view to bringing our troubles to a close, a delegation was appointed on the 23rd of October, 1835, by the General Council of the nation, clothed with full powers to enter into arrangements with the Government of the United States, for the final adjustment of all our existing difficulties. The delegation failing to effect an arrangement with the United States commissioner, then in the nation, proceeded, agreeably to their instructions in that case, to Washington City, for the purpose of negotiating a treaty with the authorities of the United States.

After the departure of the Delegation, a contract was made by the Rev. John F. Schermerhorn, and certain individual Cherokees, purporting to be a "treaty, concluded at New Echota, in the State of Georgia, on the 29th day of December, 1835, by General William Carroll and John F. Schermerhorn, commissioners on the part of the United States, and the chiefs, headmen, and people of the Cherokee tribes of Indians." A spurious Delegation, in violation of a special injunction of the general council of the nation, proceeded to Washington City with this pretended treaty, and by false and fraudulent representations supplanted in the favor of the Government the legal and accredited Delegation of the Cherokee people, and obtained for this instrument, after making important alterations in its provisions, the recognition of the United States Government. And now it is presented to us as a treaty, ratified by the Senate, and approved by the President [Andrew Jackson], and our acquiescence in its requirements demanded, under the sanction of the displeasure of the United States, and the threat of summary compulsion, in case of refusal. It comes to us, not through our legitimate authorities, the known and usual medium of communication between the Government of the United States and our nation, but through the agency of a complication of powers, civil and military.

By the stipulations of this instrument, we are despoiled of our private possessions, the indefeasible property of individuals. We are stripped of every attribute of freedom and eligibility for legal self-defense. Our property may be plundered before our eyes; violence may be committed on our persons; even our lives may be taken away, and there is none to regard our complaints. We are denationalized; we are disfranchised. We are deprived of membership in the human family! We have neither land nor home, nor resting place that can be called our own. And this is effected by the provisions of a compact which assumes the venerated, the sacred appellation of treaty.

We are overwhelmed! Our hearts are sickened, our utterance is paralyzed, when we reflect on the condition in which we are placed, by the audacious practices of unprincipled men, who have managed their stratagems with so much dexterity as to impose on the Government of the United States, in the face of our earnest, solemn, and reiterated protestations.

The instrument in question is not the act of our Nation; we are not parties to its covenants; it has not received the sanction of our people. The makers of it sustain no office nor appointment in our Nation, under the designation of Chiefs, Head men, or any other title, by which they hold, or could acquire, authority to assume the reins of Government, and to make bargain and sale of our rights, our possessions, and our common country. And we are constrained solemnly to declare, that we cannot but contemplate the enforcement of the stipulations of this instrument on us, against our consent, as an act of injustice and oppression, which, we are well persuaded, can never knowingly be countenanced by the Government and people of the United States; nor can we believe it to be the design of these honorable and high-minded individuals, who stand at the head of the Govt., to bind a whole Nation, by the acts of a few unauthorized individuals. And, therefore, we, the parties to be affected by the result, appeal with confidence to the justice, the magnanimity, the compassion, of your honorable bodies, against the enforcement, on us, of the provisions of a compact, in the formation of which we have had no agency.

In truth, our cause is your own; it is the cause of liberty and of justice; it is based upon your own principles, which we have learned from yourselves; for we have gloried to count your [George] Washington and your [Thomas] Jefferson our great teachers; we have read their communications to us with veneration; we have practiced their precepts with success. And the result is manifest. The wildness of the forest has given place to comfortable dwellings and cultivated fields, stocked with the various domestic animals. Mental culture, industrious habits, and domestic enjoyments, have succeeded the rudeness of the savage state.

We have learned your religion also. We have read your Sacred books. Hundreds of our people have embraced their doctrines, practiced the virtues they teach, cherished the hopes they awaken, and rejoiced in the consolations which they afford. To the spirit of your institutions, and your religion, which has been imbibed by our community, is mainly to be ascribed that patient endurance which has characterized the conduct of our people, under the laceration of their keenest woes. For assuredly, we are not ignorant of our condition; we are not insensible to our sufferings. We feel them! We groan under their pressure! And anticipation crowds our breasts with sorrows yet to come. We are, indeed, an afflicted people! Our spirits are subdued! Despair has well-nigh seized upon our energies! But we speak to the representatives of a Christian country; the friends of justice; the patrons of the oppressed. And our hopes revive, and our prospects brighten, as we indulge the thought. On your sentence, our fate is suspended; prosperity or desolation depends on your word. To you, therefore, we look! Before your august assembly we present ourselves, in the attitude of deprecation, and of entreaty. On your kindness, on your humanity, on your compassion, on your benevolence, we rest our hopes. To you we address our reiterated prayers. Spare our people! Spare the wreck of our prosperity! Let not our deserted homes become the monuments of our desolation! But we forbear! We suppress the agonies which wring our hearts, when we look at our wives, our children, and our venerable sires! We restrain the forebodings of anguish and distress, of misery and devastation and death, which must be the attendants on the execution of this ruinous compact.

In conclusion, we commend to your confidence and favor, our well-beloved and trust-worthy brethren and fellow-citizens, John Ross, Principal Chief, Richard Taylor, Samuel Gunter, John Benge, George Sanders, Walter S. Adair, Stephen Foreman, and Kalsateehee of Aquohee, who are clothed with full powers to adjust all our existing difficulties by treaty arrangements with the United States, by which our destruction may be averted, impediments to the advancement of our people removed, and our existence perpetuated as a living monument, to testify to posterity the honor, the magnanimity, the generosity of the United States. And your memorialists, as in duty bound, will ever pray. Signed by Ross, George Lowrey, Edward Gunter, Lewis Ross, thirty-one members of the National Committee and National Council, and 2,174 others.

Source: John Ross, *The Papers of Chief John Ross, vol 1, 1807-1839*, Norman OK Gary E. Moulton, Ed. University of Oklahoma Press, 1985, p. 458-461.