

Trail of Tears

In the early morning hours of November 14th, 1833, one of the largest meteor showers in history lit up the night sky over North America. On the southern Plains, a large band of Kiowas were camped in the Wichita Mountains, where they had been driven when the Cheyenne and Lakotas took over the Black Hills.

"And they were awakened by the light of falling stars. And they ran out into the false day and were terrified. They thought the world was coming to an end. You can imagine something like that happening directly overhead, this havoc in the night sky. And so it's very much in their blood memory. I think the Kiowas took the falling stars as a sign. It was an omen. And bad things followed. You can start counting the catastrophes."

—N. Scott Momaday

Soon, the Kiowa noticed a new people, coming from the east, moving onto the southern Plains. The settlers built towns, churches, schools. Some of them owned slaves. But these newcomers were Indians, too -- Cherokee, one of many peoples from the East forced into the West by the federal government.

No eastern tribe had struggled harder or more successfully to make white civilization their own. For generations, the Cherokee had lived side by side with whites in Georgia. They had devised a written language, published their own newspaper, adopted a constitution and the Christian faith. But after gold was discovered on their land, even they were told they would have to start over again in the West.

"My friends... circumstances render it impossible that you can flourish in the midst of a civilized community. You have but one remedy within your reach. And that is to remove to the west, and the sooner you do this, the sooner will commence your career of improvement and prosperity."

—Andrew Jackson

Early in the 1830s, Congress had created a huge new Indian Territory which was to stretch from Texas to the middle Missouri River. It was meant to be a barrier to white expansion, a place the Indians were promised they would have to themselves, forever.

One by one, Indian peoples were removed to the West -- the Delaware, Ottawa, Shawnee, and Pottawatomie; the Sac and Fox, Miami and Kickapoo; the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and Seminole. In all, some 90,000 Indians were relocated.

The Cherokee were among the last to go. Some reluctantly agreed to move. Others were driven from their homes at bayonet point. Almost two thousand of them died along the route they remember as the "Trail of Tears."

From PBS—The West, located at <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/two/trailtears.htm>

Andrew Jackson's Third Annual Message to Congress

(December 6, 1831)

The internal peace and security of our confederated States is the next principal object of the General Government. Time and experience have proved that the abode of the native Indian within their limits is dangerous to their peace and injurious to himself. In accordance with my recommendation at a former session of Congress, an appropriation of \$500K was made to aid the voluntary removal of the various tribes beyond the limits of the States. At the last session I had the happiness to announce that the Chickasaws and Choctaws had accepted the generous offer of the Government and agreed to remove beyond the Mississippi River, by which the whole of the State of Mississippi and the western part of Alabama will be freed from Indian occupancy and opened to a civilized population. The treaties with these tribes are in a course of execution, and their removal, it is hoped, will be completed in the course of 1832.

At the request of the authorities of Georgia the registration of Cherokee Indians for emigration has been resumed, and it is confidently expected that half, if not two-third, of that tribe will follow the wise example of their more westerly brethren. Those who prefer remaining at their present homes will hereafter be governed by the laws of Georgia, as all her citizens are, and cease to be the objects of peculiar care on the part of the General Government.

During the present year the attention of the Government has been particularly directed to those tribes in the powerful and growing State of Ohio, where considerable tracts of the finest lands were still occupied by the aboriginal proprietors. Treaties, either absolute or conditional, have been made extinguishing the whole Indian title to the reservations in that State, and the time is not distant, it is hoped, when Ohio will be no longer embarrassed with the Indian population. The same measures will be extended to Indiana as soon as there is reason to anticipate success. It is confidently believed that perseverance for a few years in the present policy of the Government will extinguish the Indian title to all lands lying within the States composing our Federal Union, and remove beyond their limits every Indian who is not willing to submit to their laws.

But the removal of the Indians beyond the limits and jurisdiction of the States does not place them beyond the reach of philanthropic aid and Christian instruction. On the contrary, those whom philanthropy or religion may induce to live among them in their new abode will be more free in the exercise of their benevolent functions than if they had remained within the limits of the States, embarrassed by their internal regulations. Now subject to no control but the superintending agency of the General Government, exercised with the sole view of preserving peace, they may proceed unmolested in the interesting experiment of gradually advancing a community of American Indians from barbarism to the habits and enjoyments of civilized life.

*Location: Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, *The American President: An Online Reference Resource*, "Third Annual Message to Congress (December 6, 1831" located at <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3635>)*

Andrew Jackson's Fifth Annual Message to Congress

(December 3, 1833)

Our relations with the various Indian tribes have been undisturbed since the termination of the difficulties growing out of the hostile aggressions of the Sac and Fox Indians. Several treaties have been formed for the relinquishment of territory to the United States and for the migration of the occupants of the region assigned for their residence West of the Mississippi. Should these treaties be ratified by the Senate, provision will have been made for the removal of almost all the tribes remaining E of that river and for the termination of many difficult and embarrassing questions arising out of their anomalous political condition.

It is to be hoped that those portions of two of the Southern tribes, which in that event will present the only remaining difficulties, will realize the necessity of emigration, and will speedily resort to it. My original convictions upon this subject have been confirmed by the course of events for several years, and experience is every day adding to their strength. That those tribes can not exist surrounded by our settlements and in continual contact with our citizens is certain. They have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition. Established in the midst of another and a superior race, and without appreciating the causes of their inferiority or seeking to control them, they must necessarily yield to the force of circumstances and ere long disappear.

Such has been their fate heretofore, and if it is to be averted -- and it is -- it can only be done by a general removal beyond our boundary and by the reorganization of their political system upon principles adapted to the new relations in which they will be placed. The experiment which has been recently made has so far proved successful. The emigrants generally are represented to be prosperous and contented, the country suitable to their wants and habits, and the essential articles of subsistence easily procured. When the report of the commissioners now engaged in investigating the condition and prospects of these Indians and in devising a plan for their intercourse and government is received, I trust ample means of information will be in possession of the Government for adjusting all the unsettled questions connected with this interesting subject.

Location: Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, The American President:

An Online Reference Resource, "Fifth Annual Message to Congress (December 3, 1833),"

located at <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/speeches/detail/3640>