

Black and White and Re(a)d All Over: The Role of Early Cherokee Newspapers in Promoting the Cherokee Practice of Black Slavery

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In this talk I briefly trace the history of African-ancestored slavery among the Cherokee and especially the way in which black slavery was promoted in early Cherokee newspapers. It is a relatively little-known aspect of United States history that the Cherokee and other aboriginal people in the United States sometimes held African-ancestored slaves. Once among the wealthiest of the North American aboriginal groups, the Cherokee sometimes owned large plantations in the United States. Like white plantation owners, the Cherokee frequently worked those plantations with African-ancestored slave labor. However, black slavery among the Cherokee was a contested practice that, according to some scholars, was the source of much internal friction. The *Cherokee Phoenix*, often cited as the first United States aboriginal newspaper, was established in 1828 in the midst of United States government efforts to relocate the Cherokee and other aboriginal people from the southeast to the southwestern United States. This relocation ultimately came to pass in the forced removal of aboriginal people known as the Trail of Tears. When the Cherokee were expelled from the southeast United States by the federal government in 1838 and 1839 and sent to live on reservations in the southwest, some of them took their black slaves with them on the long, brutal march.

One goal of the *Cherokee Phoenix* was to help unify the Cherokee and to help forestall removal by convincing a national and international audience (subscriptions came from as far away as Europe) that the Cherokee were “civilized” like their white neighbors. For some Cherokee, part of the embrace of civilization was the practice of black slavery. The

embrace of slavery was seen in early Cherokee constitutions promulgated via the newspaper. Even after removal a number of Cherokee felt that supporting slavery made them more like white Americans. Cherokee newspapers played a crucial role in convincing Cherokee who favored abolition or neutrality, especially on the eve of the United States Civil War, to accept slavery and to cast their lot with the Confederacy.

- I. Slavery among the Cherokee
 - a. Aboriginal slavery
 - b. African-ancestored (black) slavery
- II. Cherokee Newspapers
 - a. Roles served by the newspaper
 - i. Instrument of “civilization”
 - ii. News
 - iii. Opinions
 1. Racial issues—black, white and red
 2. Cherokee removal—pro/con
 - iv. Legislative record and case reporter
 1. Framing and shaping black slavery
 2. Other racialized laws/rules/norms
 3. New gender norms
 - v. Example: *The Cherokee Phoenix*
- III. Cherokee Newspapers and the Civil War
 - a. Cherokee neutrality
 - b. Cherokee support for the Confederacy
 - c. Lincoln and the Cherokee
- IV. Conclusion

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