



Primary and Secondary Resources on Civilization

This collection of sources chronicles the actions and policies of the United States toward Indian Nations following the Revolution. It begins with a brief overview by Dr. Jamie Mize, written for the National Parks Service in 2017, detailing these policies, which today we collectively refer to as the Plan of Civilization. It is followed by a collection of primary sources and images from 1783 through 1827, concluding with excerpts from the Constitution of the Cherokee Nation, 1827.



The U.S. government imposes a "civilization" plan

By Jaime Mize, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The forced adaptation to a way of life similar to the white settlers resulted in major shifts in culture and livelihood. The destruction of the Cherokee home front during the Creek War proved one of the strongest indications that adherence to, and even success within, the government's "civilization" policy would not matter.

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After the American Revolution, the new United States government created a "civilization" policy that it promoted among Indian groups. The goal of "civilization" was to force Cherokees and other Indians away from their traditional occupations of hunting and warfare into livelihoods that resembled those of white citizens and settlers, such as farming. "Civilization" constrained Cherokee men who once derived their status through hunting and gift-giving. The government's desire to make Cherokee men farmers proved culturally problematic. The Cherokees did not need to learn how to farm, as the prime occupation of a Cherokee woman was indeed agriculture. To avoid a loss of manhood associated with doing women's work, some Cherokees farmed with slaves on plantations. Others raised livestock on smaller farmsteads. Either way, Cherokees that embraced "civilization" resided in dwellings that resembled those of white settlers, and their occupants engaged in similar duties.

When Cherokee warriors went to participate in the Creek War, they left their homesteads and families vulnerable to intrusions by white squatters. The greatest source of destruction, however, came in the form of East Tennessee militiamen returning home from the Creek War. These men demolished fencing, burned homes, stole slaves and horses, and destroyed livestock and other foodstuffs, such as corn. The militiamen did not bother to differentiate between their Indian allies and foes.

Women, children, and the elderly experienced threats and acts of violence. Catherine Brown, daughter of a warrior fighting with Jackson, fled her home and hid in the woods to escape the possibility of rape at the hands of the militiamen. The Cherokees endured these offenses in hopes of demonstrating their fidelity to the United States government. Cherokees believed that a violent response to the attacks on their home front would only result in greater destruction for their Nation.

Yet, this did not come to pass, as the federal government refused to compensate the tribe for the tens of thousands of dollars of damage inflicted by marauding militiamen. When Indian agent Return J. Meigs complained, Jackson defended his soldiers' actions arguing that testimonies provided by Indians were untrustworthy.

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would not matter. Cherokee men farmed with and without slaves, raised livestock, and engaged in other commercial endeavors. Cherokee women learned to spin. In both cases, the Cherokee embrace of “civilization” proved of little importance in the face of continued and mounting pressure for land by white, western settlers.

Letter from the Chickasaw Nation to the United States, 1783

Following the American Revolution, relations between the newly independent United States and the Indian Nations within and surrounding their borders were uncertain. Individual States took it upon themselves to begin negotiating with Indian Nations, while leaders within these nations did not know exactly which political organization actually held the authority to negotiate with them. In an effort to establish diplomatic relations, leaders of the Chickasaw, who had previously been allied with the British during the Revolution, wrote to the newly formed United States government. Excerpts from their letter are below.

To His Excellency the President of the Honorable Congress of the United American States:

Friend & Brother,

This is the first talk we ever sent you – we hope it will not be the last. We desire you to open your ears to hear, and your heart to understand us, as we shall always be ready to do to your talks...

When our great father the King of England called away his warriors, he told us to take your people by the hand, as friends and brothers. Our hearts were always inclined to do so and as far as our circumstances permitted us, we evinced our good intentions as our Brothers the Virginians can testify...

Notwithstanding...we are yet in confusion and uncertainty. The Spaniards are sending talks amongst us, and inviting our young men to trade with them. We also receive talks from the Governor of Georgia to the same effect – We have had speeches from the Illinois [Nation] inviting us to trade with them – Our Brothers the Virginians call upon us to a treaty, and want part of our land, and we expect... will in a little time demand, if not forcibly take part of it from us, also as we have been informed they have been marking lines through our hunting grounds...

Why have we not had talks from you[?] We are head men and Chiefs, and Warriors also, and have always been accustomed to speak with Great Chiefs and Warriors...and therefore we wish to Speak with you and your Council.

Done at Chuck-ul-issah our Great Town the 28th day of July, 1783.

Minghoma
Pyamathahaw
Kushthaputhasa
Pyamingoe of Christhaura
Pyamingo of Chuckaferah



Letter from George Washington to James Duane, 1783

At the end of the Revolutionary War, George Washington wrote to James Duane, who was heading a committee on Indian Affairs for the Continental Congress. Duane's report, which he finished in October of 1783, was a direct reflection of Washington's letter. Below are excerpts from the letter.

I have carefully perused the Papers which you put into my hands relating to Indian Affairs.

...To suffer a wide extended Country to be overrun with Land jobbers—Speculators, and Monopolizers or even with scattered settlers is, in my opinion, inconsistent with that wisdom & policy which our true interest dictates, or that an enlightened People ought to adopt...

My ideas therefore of the line of Conduct proper to be observed not only towards the Indians, but for the government of the Citizens of America, in their Settlement of the Western Country (which is intimately connected therewith) are simply these.

First and as a preliminary, that all Prisoners of whatever age or sex, among the Indians shall be delivered up.

That the Indians should be informed, that...Britain has ceded all the Lands of the United States... That as they (the Indians) ... during the prosecution of the War could not be restrained from acts of hostility, but were determined to join their Arms to those of Britain and to share their fortune; so, consequently, with a less generous People than Americans they would be made to share the same fate; and be compelled to retire along with them beyond the Lakes. But as we prefer Peace to a state of Warfare, as we consider them as a deluded People; as we persuade ourselves that they are convinced, from experience, of their error in taking up the Hatchet against us, and that their true Interest and safety must now depend upon our friendship. As the Country is large enough to contain us all; and as we are disposed to be kind to them and to partake of their Trade, we will ... establish a boundary line between them and us beyond which we will endeavor to restrain our People from Hunting or Settling...

In establishing this line... care should be taken neither to yield nor to grasp at too much. But to endeavor to impress the Indians with an idea of the generosity of our disposition to accommodate them...

It is my opinion that if the Legislature of the State of New York should insist upon expelling the Six Nations [Iroquois Nation] from all the country they inhabited previous to the War... that it will end in another Indian War... That they would compromise for a part of it I have very little doubt, and that it would be the cheapest way of coming at it, I have no doubt at all. The same observations, I am persuaded, will hold good with respect to Virginia, or any other state which has powerful Tribes of Indians on their Frontiers...



Treaty with the Cherokee, 1785

The following list are some of the articles contained in a treaty signed by the Cherokee and the Confederation Congress of the United States in 1785. This treaty sought to end hostilities between the Cherokees and the U.S. and to establish the boundaries of the exclusive territory on which the Cherokee people would reside.

THE Commissioners Plenipotentiary of the United States in Congress assembled, give peace to all the CHEROKEES, and receive them into the favor and protection of the United States of America, on the following conditions.

Art. 1. The Head-Men and Warriors of all the Cherokees, shall restore all the prisoners, citizens of the United States, or subjects of their allies, to their entire liberty: They shall also restore all the negroes, and all other property taken during the late war from the citizens...

Art. 2. The Commissioners of the United States in Congress assembled, shall restore all the prisoners taken from the Indians, during the late war, to the Head-Men and Warriors of the Cherokees, as early as is practicable.

Art. 3. The said Indians for themselves, and their respective tribes and towns, do acknowledge all the Cherokees to be under the protection of the United States of America, and of no other sovereign whosoever.

...

Art. 5. If any citizen of the United States, or other person not being an Indian, shall attempt to settle on any of the lands westward or southward of the said boundary which are hereby allotted to the Indians for their hunting grounds, or having already settled and will not remove from the same with six months after the ratification of this treaty, such person shall forfeit the protection of the United States, and the Indians may punish him or not as they please...

Art. 6. If any Indian or Indians... shall commit a robbery, or murder or other capital crime on any citizen of the United States, or person under their protection, the nation, or the tribe to which such offender or offenders may belong, shall be bound to deliver him or them up to be punished according to the ordinances of the United States...

Art. 7. If any citizen of the United States, or person under their protection, shall commit a robbery or murder or other capital crime, on any Indian, such offender or offenders shall be punished in the same manner as if the murder or robbery or other capital crime, had been committed on a citizen of the United States; and the punishment shall be in presence of some of the Cherokees...

Art. 9. ...The United States in Congress assembled shall have the sole and exclusive right of regulating the trade with the Indians, and managing all their affairs in such manners as they think proper.



Ordinance Governing Relations between the United States and Indian Nations, Congress of the United States, 1786

In August 1786, the Confederation Congress passed a law intended to reorganize the bureaucracy responsible for handling Indian relations. Below are some excerpts from this ordinance.

WHEREAS the safety and tranquility of the frontiers of the United States, do in some measure depend on maintaining a good correspondence between their citizens and the several nations of Indians in **amity** with them...

Be it ordained by the United States in Congress assembled, that from and after the passing of this ordinance, the Indian department be divided into three districts...

That a superintendent be appointed for each of the said districts, who shall reside within or as near the district for which he shall be so appointed, as may be convenient for the management of its concerns. The said superintendents shall attend to the execution of such regulations as Congress shall from time to time establish, respecting Indian affairs. They shall have authority to place deputies among the several tribes and to remove all or any of them for misbehavior, and also grant licenses to traders.

There shall be communications of all matters relative to the business of the Indian departments kept up between the said superintendents, who shall regularly correspond with the Secretary [of] War, through whom all communications respecting the Indian departments shall be made to Congress... And whenever they shall have reason to suspect any tribe or tribes of Indians of hostile intentions, then, and in those cases, they shall communicate with the executive of the state or states, whose territories are subject to the effects of such hostilities. All stores, provisions or other property, which Congress may think necessary for the support of, or for presents to the Indians, shall be in the custody and under the care of the said superintendents, who shall render an annual account of the expenditures of the same to the Board of Treasury.

And be it further ordained, that none but citizens of the United States shall be [allowed] to reside among the Indian nations, or be allowed to trade with any nation of Indians within the territory of the United States...

Amity: Friendly relations



Report to Congress, 1786

In October, 1786, a congressional committee, believing that several groups of Native Americans were preparing for war, requested that Congress deploy additional troops to the frontier. The Committee's request to Congress follows.

By the UNITED STATES in
CONGRESS assembled
OCTOBER 20, 1786

The Committee consisting of Mr. Pettit, Mr. Lee, Mr. Pinckney, Mr. Henry and Mr. Smith, to whom was referred the Letter from the War Office... containing intelligence of the hostile intentions of the Indians in the Western Country having REPORTED:

THAT the uniform tenor of the intelligence from the Western Country, plainly indicates the hostile disposition of a number of Indian nations, particularly the Shawanese, Puteotamies, Chippewas, Tawas and Twightwees.

That these nations are now assembling in the Shawanese towns, and are joined by a banditti of desperadoes, under the name of Mingoos and Cherokees, who are outcasts from other nations, and who have associated and settled in that country for the purpose of war and plunder. --- That they are laboring to draw in other nations to unite with them in a war with the Americans.... there is the strongest reason to believe that, unless the speediest measures are taken effectually to counteract and defeat their plans, the war will become general, and may be attended with the most dangerous and lasting consequences:

That the committee therefore deem it highly necessary that the troops in the service of the United States be immediately augmented...

That the Secretary [of] War inform the executive authorities of the respective states in which the troops are to be raised, the number and rank of commissioned officers to be furnished by each state in proportion to the men.



Letter to President George Washington from Secretary of War Henry Knox, 1790

Over the course of the 1780's the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Six Nations had endured what they considered to be a number of affronts and mistreatments at the hands of the United States and its citizens. Fearing the potential of war with such a powerful nation, Washington asked Rev. Samuel Kirkland to lead a delegation to hear the concerns of the Seneca, one of the Six Nations. Below are excerpts from a letter written to Washington by Secretary of War Henry Knox reporting on the meetings.

It ought not to be concealed in this place that the Cornplanter is not a sachem [political leader], but the principal warrior of the Senekas—An Indian by the name of the Farmer's Brother is the Principal Sachem and another by the name of Red Jacket and a third by the name of the Big Tree... but the Farmer's Brother is a great drunkard, and has by that means lost in a great degree his influence—Red Jacket and the Big Tree have neither the talents nor influence of the Cornplanter.

The Secretary of War therefore submits the idea, that the Cornplanter's attachment should be rewarded and his future services secured by an annual pension in money goods domestic animals and farming utensils at his option to the amount of two hundred and fifty dollars, and the same sum should be annually distributed among other principal persons of the Senekas and other tribes of the six nations who shall give evidence of their attachment to the United States.

...Cornplanter has signified his willingness upon his return to the Seneka Nation to endeavor to obtain some other Chiefs, and go with them to the refractory tribes upon the Wabash and persuade them to peace. It is his opinion, that if the Wabash Indians would adopt the measure of sending some few of their Chiefs to the President of the United States, that it would have the effect to convince them from the population of the country that all resistance would be in vain, and only accelerate their destruction.

This measure, if carried into execution, appears to promise success, and that it would be proper to put it into an immediate train of execution.

...Nothing would more contribute to the reputation of the general government than an attempt to impart the blessings of civilization to the Indian tribes instead of extirpating [exterminating] them—Every wish therefore of theirs upon [civilization], should be encouraged and matured.



Silver Peace Medal, 1793 and Canandaigua Treaty Belt, 1794

As the United States negotiated and executed treaties with Indian Nations, they recognized the importance of engaging in traditional gift giving and commemoration practices to memorialize and record the agreements. A more European styled gift, Peace Medals were made in three sizes relative to the level of office held by the Indigenous leader to which they were gifted. In many instances, however, the U.S. found it advantageous to utilize symbols more traditionally recognized by Indian peoples, such as the wampum belt below commissioned by George Washington to commemorate the treaty between the United States and the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Six Nations.





Civilization Fund Act, 1819

Following the War of 1812, many in the U.S. government were frustrated with what they viewed as the lack of progress toward their goal of Americanizing Indigenous nations. In an attempt to accelerate the process they called “civilization,” Congress passed the Civilization Fund Act, excerpts from which are below.

An act making provision for the civilization of the Indian tribes adjoining the frontier settlements.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That for the purpose of providing against the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes, adjoining the frontier settlements of the United States, and for introducing among them the habits and arts of civilization, the President of the United States shall be, and he is hereby authorized, in every case where he shall judge improvement in the habits and condition of such Indians practicable, and that the means of instruction can be introduced with their own consent, to employ capable persons of good moral character, to instruct them in the mode of agriculture suited to their situation; and for teaching their children in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and performing such other duties as may be enjoined, according to such instructions and rules as the President may give and prescribe for the regulation of their conduct, in the discharge of their duties.

SEC. 2. And be it further enacted, That the annual sum of ten thousand dollars be, and the same is hereby appropriated, for the purpose of carrying into effect the provisions of this act; and an account of the expenditure of the money, and proceedings in execution of the foregoing provisions, shall be laid annually before Congress.

APPROVED, March 3, 1819.



Benjamin Hawkins and the Creek Indians, 1805

Benjamin Hawkins was a missionary who was appointed the primary Indian Agent to the Creeks, responsible for carrying out the civilization program through education and distribution of agricultural tools and goods.



Benjamin Hawkins and the Creek Indians, 1805, Artist Unknown



Constitution of the Cherokee Nation, 1827

As tensions with the United States grew during the late 1800s, leaders in the Cherokee nation, such as John Ross, came to believe that they could achieve greater standing in their negotiations if the Americans saw more of themselves in the Cherokee way of life. By 1827, for the most part, the Cherokee lived much like the whites around them: speaking English, practicing Christianity, and engaging in plantation agriculture. The greatest signifier of what the Cherokee at the time said was evidence of their level of civilization, was the adoption of a national constitution modeled on the U.S. Constitution. Below are some excerpts from that constitution adopted in 1827.

Preamble

"We the Representatives of the people of the Cherokee Nation, in Convention assembled in order to establish justice ensure tranquility, promote our common welfare, and secure to ourselves and our posterity the blessings of liberty, acknowledging with humility and gratitude the goodness of the sovereign ruler of the Universe affording us an opportunity so favorable to the design and imploring his aid and direction in its accomplishments do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Government of the Cherokee Nation.

The boundaries of this nation embracing the lands solemnly guaranteed and reserved forever to the Cherokee Nation by the treaties concluded with the United States is as follows, and which shall forever hereafter remain unalterably the same...

The sovereignty & jurisdiction of this Government shall extend over the country within the boundaries above described, and the lands therein is & shall remain the common property of the nation; but the improvements made thereon and in possession of the citizens of the nation, are the exclusive ... property of the [individual] citizens respectively...

The power of this Government shall be divided into three distinct departments, the legislative, Executive, and Judicial...

The Legislative power shall be vested in two distinct branches, a Committee and a Council each to have a negative on the other, and both to be [called] the General Council of the Cherokee nation...

All free male citizens (excepting negroes and descendants of white & Indian men by Negro women who may have been set free) who shall have attained to the age of 18 years shall be equally entitled to vote at all public elections...

The supreme executive power of this nation, shall be vested in a Principal Chief who shall be chosen by the General Council and shall hold his office four years...

The Judicial powers shall be vested in a Supreme Court, and such Circuit and inferior Courts as the General Council may from time to time ordain and establish...