A
ter the Revolution, and especially in the boom
times after the War of 1812, white settlers and
individual states claimed Cherokee
lands that occupied much of what
is now the southeastern United
States. In 1828, Georgia passed
laws that challenged Cherokee
sovereignty within the state. After
Andrew Jackson was inaugurated
in March 1829, he supported
Georgia’s claims, not surprisingly
since he was elected largely because
he favored Indian removal.

Eight months later, Jeremiah Evarts,
a missionary who worked among
the Cherokees, encouraged a mas-
sive petition campaign against the
impending Indian Removal Act. On
December 1, 1829, educator Catha-
rine Beecher wrote this circular, which
was published unsigned on Christmas
Day. Beecher—older sister of Harriet
Beecher Stowe—and Lydia Sigourney,
her colleague at the Hartford Female
Seminary in Connecticut, organized
the petition effort, drawing on their
many contacts in education and be-
nevolent societies. Petitions were an
acceptable medium for women’s opin-
ions, but in Beecher and Sigourney’s
campaign, women worked collectively,
nationally, on a heated political issue.
They were venturing into areas where
they were expected to remain silent.

Despite these efforts, Congress
passed the Indian Removal Act on
May 28, 1830. The Trail of Tears—
the forced march of the Cherokees
to Oklahoma Territory—began in
1838. The failure of the women’s
petition effort, and the reports of
Cherokee deaths and suffering, led
many to see parallels to the plan to
end slavery by sending freed slaves
to Africa. Some in the antislavery
movement abandoned colonization
as unworkable and unjust, and be-
came full-fledged abolitionists. But
Catharine Beecher was not among
them. She continued to favor colo-
nization, and saw abolitionists like
Angelina Grimke Weld as danger-
ous radicals.

Sources: Catharine Beecher, Essay on Slavery and
Abolitionism, Addressed to Miss A. D. Grimke
va.edu/dobson/abescha2.html (accessed by M.
Waters, 10-26-2016); Theda Purdue, The Cherokee
Removal: A Brief History with Documents, rev. ed.,
(Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016).

Discussion Questions
★ What does this circular reveal
about the political engagement of
women in the 1820s?
★ What could women do to
express their disapproval of
a government policy? How
effective was this tactic?
★ Why was petitioning considered
an appropriate way for women
to express their opinions?

Ever since the existence of this nation, our general
government . . . [has] acknowledged . . . [the Indian]
people, as free and independent nations, and has protected
them in the quiet possession of their lands . . .

But the lands of this people are claimed to be embraced
within the limits of some of our Southern States, and as
they are fertile and valuable, they are demanded by the
whites as their own possessions, and efforts are making
to dispossess the Indians of their native soil. And such
is the singular state of concurring circumstances, that
it has become almost a certainty, that these people are
to have their lands torn from them, and to be driven
into western wilds and to final annihilation, unless
the feelings of a humane and Christian nation shall
be aroused to prevent the unhallowed sacrifice . . .

Have not then the females of this country some duties
devolving upon them in relation to this helpless race?
. . . It may be, that female petitioners can lawfully be
heard, even by the highest rulers of our land . . .

This communication was written and sent abroad solely
by the female hand. Let every woman who peruses it . . .
endeavor by every suitable expedient to interest the feelings
of her friends, relatives and acquaintances, in behalf of this
people, that are ready to perish. A few weeks must decide
this interesting and important question, and after that
time, sympathy and regret will all be in vain.

[Source: Catharine Beecher, “Circular Addressed to Benevolent Ladies of the United States,” December 1, 1829. Theda
pg208583pg302b.html, 47].