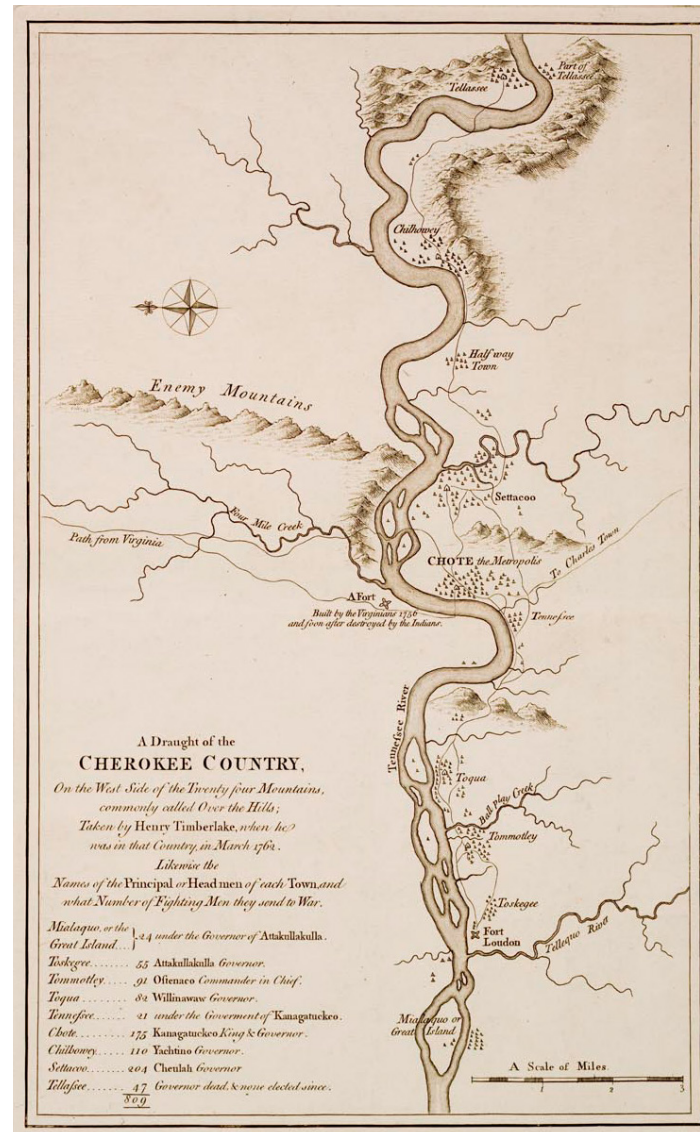


Nancy Ward (Nanyehi) 1738–1822

Nanyehi was born in Chota, the “mother town” of the Cherokees, which was located in what is now eastern Tennessee. She was closely related to important Cherokee leaders, and she became one herself.

By the age of 17, Nanyehi was married and the mother of two children. That year, 1755, the Cherokees raided the Creek Indians. Nanyehi fought alongside her husband, and when he was killed, she raised his rifle and led the warriors herself to a victory that expanded Cherokee lands in northwest Georgia. For her courage and leadership, she was named a Beloved Woman, or War Woman. It was the only title of honor a Cherokee woman could receive, and was usually given to women who had supported war parties in traditionally female ways, such as preparing food for the warriors, or had fought as warriors themselves. She was called the Beloved Woman of Chota, and known as Nancy Ward after she married English trader Bryant Ward in the late 1750s.

Cherokee society was matrilineal: kinship passed through the mother’s line. This gave women important power, which was reinforced by the traditional division of labor: women were farmers, and men were hunters. The gender roles were clear and separate, but both were considered essential and therefore in balance. It was different from the white



Henry Timberlake, *A Draught of the Cherokee Country*, 1765. Ink on paper. Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, 5549.

European view of a sex hierarchy, with men at the top and women regarded as inferior.

As trade and conflict between Indians and whites increased through the 1700s, Cherokee men’s roles became more important because trade and war were part of their domain. Beloved Women, however, continued to have and to use their considerable political influence. Nancy Ward was the only female among the voting members of the Cherokee General Council, and was the leader of the Women’s Council. Like Beloved Women of other villages, she was responsible for decisions about justice and vengeance. In 1776, Cherokees took prisoners after raiding a white settlement. Nancy Ward permitted the torture and death of a young boy, but she reportedly saved a captured white woman about to be burned at the stake. She also freed Patriot prisoners taken during the American Revolution, even though the Cherokees allied with the British during the war.

Beloved Women served as negotiators in important meetings with whites. When the Cherokees met with U.S. officials, Nancy Ward was often present, to the surprise of the assembled white men. In 1781, she addressed the U.S. treaty commissioners after settlers attacked Cherokee towns. She believed that peace would come only if Indians and whites saw themselves as one people, and she thought only the women on the two sides could make this happen. “Let your women’s sons be

Nancy Ward (Nanyehi) 1738–1822 *continued*

ours; our sons be yours,” she said to the commissioners. “Let your women hear our words.” Because she argued for peace, and for getting along with white people, some Cherokees at the time considered her a traitor, and still do today. Her cousin, Dragging Canoe, was and is a hero to many because he advocated armed resistance.

In the years after the Revolution, America’s white population grew quickly, and more and more settlers moved into Cherokee territory, which occupied much of the American Southeast. It was prime land, ideal for growing cotton. George Washington’s administration tried to prevent states from seizing the land illegally, but the seizures continued. So did skirmishes between Cherokees and settlers, and the signing of treaties that whites routinely ignored.

Americans began to expect that one day the Cherokees would be gone from the Southeast entirely. It seemed only a matter of time. During the Louisiana Purchase, Thomas Jefferson suggested that the local native population might exchange their territory for land farther west. That swap did not happen, but the idea took root in American thinking, and the Cherokees felt constant pressure from land-hungry whites. The issue divided the Cherokee people. Most were against selling land and relocating, but some moved west on their own, many to Arkansas, eager to live beyond the reach of white

encroachment. Others sold land to the state governments or individual settlers.

In 1816, Cherokee leaders in an area known as the “lower towns” signed a treaty that gave away a large portion of land in Alabama in exchange for land in Arkansas. The Cherokee National Council viewed the action as treason, and moved to arrest the signers. Against this backdrop, on May 2, 1817, the Cherokee Women’s Council urged the National Council to hold on to what remained of Cherokee land. Nancy Ward, nearly 80 years old, made her last-known speech, but was too unwell to deliver it in person. She sent her son, Five Killer, with her written plea, which was signed by twelve other women, including her daughter and granddaughter: “Our beloved children and head men of the Cherokee Nation, we address you warriors in council. We have raised all of you on the land which we now have. . . . We know that our country has once been extensive, but by repeated sales has become circumscribed to a small track. . . . Your mothers, your sisters ask and beg of you not to part with any more of our land.”

But the land sales continued. In 1819, the U.S. government purchased a large portion of the Cherokee Nation that included Chota. Nancy Ward died three years later, before the election of Andrew Jackson all but guaranteed the removal of the Cherokees from their land, and before the forced march of her people in the Trail of Tears, 1838–39.

Discussion Questions

- ★ How did Cherokee gender roles differ from European gender roles?
- ★ What were the responsibilities of a Cherokee Beloved Woman? How did Nancy Ward earn this title?
- ★ What role did Nancy Ward envision for women in the peace talks between the Cherokee and the American government?
- ★ How did Nancy Ward feel about the sale of Cherokee land to state governments? What action did she take?

Sources: Virginia Moore Carney, *Eastern Band Cherokee Women: Cultural Persistence in Their Letters and Speeches* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005); “A Brief History of the Trail of Tears,” Cherokee Nation Cultural Resource Center, <http://www.cherokee.org/AboutTheNation/History/TrailofTears/ABriefHistoryoftheTrailofTears.aspx> (accessed by M. Waters, 10-18-2016); Guide, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions archives, 1810–1961, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/-/hou01467> (accessed by M. Waters, 10-18-2016); Theda Purdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Theda Purdue, *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents*, rev. ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016).