

PRIMARY DOCUMENT A

Letter to Congress from Guwisguwi (or John Ross) in 1829

John Ross, also known as Guwisguwi (a mythological or rare migratory bird), was the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1828 to 1866. In 1829, knowing that President Andrew Jackson not only supported Indian removal, but also was orchestrating a bill to ensure it became federal policy, Ross crafted this memorial to Congress, forgoing the customary correspondence and petitions to the President.

We, the undersigned, Representatives of the Cherokee nation, beg leave to present before your honorable bodies a subject of the deepest interest to our nation, as involving the most sacred rights and privileges of the Cherokee People. The Legislature of Georgia, during its late session, passed an act to add a large portion of our Territory to that State, and to extend her jurisdiction over the same, and declaring “all laws and usages, made and enforced in said Territory by the Indians, to be null and void after the first of June, 1830. No Indian, or descendent of an Indian, to be a competent witness, or a party to any suit to which a white man is a party.”

This act involves a question of great magnitude and of serious import, and which calls for the deliberation and decision of Congress. It is a question upon which the salvation and happiness or the misery and destruction of a nation depends, therefore it should not be trifled with. The anxious solicitude of Georgia to obtain our lands through the United States by treaty was known to us, and after having accommodated her desires (with that of other States bordering on our territory) by repeated cession of lands, until no more can be reasonably spared, it was not conceived, much less believed, that a State, proud of Liberty, and tenacious of the rights of man, would condescend to have placed herself before the world, in the imposing attitude of a usurper of the most sacred rights and privileges of a weak, defenceless, and innocent nation of people, who are in perfect peace with the United States, and to whom the faith of the United States is solemnly pledged to protect and defend them against the encroachments of their citizens.

In acknowledgment for the protection of the United States and the consideration of guaranteeing to our nation forever the security of our lands, the Cherokee nation ceded by treaty a large tract of country to the United States, and stipulated that the said Cherokee nation “will not hold any treaty with any foreign power, individual State, or with individuals of any State.”² These stipulations on our part have been faithfully observed, and ever shall be.

The right of regulating our own internal affairs is a right which we have inherited from the Author of our existence, which we have always exercised, and have never surrendered. ...

It is with pain and deep regret we have witnessed the various plans which have been advised within a few years past by some of the officers of the General Government, and the measures adopted by Congress in conformity to those plans, with the view of effecting the removal of our nation beyond the Mississippi, for the purpose, as has been expressed to promote our interest and permanent happiness, and save us from the impending fate which has swept others into oblivion. ...

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We cannot admit that Georgia has the right to extend her jurisdiction over our territory, nor are the Cherokee people prepared to submit to her persecuting edict. We would therefore respectfully and solemnly protest, in behalf of the Cherokee nation, before your honorable bodies, against the extension of the laws of Georgia over any part of our Territory, and appeal to the United States' Government for justice and protection. ...

The nation, under a continuance of the fostering care of the United States, will stand forth as a living testimony, that all Indian nations are not doomed to the fate which has swept many from the face of the earth. Under the parental protection of the United States, we have arrived at the present degree of improvement, and they are now to decide whether we shall continue as a people or be abandoned to destruction.

²Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1791