

200 years after treaty, Cherokee Nation ready for seat in Congress

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Kimberly Teehee speaks in support of the Tribal Law and Order Act in 2010. At the time, she was a senior policy adviser for Native American Affairs in the White House. Photo by: Lonnie Tague for the Justice Department

The Cherokee Nation's principal chief made an important announcement in August. Chuck Hoskin Jr. said he would name a Cherokee delegate, or representative, to the U.S. Congress.

His decision would come as a surprise to some, but to the Cherokee, the announcement was nearly 200 years in the making. The story starts in 1835 with the signing of the Treaty of New Echota. For the Cherokee Nation, the years leading up to and after the signing were dark. Living in their ancestral homeland of Georgia, the tribe faced increased pressure to leave from white settlers.

State Of Georgia Ignores Court Decision

While other Native American tribes were being kicked off their lands, the Cherokee fought against removal and even won a U.S. Supreme Court case. However, the state of Georgia passed laws that hurt the Cherokee Nation, ripping homes away from Cherokee people.

John Ridge, a member of the Cherokee Nation, traveled to Washington to speak with President Andrew Jackson. He explained that Georgia was ignoring the court's decision. Jackson was not interested in helping Native Americans like the Cherokee. He told Ridge that Supreme Court Chief Justice "John Marshall made his decision, let him enforce it." He basically refused to help.

Cherokees Divided Over Signing Of Treaty

It was a time of great stress and suffering, said Mary Kathryn Nagle, a great-great-great granddaughter of John Ridge. Her ancestors agreed to the treaty because they wanted to be active participants in a negotiation. They thought that was better than being victims of forced removal.

Many other Cherokees disagreed, and they wanted to fight. Notably, John Ross, the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation at the time, was strongly against removal. That is according to Julie Reed, an associate professor at Pennsylvania State University and citizen of the Cherokee Nation.

Even so, Nagle's ancestors signed the Treaty of New Echota in 1835. The group would come to be known as the "Treaty Party," Reed said. Anger within the Cherokee still lingers, said Nagle, who recently heard people refer to the treaty as one that "traitors signed."

Treaty Forced Cherokee Off Ancestral Homeland

In early 1836, thousands of Cherokee citizens asked the Senate to get rid of the treaty, according to Smithsonian magazine. The Senate approved the Treaty of New Echota anyway, and Jackson signed it into law. The treaty forced the Cherokee off lands they had lived on for centuries. Many resisted the government, Reed said. This refusal sparked what came to be known as one of the darkest periods in Cherokee history — the Trail of Tears. It was a long journey from Georgia to what is today Oklahoma, and many Cherokee died along the way.

Nagle's relatives were later killed over the treaty. "We had a huge division in Cherokee Nation," Nagle said, adding that Cherokee people are still dealing with that division.

Treaty Also Allowed A Cherokee Delegate In Congress

The treaty provided for \$5 million and land in Oklahoma, where the Cherokee Nation still resides. There was something else in that agreement that, until late-August, the Cherokee had not taken advantage of: a part of the treaty that allows for a Cherokee delegate, or member, in the U.S House of Representatives. The House and the Senate are the two lawmaking bodies of the U.S.

"Over 184 years ago, our ancestors bargained for a guarantee that we would always have a voice in the Congress," Hoskin said. He spoke at a news conference in the Cherokee capital of Tahlequah, Oklahoma. "It is time for the United States to uphold its end of the bargain."

Chosen Delegate Worked With President Obama

Hoskin named Kim Teehee as the delegate. She has worked for former President Barack Obama and now serves in the Cherokee government. Hoskin said he expects the U.S. to uphold the promises it made in the treaty. Nearly 200 years after its signing, the Treaty of New Echota could allow the Cherokee to move toward membership in U.S. democracy.

Oklahoma's businesses have struggled in recent years. As a result, Native Americans have helped fund public services in Oklahoma like education and road work. Because of this, Reed says,

interest in having the delegate has grown.

"It's complicated." Reed said. "You can have positive outcomes in spite of really awful conditions. That doesn't make what took place any less awful. I think that's how people try to make sense of that period. It was a dark period, but the Cherokee people overcame it."

Quiz

1 Read the inference below.

The system of checks and balances in the U.S. government failed to protect the Cherokee Nation's rightful claims to their land.

Which selection from the article provides the BEST support to the statement above?

- (A) For the Cherokee Nation, the years leading up to and after the signing were dark. Living in their ancestral homeland of Georgia, the tribe faced increased pressure to leave from white settlers.
- (B) While other Native American tribes were being kicked off their lands, the Cherokee fought against removal and even won a U.S. Supreme Court case. However, the state of Georgia passed laws that hurt the Cherokee Nation, ripping homes away from Cherokee people.
- (C) The Senate approved the Treaty of New Echota anyway, and Jackson signed it into law. The treaty forced the Cherokee off lands they had lived on for centuries.
- (D) "Over 184 years ago, our ancestors bargained for a guarantee that we would always have a voice in the Congress," Hoskin said. He spoke at a news conference in the Cherokee capital of Tahlequah, Oklahoma. "It is time for the United States to uphold its end of the bargain."

2 Why did the U.S. government violently force the Cherokee to leave their homes by foot? How do you know?

- (A) White settlers began to steal land from the Cherokee because they believed it was valuable. "Living in their ancestral homeland of Georgia, the tribe faced increased pressure to leave from white settlers."
- (B) The state of Georgia created laws that took the Cherokee's land. "However, the state of Georgia passed laws that hurt the Cherokee Nation, ripping homes away from Cherokee people."
- (C) The Treaty of Echota required the Cherokee to quickly flee their homes. "The Senate approved the Treaty of New Echota anyway, and Jackson signed it into law. The treaty forced the Cherokee off lands they had lived on for centuries."
- (D) The Cherokee fought against the government's prior attempts to remove them because they felt the treaty was unfair. "Many resisted the government, Reed said. This refusal sparked what came to be known as one of the darkest periods in Cherokee history — the Trail of Tears."

3 Read the following passage introducing Mary Kathryn Nagle.

It was a time of great stress and suffering, said Mary Kathryn Nagle, a great-great-great granddaughter of John Ridge. Her ancestors agreed to the treaty because they wanted to be active participants in a negotiation. They thought that was better than being victims of forced removal.

Why did the author MOST LIKELY include this person based on this selection?

- (A) to show how the decision to sign the treaty caused a lasting division between the Cherokee tribe
- (B) to show how much John Ridge and his ancestors suffered for supporting the treaty
- (C) to show John Ridge's well-intended motivations for supporting the treaty despite the tension it caused
- (D) to show that there was another legal way to protect the Cherokee people's claim to their lands.

Which answer choice accurately characterizes Chuck Hoskin Jr.'s reaction to the promises included in the Treaty of Echota?

- (A) He felt surprised that a Cherokee delegate still had not been appointed 200 years after the signing of the treaty and named someone immediately.
- (B) He felt optimistic about the possibility of having a Cherokee delegate in Congress, but thought it came with a terrible cost to the Cherokee Nation.
- (C) He felt motivated by his tribe's increased role in public services to demand the representation his people were legally promised long ago.
- (D) He felt outraged that another legal promise had not yet been upheld by the U.S. government and vowed to fight for an increased voice in Congress.