

History is His Story

Andrew Jackson has been rejected by many moderns, though once a hero of the nation and founder of the Democrats. He was always a controversial figure. He was a slaveowner and advocated for the Indian removal. He was a booster of Tennessee and a land-seller of Indian territories he had himself conquered. But he was also a Christian, an orphan who became a brave and brash war hero, who saved the United States and adopted orphan children to give them a chance in life. Jackson's childhood was destroyed by the Revolutionary War which pitted not just British regiments against Americans but frontier families against one another. Jackson's parents and brother died in this conflict. After the war, a faction of angry Creek Indians, known as the Red Sticks massacred white settlers. Jackson organized a group of militia members that fought and overwhelmed the Red Sticks. Following a bloody battle, some of the homeless children were brought to Jackson and he asked the captured Creeks if they would care for a little orphan boy. The Creeks refused saying all the child's relatives were gone and he should just be killed too. The situation struck Jackson, himself an orphan, and he adopted Lyncoya. He instructed his wife Rachel to give Lyncoya every advantage, like their own children. (The Jacksons fostered several children along with Lyncoya.) He tragically died late in his teen years of tuberculosis.

Jackson went on to be America's hero when he organized a rag-tag group of civilians to successfully defend New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812. He spurred Washington to conquer Florida, then did the job himself. He is also charged with genocide against the Cherokees, but the true story of this is complex. Throughout history, conquered peoples were either enslaved or killed off by newcomers. And in Georgia, this was coming to a head in the 1820s. Jackson preferred the Indians be made American citizens, But most Cherokees resisted. They wanted to preserve their native culture, language and tribal identity. DC politicians liked the idea of "protected nations", an armchair utopia that was forerunner of the reservation system. But the Cherokees were so many, their state-within-a-state would comprise half of Georgia. Georgians rejected this, saying they would start a war and take the Cherokee land by force. Jackson liked many Indians but hated the tribal governments, dominated by mixed race opportunists who lorded it over the rest of the tribe and were determined to protect their own privileges. "These leaders," Jackson wrote, "are like some of our bawling politicians, who loudly exclaim, 'we are the friends of the people,' but who, when they obtain their views, care no more for the happiness or welfare of the people than he Devil does." The Georgia situation was headed for war. Jackson followed Jefferson in advocating Removal to the newly purchased Louisiana Purchase. This idea wasn't entirely their own. Many tribal leaders wanted it because they worried about how to keep autonomy amid the fast-growing American states.

The issue landed in Chief Justice John Marshall's Supreme Court. Some missionaries had violated Georgia law to go into Cherokee lands to preach the gospel. Marshall ruled that Georgia's laws were null and void, and Pres. Jackson negotiated the release of the missionaries from a Georgia jail. Meanwhile the Cherokees were split over the notion of going to an area that would become Arkansas, Oklahoma and Kansas. Major Ridge, a Cherokee ally of Jackson's in the Red Stick wars, got half the Cherokees to sign a treaty to move (Treaty of Eschota), But Jonathan Ross, a large plantation owner who was only 1/8 Cherokee with no desire to pull up stakes, convinced the other half to resist. Ridge's Treaty Party then moved about 30,000 people to the West successfully. The Removal Act was then passed in Washington to also affect 4 other large tribes. But many Cherokees held out and hid for years. Under the Martin Van Buren administration, the federal government demanded those holdouts honor the treaty, rounded them up, and used the US Army to force move the people. This Trail of Tears became one of the worst humanitarian disasters in our history. Of 35,000 removed, only 18,000 made it to Oklahoma. Thousands died as a result of the harsh conditions, greed and corruption of officials and private people taking advantage along the way. As a final act in this sad fiasco, the Ross followers assassinated Major Ridge and the leaders who had signed the Treaty of Eschota. Was Jackson to blame? True, he was paternalistic towards the tribes. He had acted under the notion that, if left somewhat alone, the Cherokees and others would grow into Christianity and Western culture then merge with USA. Considering the strides of Oklahoma and the Cherokee heritage, of their present Governor, Jackson might have been quite correct.