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# Helpers in a "Heathen" Land?: An Examination of Missionary Perceptions of the Cherokees

## **Abstract**

This analysis examines writings left behind by missionaries living among the Cherokees in the early nineteenth century to tease out the missionary perceptions of their Indigenous neighbors. This approach includes a heavy emphasis on decoding the white lexicon employed to discuss Native Americans to elucidate the broader cultural/racial intellectualism of the time. The utilization of this approach deconstructs a conventional "friend or foe" binary viewpoint of the missionaries, conversely constructing a greater complexity within the interracial and intercultural dynamics of the Early Republic, thereby providing a more layered and broader understanding of early America and, by extension, America overall.

## **Keywords**

Missionary, Cherokee, Indian Removal, Ethnocentrism, Racism, Civilized, Savage

# Helpers in a “Heathen” Land?: an Examination of Missionary Perceptions of the Cherokees

By  
Andrew Nosti



## Introduction

From the earliest contact between Europeans and Indigenous Americans, traces of cultural conversion and coercion underpinned the emerging interactions. These cultural pressures often materialized through religion, chiefly Christianity. As the “white man’s burden” of bringing what they considered civilization to the newfound lands pervaded the public conscience, spreaders of the gospel permeated Indigenous American communities. A special relationship between Christian missionaries and Native peoples developed, often serving as the first and sometimes only forms of interracial interaction.

Following their revolutionary victory, America’s first wave of officials had a challenge to confront: how to handle the Native tribes within and around American-claimed lands. The initial conquered lands approach soon gave way to Secretary of War Henry Knox’s civilization program. This directive, begun during George Washington’s presidency, established Native tribes as sovereign nations while simultaneously working towards their eventual assimilation into the dominant American culture. Knox and Washington, like most leaders of their day, viewed the Natives as uncivilized, which meant living and functioning under non-

Euro-American standards and mores. As these officials depicted the Indigenous inferiority as cultural instead of racial, they pursued a process through which the Native people would gain the intellectual, moral, and physical tools required for their acculturation. The early American government quickly endorsed Christianization as integral to this acculturation process.<sup>1</sup>

As missionaries sought out distant lands to transform tribal peoples, the U.S. experienced a transformation of its own in the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. This religious revolution formed a new frontier of American Christianity. Doctrines of self-improvement and revivalist reformation replaced stricter Calvinistic teachings of preordination. New forms of socio-religious egalitarianism undermined past religious hierarchies, especially in New England parishes only recently adjusted to the effects of the First Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century. These undercurrents sent shockwaves through the American populace and catalyzed a number of reform efforts. The combination of democratic egalitarianism and zealous self-improvement energized an individualistic approach that focused on changing society one person at a time, viewing the body politic as an atomized collective only alterable from the atom up.<sup>2</sup>

The Second Great Awakening had perhaps its greatest effect on religious institutions and efforts themselves. These effects extended beyond pulpits and congregations to missionary causes. Sometimes already structurally in place due to previous outreach and the federal government's civilization program, the

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<sup>1</sup> Theda Perdue, "Introduction: The Cherokees and U.S. Indian Policy," *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 7-11.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the reform movements stemming from the Second Great Awakening, see John Thomas, "Romantic Reform in America, 1815-1865," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 17, Issue 4 (Winter, 1965): 656-681.

Second Great Awakening's religious revivalism revitalized the missionary cause. A new generation of preachers swelled the missionary ranks and descended upon tribal peoples, bringing their gospel fervor to the "heathen" lands. As the atomized conceptions of self- and societal reform combined with the doctrine of Millennialism, which demanded faith across all people to usher in the holy millennium prophesied in scripture, many believers turned to the Indigenous Americans to prove their worth, craft a better society, and swell the ranks of the devout.<sup>3</sup>

While all missionaries provide a profound insight into early American perceptions of their Native neighbors, the missionaries to the Cherokees prove remarkable and worthy of special attention for a variety of reasons. These missionaries came from diverse backgrounds and held diverse beliefs. Some followed Congregationalist doctrines; others Methodist, Baptist, or Moravian. Many came from New England; others Tennessee, North Carolina, or elsewhere. By the time of removal, Congregationalists had established nine mission stations in the Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia regions of the Cherokee Nation and sent thirty-five ministers, school teachers, and artisans to these outposts; the Moravians boasted two mission stations in Cherokee Georgia; the Methodists had eight circuit-riding missionaries; and

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<sup>3</sup> For more about the causes and propagation of the Second Great Awakening, see Donald G. Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring, 1969): 23-43. For more on the effects of the Second Great Awakening, see Louis P. Masur, "Religion and Politics," *1831: Year of Eclipse* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 63-114; and Richard D. Shiels, "The Scope of the Second Great Awakening: Andover, Massachusetts, as a Case Study," *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Religion in the Early Republic (Summer, 1985): 223-246. To see how missionary-like effects affected other portions of the United States during the Second Great Awakening, turn to Carol Sheriff, "The Perils of Progress," *The Artificial River: The Erie Canal and the Paradox of Progress, 1817-1862* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 138-171.

the Baptists had sent a total of nine missionaries, teachers, and artisans.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that they worked with and lived among the Cherokees gives them a prominent position within the history of American-Indian affairs. The Cherokees held a special place in the minds of white Americans. They had long attempted to adopt the norms of white society and, subsequently, gained the moniker the “most civilized tribe” in America. The missionaries’ arrival in the 1810s, 20s, and 30s occurred during a pivotal era for the Cherokee Nation. Always attempting to halt the approach of the white man onto their lands, the Cherokees faced a crisis in the 1820s and 30s when Georgia and, beginning in 1829, the federal government demanded they relinquish their homelands to the state and encroaching settlers. The missionaries continued to live among the Cherokees throughout this period, and, consequently, through extant letters, diaries, and journals, they provide a crucial source of information for decoding the complex conceptions surrounding the Cherokees and Native Americans that pervaded the white psyche in the Early Republic. An examination of such documents complicates traditional, bifurcated understandings of helper and harmer in relation to Native Americans.

### **Civilized vs Savage**

Before deciphering the missionaries’ conceptions, one must first define and decode the language they employed in their discussions of the Cherokees. When Revered Cyrus Kingsbury marched from Boston to what is now Chattanooga, Tennessee, in January 1817, to establish the Brainerd School on behalf of the American Board

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<sup>4</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794-1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence*, Ed. Walter H. Conser, Jr. (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press), 60-61.

of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) – the Congregationalist missionary organization – he framed his impending work in the same binary context of civilization and wilderness, civilized and savage, that white Americans had applied to Indigenous Americans for centuries. On March 4, 1817, Kingsbury noted the enthusiasm among the missionaries over “the great and good work of building the cause of the Redeemer in this Heathen land.” Two days later, Kingsbury penned, “Here for the first time I beheld the dear sisters who are devoted to the arduous work of civilizing and converting the savages of our wilderness.”<sup>5</sup> In January 1818, Ard Hoyt, another ABCFM missionary, commented, “It is truly painful to see the ignorance of these people...in several instances when first speaking with them on the most solemn and momentous subjects, they would laugh like [mere?] idiots.”<sup>6</sup> As displayed by Kingsbury’s and Hoyt’s entries, missionaries, and others, constantly incorporated words such as heathen, savage, ignorant, and wilderness (or wild) in discussions of Native Americans. The strikethrough of “like [mere?] idiots” suggests that Hoyt may have reconsidered the original inclusion of such condescension, but its original insertion says more than his change of mind.

Other words and phrases, such as darkness, similarly coated their language. When facing the loss of Catharine Brown, a student whose model example would gain her fame and turn her memory into a partially fictionalized figure, because of her family’s western emigration, Ard Hoyt lamented, “Precious babe in Christ! a few months ago brought out of the dark wilderness; here illuminated by the word & spirit of God, & now to be sent back to the dark &

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<sup>5</sup> Cyrus Kingsbury, March 4 and March 6, 1817, entries in *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1823*, eds. Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998): 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ard Hoyt, Jan. 28, 1818, entry in *ibid.*, 45.

chilling shades of the forest.”<sup>7</sup> The constructed dichotomies became almost Biblical: a confrontation between light and dark.

This cultural lexicon functioned as much more than a conglomeration of abstractions; concrete notions grounded words such as heathen, savage, civilization, ignorant, and darkness in clearly defined ways. A host of long-standing standards combined to make a person or a people civilized or savage, and, in order to understand the missionaries’ perceptions of Native Americans, we must first understand these concrete qualifications.

One of the first requirements for “civilization” was a Lockean approach to economic living. As Roy Harvey Pearce explained in his work *Savagism and Civilization*:

This is agrarian idealism, the belief that men, having a natural right to their land by occupation and labor, achieve status and dignity by exercising that right and becoming freeholding farmers.... For Locke—and virtually all Americans were, in the most general sense, Lockeans—man achieved his highest humanity by taking something out of nature and converting it with his labor into part of himself. His private property, conceived of in terms of the close, personal relationships of an agrarian society, was his means to social maturity.”<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Jefferson echoed this ideology in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of

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<sup>7</sup> Hoyt, Nov. 20, 1818, entry in *ibid.*, 94. Catharine Brown would become a popular figure through her published memoir – published with the assistance of a missionary helper – and then dramatized in a play about her titled *Catharine Brown, the Converted Cherokee*.

<sup>8</sup> Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 67-68.

God, if ever He had a chosen people. Whose breasts he has made his particular deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”<sup>9</sup> When whites first encountered Native Americans, the indigenous peoples had no conception of land ownership or the linear territoriality that caused Europeans to divvy up and fence off land. Over time, American Indians developed a sense of land ownership, but it functioned as a communal commodity for the public good as opposed to a privatized parcel. Most Europeans and then Americans – and, therefore, the missionaries – viewed these clear set private boundaries as requirements for civilization, leading to what Jeremiah Evarts terms the “controversies about unappropriated lands,” or the discussions during the Early Republic over whether Indigenous Americans had a rightful claim to lands they did not separate and cultivate or whether state governments controlled such lands.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Memorial Edition, II, 229, as quoted in Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 67. This economic system espoused by Jefferson would come to be known as the “yeoman republic,” and, albeit meaning different things to different people, would come to dominate a large swath of the American public as Jeffersonians took power after the election of 1800. Contemporaneous to missionaries visiting the Cherokees and Georgia asserting its claims over Cherokee lands, Jeffersonian political economy had a resurgent reverberation throughout America through the ascendancy of its second great champion: Andrew Jackson. Jackson’s stance on political economy would, of course, influence his eventual stance on Indigenous Americans, which would have profound consequences for the Cherokees. For more on Jeffersonian political economy, see Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

<sup>10</sup> Anna Rosina, *The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokee*, eds. Anna Rosina Gambold, John Gambold, and Rowena McClinton. Abridged ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2010): 65; Jeremiah Evarts, “No. XVII,” *The “William Penn” Essays and Other Writings*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1981): 134.

This cultivation requirement and agrarian ideal caused agriculture to take precedence in American conceptions of civilization. Since Americans almost universally viewed their native neighbors as savages, they also largely believed Native Americans subsisted off of the “hunt,” despite apparent agricultural tendencies within all eastern American Indians.<sup>11</sup> These misconceptions led white Americans to endorse the proliferation of agricultural practices among the tribes. This effort manifested in the 1791 Treaty of Hopewell between the federal government and the Cherokees, stating, “That the Cherokee nation may be led to a greater degree of civilization, and to become herdsmen and cultivators, instead of remaining in a state of hunters, the United States will, from time to time, furnish gratuitously the said nation with useful implements of husbandry.”<sup>12</sup> Missionaries followed this example when among the Cherokees. At Springplace Mission, a mission nestled into the Appalachian Mountains along the border of Tennessee and Georgia, the Moravians set up orderly orchards to teach Cherokees agricultural methods.<sup>13</sup> The missionaries at Brainerd displayed a constant anxiety over what they considered the hunter state of the supposedly ignorant Cherokees and did all they could to eradicate

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<sup>11</sup> Pearce argues that the idea of Native Americans as uncivilized penetrated so deep into the American conscience that it effectively blindfolded them to information which would refute their perceptions, creating a system of cultural cognitive bias that perpetuated the Native mythology: “Universally Americans could see the Indian only as hunter. That his culture...was as much agrarian as hunting, they simply could not see. They forgot too, if they had ever known, that many of their own farming methods had been taken over directly from the Indians whom they were pushing westward. One can say only that their intellectual and cultural traditions, their idea of order, so informed their thoughts and their actions that they could see and conceive of nothing but the Indian who hunted.” Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Perdue, “Introduction,” *The Cherokee Removal*, 11. The Treaty of Hopewell comprised one portion of the civilization program.

<sup>13</sup> Rosina, *The Moravian Springplace*, 2, 74.

this perceived way of life. When first establishing the Brainerd school, Reverend Kingsbury explained his hopes that “we may be instrumental of putting them in a way to obtain an abundance of bread, & all other necessaries of life, by teaching them & their children to cultivate the earth.”<sup>14</sup> Over a year later, when a twenty-four-year-old Cherokee applied to live at their school, the Brainerd missionaries marked his “rambling li[f]e” and how he “obtained his living by hunting.” They went on to tell him “hunting could not be permitted, but we would put him in a better way to purchase clothes, viz., that we would employ him to labor with our men in the field a sufficient time to buy his necessary clothing.”<sup>15</sup> This value system of agricultural labor caused the characterization of “industrious” to become one of the most highly regarded traits among the students.

Connected to the view of the hunter state came an evaluation of backwards gender dynamics among the Cherokees. In the traditional Cherokee way of life, men typically hunted while women farmed. The rigidity of these gender roles broke down slightly when men assisted with clearing fields and planting crops and women dressed and tanned deerskins, but generally these separated roles defined Cherokee gender dynamics. At the same time, the Cherokees lived under matrilineal and matricentric societal and cultural structures, a dichotomous opposition to the patriarchal Euro-American society.<sup>16</sup> Since white Americans and Christian missionaries presumed the inferiority of the hunter state and associated masculinity with agricultural manual labor, public

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<sup>14</sup> Kingsbury, May 1, 1817, entry in *The Brainerd Journal*, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Hoyt, June 2, 1818, entry in *ibid*, 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> Perdue, “Introduction,” *The Cherokee Removal*, 2; M. Amanda Moulder, “Missionary Intentions: Literacy Learning Among Early Nineteenth-Century Cherokee Women,” *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 63, No. 1, *Indigenous and Ethnic Rhetorics* (Sept., 2011): 76-77.

leadership, and the head of house, a clear effort was made to redefine Cherokee gender roles.

As Barbara Welter lays out in her essay “The Cult of True Womanhood,” America experienced a firm tightening of gender roles at the same time as missionaries ventured to Cherokee land. These evolving gender roles created two distinct spheres for men and women: men would operate in the public sphere, working and bringing home the means to survive, while women would operate within the private sphere of the home, cultivating a domain of comfort for her wearied husband.<sup>17</sup> These sentiments rang true for the missionaries, displayed by Hoyt’s assertion that “our dear sisters at the north would gladly take part with their sisters here in the labor of making clothes for these naked sons of the forest.”<sup>18</sup> The acculturation of these emerging, or tightening, gender dynamics would force Cherokee women into the home and Cherokee men into the fields. To accomplish this, missionaries taught women how to cook, spin, weave, sew, and mend, as well as make butter, cheese, soap, and candles, while they taught men how to prepare lands and plant and harvest crops. William G. McLoughlin summed up this effort in his essay “Two Bostonian Missionaries”: “The Board [ABCFM] used the mission farm to teach young Indian boys how to become farmers; missionary wives educated young Cherokees girls to become farmers’ wives.”<sup>19</sup> The missionary drive to separate boys and girls in order to demarcate their separately defined roles caused the Brainerd missionaries to flirt with the idea of establishing a separate school for girl pupils,

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<sup>17</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1966): 151-174.

<sup>18</sup> Hoyt, June 19, 1818, entry in *The Brainerd Journal*, 65. Neither Hoyt nor any other missionary appears to have reasoned that any men could contribute to this clothes-making labor.

<sup>19</sup> McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 63.

with male missionaries teaching the boys and female missionaries the girls.<sup>20</sup>

The attempted application of patriarchal gender roles extended into missionary efforts to reform Cherokee marriage practices. Cherokee marriage practices had long included polygamy, specifically sororal or intra-familial polygamy where a man would marry a set of sisters. No laws bound husbands to their wives, so when a husband grew upset with his wife he would sometimes simply leave the household and live with his relatives until he married again and moved in with his new wife, still technically married to his previous one(s).<sup>21</sup> This practice often shocked missionaries. When Anna Rosina of the Moravian Springplace mission encountered John Rogers, a Cherokee, she noted “Mr. Rogers’s two women, namely a mother and her *daughter!* [author’s emphasis].”<sup>22</sup> This small notation conveys both the utter surprise, and judgment, in regards to Mr. Rogers’s union with both a woman and her daughter and the missionaries’ perceptions of marriage as a form of property ownership – “Mr. Rogers’s two women.” Missionaries worked hard to explain the flaws and sin of polygamy and to institute the “correct” form of marriage within the Cherokee nation. When one polygamous relationship led to complications with one Cherokee man’s

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<sup>20</sup> One missionary, a Father Gambold, “who has resided as a teacher, more than 12 years in the nation,” went so far as to say they “shall find it quite necessary to keep the sexes more separate. Being himself unable to have more than one school, he has, after repeated experiments of both sexes together, excluded the females entirely.” Hoyt, July 3, 1818, entry in *The Brainerd Journal*, 69. This prioritization of male learning over female learning reflects Welter’s conclusions regarding women’s education in this time period. For more information on this, see Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1966): 166-168.

<sup>21</sup> Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, Note 89 in “Notes for 1818,” *The Brainerd Journal*, 465.

<sup>22</sup>Rosina, *Moravian Springplace*, 80.

children's enrollment at the Brainerd school, Hoyt wrote, "How much better for this man & his children if he had adhered to the original institutions of marriage; few, however, of the natives pay attention to it."<sup>23</sup> The missionaries work to propagate their "original institutions of marriage" and ensure such complications would not happen again.

Similar to the social institution of marriage, Americans also attempted to enforce white governmental institutions on the Cherokees, believing these the best means to attain and maintain civilization. Cherokee society had long functioned under the structures of clan and kinship. Seven clans banded together to make the Cherokee nation, and blood ties rooted in shared ancestry held the clans together.<sup>24</sup> A combination of clan ties and adherence to a faith in cosmic harmony created an effective societal structure of clan governance. As Theda Perdue outlines in her introduction to *The Cherokee Removal*, "The obligation of clan members were [sic] so strong and so scrupulously fulfilled that the Cherokees had no need for a police force or court system: Protection, restitution, and retribution came from the clan."<sup>25</sup> Many Americans, including the missionaries, mistook the clan forms of governance and blood retaliation as anarchy and barbarism, and thus pressure caused the National Council to outlaw blood retaliation in favor of the Nation to resolve future injuries and disputes through legal means.<sup>26</sup> This same process caused an increasing centralization of power and, subsequently, more rigid social hierarchy within the Nation. Over time, the National Council, developing into an elite body made up of wealthy, English-literate, Christian Cherokees of partial white ancestry, instituted a number of laws that dissuaded polygamy,

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<sup>23</sup> Hoyt, Sept. 5, 1818, entry in *The Brainerd Journal*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Gambold, Gambold, and McClinton, *The Moravian Springplace*, 88-89.

<sup>25</sup> Perdue, "Introduction," *The Cherokee Removal*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Gambold, Gambold, and McClinton, *Moravian Springplace*, 89.

transitioned away from the matrilineal genealogy, and generally promoted a restructuring of the broader social order. These pressures eventually compelled the National Council to adopt a constitution in 1827 modelled on the American republican system, replete with a bicameral legislature and judicial system.<sup>27</sup>

## **Christianity**

Americans and, perhaps even more so, missionaries combined Christianity and civilization; civilizing and converting went hand in hand. As displayed in the Kingsbury quote above, Kingsbury places the “arduous work of civilizing and converting the savages of our wilderness” in the same train of thought.<sup>28</sup> The fervor of the Second Great Awakening and its resulting Millennialism and revivalism caused an even greater emphasis on conversion among Native Americans in the early nineteenth century. Missionaries disagreed as to the process of Christianization; Congregationalists favored a stricter, more hierarchical and local approach while Baptists and Methodists preferred a more itinerant, egalitarian, and open one. They also sometimes disagreed as to the steps within that process – whether Christianization directly meant civilization, whether civilization should precede Christianization, and vice versa. They did all, however, agree on one thing: the absolute necessity of Christianity for a civilized society. As McLoughlin puts it, this meant that “To Christianize was to Americanize.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite assertions by missionaries and other Americans, the Cherokees had long had religious and spiritual practices. They held a spiritual sense of cosmic harmony, a balance of the universe

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the background to the Constitution and the Constitution itself, see Perdue, “The Cherokee Constitution of 1827,” *The Cherokee Removal*, 58-70.

<sup>28</sup> Kingsbury, March 6, 1817, entry in *The Brainerd Journal*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 38, 63-69.

that held everything together. Ancestry and ancestral lands contained spiritual significance for the Cherokees. They also had a ritualistic belief system that included ceremonial events, such as rain dances. Beyond these views and practices, they did have some beliefs akin to Christian theology. One such similarity came through their origin story, which consisted of a deity figure creating life, potentially in a seven day cycle and out of clay, and told the story of the first man and woman and an eventual fall of humanity.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the rather clear presence of spiritual and/or religious beliefs and practices among the people, some missionaries depicted the Cherokees as completely areligious. In April of 1818, Hoyt wrote

There is nothing among this people to oppose the gospel, except their ignorance & the depravity of the human heart. They have not, as is the case with most heathen nations, a system of false religion, handed down from their fathers, which must be overturned in order to make way for the Gospel. They are rather, as the Prophet foretold the children of Israel would be, 'Without sacrifice, & without an image, & without an ephod, & without a teraphim.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For more information on the Cherokee Origin stories and missionary understandings of them, see *Moravian Springplace*, 106-110. For more information on rainmaking practices, see pages 84 to 86 of the same work.

<sup>31</sup> Hoyt, April 9, 1818, entry in *The Brainerd Journal*, 51-52. The use of "handed down from their fathers" demonstrates the patricentric mindset of the missionaries. As opposed to the exclusively male clergy of the missionaries, Cherokee women actually passed down the oral traditions that would contain the Cherokee spiritual or religious narratives.

Roughly three and a half months later, Hoyt noted a conversation the missionaries had with a band of visiting Cherokees in which the visitors expressed “they had no expectation of any thing after death.” Apparently, these Cherokees “seldom or never bestowed any thoughts on these things . . . they were not conscious of ever having done, said, or thought any thing that was wrong or sinful.” Hoyt concluded that “they appeared as stupid, ignorant & unconcerned as the hearts that perish ever destitute of that conscience which St. Paul speaks of as ‘accusing or excusing,’” and then goes on to say, “But it is not thus with all the Natives around us. Some of them are considerably enlightened, & feel the importance of receiving further instruction. Darkness itself cannot be seen without some light.”<sup>32</sup> The final comment perhaps proves the most fruitful within this entry, that “considerably enlightened” Natives “feel the importance of receiving further instruction.” Hoyt clarifies that this band did not include some particularly areligious or unthinking Cherokees, but instead could stand in for the whole of the people outside of those who actively turned to the missionaries for enlightenment. Thus, only involvement with the missionaries and conversion to Christianity could break apart “the thick darkness that shrouds their minds.”<sup>33</sup>

This sentiment extends the ethnocentrism previously outlined to religion, and creates a belief system which places value on the missionaries as a saving, guiding force of light. The emphasis on the missionary role of illuminating the ignorant and darkened Cherokees has the practical effect of making missionary ventures directly necessary, but it also furthers the paternalistic approach that treated the Cherokees like children who did not know better. Hoyt did not paint a picture of paganist people, but

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<sup>32</sup> Hoyt, July 26, 1818, entry in *ibid*, 75-76.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

instead took all religious/spiritual agency away from the Cherokees and placed it within the hands of the missionaries, who could pull the Cherokees from the grips of the darkness that surrounded them. He fails to recognize, in any manner, that their belief systems and abstract approaches may have little or nothing to do with an afterlife, and may develop in a complex way in which he never imagined. Instead, he characterizes these people as “stupid, ignorant & unconcerned,” seemingly without any conscience irony regarding the fact that they willingly entered into a discussion of his beliefs while he failed to inquire about, and therefore even remotely comprehend, theirs. Their lack of knowledge in regards to his faith gave Hoyt enough evidence to draw conclusions of their ignorance.

Not all missionaries diminished Cherokees’ agency to the extent or in the way that Hoyt did in this instance, and not all required the same strict white standards out of their converts. The Methodists and Baptists, already less rigid in their missionary structures, primarily due to their itinerancy, more openly admitted Cherokees among their religious ranks. Similarly, the Methodists and Baptists proved much more likely to ordain Natives as well as admit them. The ABCFM ordained a few, but their nearly impossibly unrealistic standards kept them from propagating a Cherokee class of Congregational preachers, and correspondingly made them rather critical of the Baptist and Methodist ordained Native ministers.<sup>34</sup>

In a parallel vein, the different denominations differed over usage of the Cherokee language within conversion efforts, both verbal and written, since Sequoyah had established the Cherokee syllabary in 1827. Baptist and Methodist missionaries had a much greater inclination to support utilization of the Cherokee language,

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<sup>34</sup> McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 83-90.

believing, in their more egalitarian approach, it could help them reach a much wider audience. Some Baptist and Methodist ministers did their best to learn at least conversational Cherokee and the larger organizations set out translating the Bible into a written Cherokee format. Congregationalists, on the other hand, resisted these bilingual efforts. The ABCFM summarized the Congregationalist view in its first annual report when it claimed, “Assimilated in language, they will more readily become assimilated in habits and manners to their white neighbors.”<sup>35</sup> Samuel Worcester, the first corresponding secretary of the ABCFM, expressed a similar sentiment when he said using the Cherokee language “would perpetuate the dying Indian tongue.”<sup>36</sup> The Congregationalists eventually relented and submitted to the usage of the Cherokee language, but they always viewed this as a temporary measure.<sup>37</sup>

### **Missionaries in Relation**

The savage mythos that surrounded Indigenous Americans penetrated deep into the American psyche. Indian captivity narratives circulated throughout early America and bloody stories of Native barbarity – of hatchets, scalps, and war-whoops – flooded the popular imagination and drowned out the voice and

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<sup>35</sup> Cited in McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 68. This sentiment – that the tools of conversion should function within the process of acculturation – furthers the supposition that Christianization and civilization served the same purpose.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel Worcester to Jeremiah Evans, July 1, 1815, ABCFM Papers, as cited in McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 68

<sup>37</sup> For a much more intricate examination of Americans’ attitudes and intellectual approach to Native American languages, see Sean P. Harvery, “‘Must Not Their Languages Be Savage and Barbarous Like Them’: Philology, Indian Removal, and Race Science,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 30 (Winter, 2010): 505-532.

presence of the actual Native Americans, as they became caricatures or stereotypes, more animal than human. In his letter to Andrew Jackson, then forwarded to Congress in February of 1832, Secretary of War Lewis Cass outlines some of the prevailing American views of the southeastern Indigenous tribes and the Native American peoples in general. He accuses them of a “predisposition to war,” of being “like children,” and of an “indolence and improvidence” characteristic “of the Indian race.”<sup>38</sup>

These assumptions of Indigenous character led Cass, and many others, to conclude that the “Indian race” would soon go extinct, especially if it maintained contact with the superior race and culture of the white man. This argument stemmed from an acceptance of the inevitability of white settlers encroaching upon Native lands, which would shrink their lands to a size unsustainable for their hunting way of life, thus ending it altogether. This reality proved unavoidable in the march of progress. In his Second Annual Message, President Jackson articulated this racial determinism and its inexorability

Humanity has often wept over the face of the aborigines of this country, and Philanthropy has been long busily employed in devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful

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<sup>38</sup> U.S. Congress, 22<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, *Removal of Indians Westward, Message from the President of the United States, upon the subject of the contemplated removal of the Indians to the west of the River Mississippi*, February 16, 1832, Referred to the Committee on Indian Affairs, 1832, (H.exdoc. 116), Washington: Thomas Allen, 1832 (Serial Set 219), 7, 9, 14. Americans managed, seemingly without any hint of cognitive dissonance, to hold several somewhat contradictory views of Native Americans. The popular image of Native Americans cast them as both threatening and incapable, both powerful and powerless.

tribes disappeared from the earth. To follow to the tomb the last of his race and to tread on the graves of extinct nations excite melancholy reflections. But true philanthropy reconciles the mind to these vicissitudes as it does to the extinction of one generation to make room for another . . . What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion?<sup>39</sup>

People who held these views of Indigenous extinction often predicated them upon the inability of the “savage” to change and achieve the civilized way of life of their white neighbors. Once again, Lewis Cass perfectly summarizes this view: “To collect savage men together, who are ignorant of the very first rudiments of civilization, who have, in fact, neither government, law, religion, property, arts, nor manufactures; who are actuated by impulse, and not by reflection; by whom the past and the future are almost equally disregarded, and to teach them abstract principles, is a process which seems, on calm reflection, to promise as little as it has performed.”<sup>40</sup> Cass depicts the missionary efforts, and all similar efforts to bring white civilization to the Indigenous

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<sup>39</sup> *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897*, II, ed. J.D. Richardson, 520-521, cited in Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 57. Especially note Jackson’s closing question again linking civilization and religion.

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Congress, *Removal of Indians Westward*, 11.

Americans, as vain; due to the inferiority of the race of “savages,” this race could never gain the implements of civilization and, as a result, would go extinct.

Some have argued that the missionaries worked among the Indigenous Americans throughout this era to grant salvation for their charges in the next life, as opposed to civilization in this one. Such an approach indicated a resignation, or perhaps acknowledgment, or this-worldly betterment in the form of missionary civilizing efforts. Roy Harvey Pearce followed this train of thought in regards to the missionaries: “Missionary societies proliferated; for conversion of the heathen Indian seemed to be the only way to save him, Christianity being the one thing which civilization could give him and not take away.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps this was true for some missionaries, as many expressed concern over the souls of Natives: on January 11, 1818, Ard Hoyt wondered, “And, if they are not enlightened by the Gospel, where will be their immortal souls?”<sup>42</sup> Yet efforts to save Cherokee souls does not exclude efforts to civilize them; missionaries taught civilization alongside scripture, practical living alongside theological ideals.

Beyond solely enacting plans to civilize Native Americans, many missionaries posited that Indigenous Americans could change, and some expressed satisfaction over past changes and optimism over future prospects. Revered Thomas Roberts, a Baptist missionary among the Cherokees, remarked, “The Cherokee children learn as fast as any children I ever saw. They are kind, obedient, and industrious. Their mental powers appear to

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<sup>41</sup> Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, 61.

<sup>42</sup> Hoyt, Jan. 11, 1818, entry in *The Brainerd Journal*, 42.

be in no respect inferior to those of whites.”<sup>43</sup> Jeremiah Evarts, in his essayistic refutation of Indian Removal, went a step further in his depiction of the Cherokees:

the Cherokees are neither savages, nor criminals . . . they are peaceful agriculturists, better clothed, fed, and housed, than many of the peasantry, in most civilized countries . . . they have been encouraged and aided, in rising to a state of civilization, by our national government, and benevolent associations of individuals;—that one great motive, presented to their minds by the government, has uniformly been the hope and expectation of a permanent residence, as farmers and mechanics, upon the lands of their ancestors, and their enjoyment of wise laws, administered by themselves, upon truly republican principles . . . and aided in the cultivation of their minds and hearts by benevolent individuals stationed among them at their own request, and partly at the charge of the general government, they have greatly risen in their character, condition, and prospects;—that they have a regularly organized government of their own, consisting of legislative, judicial, and executive departments, formed by the advice of the third President of the United States, and now in easy and natural operation . . . that a considerable number of the young, and some of the older, can read and write the English language . . . and, to crown the whole, that they are bound to us

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<sup>43</sup> *Christian Watchman*, March 9, 1822, cited in William G. McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 155.

by the ties of Christianity which they profess, and which many of them exemplify as members of regular Christian churches.<sup>44</sup>

Evarts, in his defense of the Cherokees remaining in their ancestral homeland, pointed out the progress they had made towards adopting white civilization. He displayed no signs of the extinction expectation so common to prevailing contemporary American racial thought.

Roberts and Evarts may have avoided the overt racism inherent in the arguments of Jackson and Cass, but they still fell prey to the ethnocentrism so vital to the construction of the Indigenous image.<sup>45</sup> Evarts never attempts to depict Cherokee culture as civilized, never considered it as a stand-alone equal to white civilization. Instead, Evarts argues that the assistance of “benevolent individuals” – whites – and their government pulled the Cherokees out of the darkness of their savagery and into the light of white, Christian civilization. Roberts, similarly, does not remark upon the abilities of the Cherokee children as impressive in and of themselves, but instead asserts their mental prowess in relation to white children.

Although relatively sympathetic, missionaries construed the Indigenous image through the lens of an all-encompassing ethnocentrism, the same lens which framed and sustained the

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<sup>44</sup> Evarts, “No. XXII,” *The “William Penn” Essays*, 175-177.

<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that missionary perceptions did not contain racial overtones. Missionaries’ ethnocentrism relied heavily upon the subtleties of racism. Many missionaries, especially the Congregationalists, utilized the pseudoscience of their day to classify Cherokees as “full-blood,” “half-blood,” or “mixed-blood,” and some tended to target the Cherokees with some form of white ancestry, exasperating the stratifications that had taken root in Cherokee society since the acculturation process. For more on this, see McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity*, 65-67.

racism which pervaded their white contemporaries. The prioritization of Euro-American agricultural pursuits, Christian knowledge, and republican governance display more than solely a desire to spread the American way of life. These efforts, combined with depictions of the Cherokees prior to missionary and government intervention, demonstrate a potent ethnocentrism which bounded the missionaries' objective ability to perceive their Native neighbors. Barbara Perry explores this process in her work *Silent Victims*. The inability to recognize value in the Cherokees as the Cherokees, and instead of placing worth on Cherokees in relation to whiteness, constructs an ethnocentric dynamic that operates on multiple levels. Missionaries' inability to recognize Native religion as religion, Native agriculture as agriculture, and Native government as government represents a broader trend in which whites denigrated Native knowledge systems, and, by extension, Native life. This inability to accept Native knowledge systems as knowledge systems and Native life as a legitimate way of life both manifested from white ethnocentrism and conversely authenticated it. Usage of terms like "ignorant" and "darkness" and then the eventual knowledge acquirement, or "enlightenment," that invariably came through a guiding white presence exposes the valuation of understanding only in relation to white understanding. Similarly, usage of terms like "savage" and "heathen" work in the same manner, evaluating and valuing civilization only in relation to white civilization, life only in relation to white life. This process functioned within the larger undercurrent of what Perry categorized as the racial/cultural genocide of Indigenous Americans.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Barbara Perry, *Silent Victims: Hate Crimes Against Native Americans* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2008): 42-43. She goes on to lay out how this process served to promote Euro-American interests: "It comes as no surprise, then, that through the process of colonization, indigenous

## Conclusion

Throughout the early nineteenth century, missionaries worked on behalf of the Cherokees and did their best to give voice to their cause. Many missionaries, such as Jeremiah Evarts, passionately championed the Cherokees and continually defended their rights to their land. Samuel Worcester and others went to jail instead of recognizing the rights of Georgia over Cherokee land, and helped build a public outcry against the injustice of the Georgian landgrab and legal assertion over the Cherokee people. Some missionaries, such as the Methodist Reverend James Jenkins Trott, married Cherokee women and started families with them, becoming a part of the tribe per Cherokee beliefs. Once anti-Removal efforts collapsed and forced emigration became a reality, some missionaries, like Evan Jones, trekked the horrors of the Trail of Tears alongside the Cherokees.<sup>47</sup>

And yet, despite these relationships, and despite their comparative racial progressivism, missionaries almost universally viewed the Cherokees and other Indigenous Americans through the same ethnocentrism that partially lent justification to Cherokee removal and propagated the popular view of the warring and degenerate savage. The framework of this ethnocentrism constricted the friendships between the missionaries and the Cherokees and their defense of the tribe. The missionaries believed in Cherokee rights, but their Euro-American cultural centrality

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knowledge and perspectives have been ignored and denigrated by colonial powers seeking to exploit indigenous resources.” For more on how Euro-American/colonial beliefs had a self-validating function, see Pearce, “Character and Circumstance: The Idea of Savagism,” *Savagism and Civilization*, 76-104.

<sup>47</sup> William G. McLoughlin, “Cherokees and Methodists, 1824-1834,” *Church History*, Vol. 50, Issue 1 (March 1, 1981): 44; Letters of Evan Jones, *The Cherokee Removal*, 158-162.

made them only able to assert these rights within the confines of white values: private property ownership, cultivation and/or exploitation of land, republican governance, and, most of all, Christianity. The missionaries supported the Cherokees, not in their right to live as Cherokees, but in their right to live as acculturated Americans.<sup>48</sup>

Recognition of the ethnocentrism present within missionaries – who perhaps held the gentlest view of Indigenous Americans – constructs a more complex comprehension of American-Indian affairs in the early nineteenth century. Instead of demonstrating a coalition of missionaries and Cherokees versus Georgia and Jackson, such ethnocentricity breaks down this binary-like dynamic and layers our understanding of the associated relations, language, policies, and events of the time. One begins to see that the Cherokee way of life faced an assault on all fronts: Georgians and Jackson threatened their homeland while the missionaries, their supposedly benevolent friends, assaulted their culture and traditions. This enhanced complexity subsequently lends itself to a more complex, nuanced understanding of American-Indian relations overall, both past and present.

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<sup>48</sup> Beyond the ethical dilemmas surrounding forced assimilation, a slew of practical issues arises as well. The scope of this analysis disallows a more refined explanation of these practical issues, but a quick explanation suffices for a cursory understanding. Cultural assimilation requires, and its advocates often seem to assume, a monolithic and static nature to culture. This has no grounding in truth. A national, societal, communal, and even familial culture means something different to each individual within those groups. This expansive difference effectively bars any form of assimilation, as acculturation to so many separate, and sometimes competing, cultures is, of course, impossible. In effect, Native Americans were damned if they did not attempt acculturation – likely continually viewed as “savages” in their traditional ways – and damned if they did attempt acculturation – forfeiting the ways of life so vital to their self-identities in pursuit of an impossible goal, which would leave them still depicted as “savages.”

Similarly, these conclusions and the general approach can serve to foster a greater understanding of early Americans and, thus, early America. The significance of prevalent ethnocentrism within missionary depictions and interactions with the Cherokees raise the question of how ethnocentricity coated other contemporaneous affairs. How did Americans view immigration and assimilation, especially from non-Protestant, non-Anglo-Saxons, who they likely perceived as drastically different from themselves? How did ethnocentricity inflect Manifest Destiny, in both land acquisition from Indigenous tribes and from Mexico? In what way does the assertion that “inferior” cultures/races face extinction while in contact with “superior” cultures/races affect an understanding of the support and effort to colonize freed blacks? These questions fall well beyond the scope of this analysis, but they all have intricate ties to the approach and conclusions of this piece. Ethnocentrism saturated early American thought, and an understanding of this creates a greater, more complex understanding of American history, whether dealing with Cherokee missionaries or something else entirely. When writing about the Cherokees, nineteenth century missionaries provided us with a tool to examine contemporary racial/cultural attitudes that illuminate both topics directly and indirectly dealt with by the missionaries and other topics they had no knowledge of.

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