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A Legacy of Bravery: The Indian Home Guards in the Civil War

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A Legacy of Bravery: The Indian Home Guards in the Civil War

Abstract

Many may not realize that Native Americans played a part in the Civil War, just as they did in many previous American wars. Some Native Americans enlisted with regular infantry units, alongside white Americans. These Native Americans believed they could achieve better treatment by the government and keep their land if they enlisted. They also got paid and fed regularly in the army. They did face discrimination by white soldiers, who believed that these Native Americans exemplified the stereotype of the lazy, drunk Indian. However, such stereotypes were often proved wrong. The most notable example of this is Company K of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters, made up mostly of Native Americans, who showed their courage and strength in the Battle of the Wilderness and the Battle of Petersburg, among others. In the South and West, most Native Americans tended to fight as separate auxiliaries. It was in this part of the country that most Native Americans had been forcibly relocated to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma as part of Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830. Foremost among these Native Americans were the five "civilized" tribes, called so because they, for the most part, attempted to integrate into American society to gain respect and stop encroachment on their land. These tribes were the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee or Creek, and the Seminole, and they would come to play the biggest role in the Civil War among Native Americans, mostly because they could not escape it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Battle of Honey Springs, Indian Home Guards, Indian Territory, Native Americans

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Legacy of Bravery: The Indian Home Guards in the Civil War

By [*Savannah Labbe '19*](#)

Many may not realize that Native Americans played a part in the Civil War, just as they did in many previous American wars. Some Native Americans enlisted with regular infantry units, alongside white Americans. These Native Americans believed they could achieve better treatment by the government and keep their land if they enlisted. They also got paid and fed regularly in the army. They did face discrimination by white soldiers, who believed that these Native Americans exemplified the stereotype of the lazy, drunk Indian. However, such stereotypes were often proved wrong. The most notable example of this is Company K of the 1st Michigan Sharpshooters, made up mostly of Native Americans, who showed their courage and strength in the Battle of the Wilderness and the Battle of Petersburg, among others. In the South and West, most Native Americans tended to fight as separate auxiliaries. It was in this part of the country that most Native Americans had been forcibly relocated to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma as part of Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830. Foremost among these Native Americans were the five "civilized" tribes, called so because they, for the most part, attempted to integrate into American society to gain respect and stop encroachment on their land. These tribes were the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Muscogee or Creek, and the Seminole, and they would come to play the biggest role in the Civil War among Native Americans, mostly because they could not escape it.

After the war started in 1861, the United States pulled all of its white troops out of the forts in Indian Territory to provide more manpower for the war in the East, leaving the Native Americans unprotected. In addition, when the government had relocated the Five Civilized Tribes, it had signed treaties promising to pay them a yearly amount of money. The tribes relied on this money to survive and provide services to their people, but in 1861 the government refused to pay them. This caused an ideological civil war within the tribes over which loyalty would serve them best. Some believed they should still keep their end of the treaty and side with the United States, even though the government had broken its promise. Others held that the treaty was now void and they should instead fight for the Confederates, as they had not broken any treaties. The Creeks, for example split in half.

Those with Union sentiment looked to Opothleyahola, who had been a prominent spokesperson and leader of the Creeks since their removal in 1830. Before the removal,

he had been an advocate of the traditional ways of the Creeks and had opposed removal, but he eventually came to see that it was inevitable. He urged neutrality and encouraged the tribe to uphold its end of the treaty. Others, called the McIntoshes, disagreed and took a pro-Confederate stance. This group was named after William McIntosh, who was the son of a Scottish man and a Creek woman. Even though McIntosh had died many years before the Civil War, his descendants carried on his legacy and fought for the Confederacy.

In addition, many of the tribes that came to support the Confederate cause were originally from the South and had shared cultural ties. Some Native Americans even owned black slaves, believing this could help them assimilate into American society. Their slaves were forbidden to intermarry and were generally treated similarly by Native Americans as they were by whites. This still poses a problem today because many people of African American and Native American descent claim to be Native American, but some tribes do not accept them or recognize their status. In addition, a lot of these slaves were not freed at the end of the Civil War because the United States still, to some extent, saw them as separate political entities that did not have to abide by the Thirteenth Amendment. They became freed a year later when a treaty was signed between some Native American tribes and the government in which the Native Americans agreed to free their slaves. However, this did not stop these Native American nations from passing discriminatory laws, similar to Jim Crow laws and Black Codes, aimed at the newly freed African Americans that lived amongst them.

After the Union had abandoned Indian Territory in 1861, Confederates were quick to move in, scattering the remaining Native Americans who sided with the Union. They attacked Opothleyahola and his followers on December 26, 1861. Opothleyahola fled, reaching Kansas with no food and water and leaving the Confederates with control over Indian Territory. Those who had fled wanted to get back to their homes, and the United States saw its opportunity. Thus, the Indian Home Guards were formed. The Union did not have enough men to spare to fight the Confederates in Indian Territory, so they took advantage of the Native Americans who wanted their home back and had them fight for it in order to win the war. This decision did not come without controversy, however, as many in Kansas were afraid that giving weapons to Native Americans would cause them to turn against the state's white citizens. They also thought Native Americans were inferior and would not be able to fight in the army.



Indian Home Guards being sworn in. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

At first, the Indian Home Guards were under the overall command of a white officer, while individual companies had Native American leaders. Later, white leadership took over, as the majority of Native Americans were illiterate and unable to do the paperwork required of officers. However, they were still often used to lead their men in battle, as Native American soldiers were more likely to follow a fellow Native American leader. There were other problems with these units, though. Many had trouble adjusting to the army's way of conducting warfare, which was much more regimented than they were used to, and there were a lot of desertions. In addition, some Native Americans treated their army-issued guns as their personal property and used them for sport or hunting. This led to ammunition shortages in the already ill-supplied ranks, and the government had to take the cost of ammunition used for personal reasons out of the Native Americans' pay.

Despite all these problems, the Native Americans fought hard for their homes, leading their white commander, William A. Phillips, to remark in his reports that he was "very much pleased with the conduct of the whole Indian force." On July 17, 1863, at the Battle of Honey Springs, the Indian Home Guard, along with other troops, gained a foothold in Indian Territory. The battle, fought between 5,700 Confederates and 3,000 Union troops, is often termed the "Gettysburg of the West" because it was the last real Confederate effort to protect this territory. This made it much easier for the Indian Home Guards to eventually take back the whole area.

The capture of the Indian Territory was important to the Union effort, as it helped them take back land that had been lost to the Confederates, but despite the important role

that the Indian Home Guards played in this effort, the treatment of Native Americans after the war was not reflective of this. No matter what side the Native Americans fought on, they were all treated alike and pushed off their land as Manifest Destiny and increased settlement took hold after the Civil War. Those who had fought for the Union cause were treated just the same as those who had fought for the Confederacy. Their land was increasingly shrinking and they became the target of U.S. military action. These Native Americans fought for their homes during the Civil War, only to lose them and be pushed off of them afterwards.

The Native Americans soldiers are not remembered and their contributions are not recognized. Instead, the Civil War's end led into the Indian Wars, in which many of the tribes that had helped the Union win were slaughtered at the hands of the United States military. There are no monuments to these Native Americans. The only monument which is remotely related to Native Americans is that of the 42nd New York on the Gettysburg Battlefield. It has a teepee on it, but only because the regiment was supported by Tammany Hall, which was named after a famous Native American leader. While their legacy is not remembered by white Americans, it is no doubt remembered by the Native Americans themselves, who will always know how bravely their ancestors fought for their homes. Non-natives should also keep in mind the importance of the Indian Home Guard's bravery, for they ultimately contributed to Union victory do but not receive the recognition they deserved.

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