

# John Ridge

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<b>Born</b>	<i>Skah-tle-loh-skee</i> (Yellow Bird) 1802, exact date unknown Oothacaloga (Calhoun, Georgia)
<b>Died</b>	June 22, 1839 (aged 36 or 37)
<b>Cause of death</b>	Assassination
<b>Nationality</b>	American
<b>Other names</b>	<i>Skah-tle-loh-skee</i> (Yellow Bird)
<b>Ethnicity</b>	American Indian
<b>Citizenship</b>	United States
<b>Spouse</b>	Sarah Bird Northup
<b>Children</b>	John Rollin Ridge
<b>Parents</b>	Major Ridge
<b>Signature</b>	

**John Ridge**, born *Skah-tle-loh-skee* (Yellow Bird) (c. 1802 – June 22, 1839), was from a prominent family of the Cherokee Nation, then located in present-day Georgia. He married Sarah Bird Northup, of a Yankee New England family, whom he had met while studying at the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut. Soon after their return to New Echota, Ridge was chosen for the Cherokee National Council and had political influence in the tribe.

In the 1830s, he was part of the Treaty Party with his father Major Ridge and cousin Elias Boudinot. Believing that Indian Removal was inevitable, they supported making a treaty with the United States government to protect Cherokee rights. Ridge and Boudinot were both signatories to the Treaty of New Echota of 1835, by which they ceded Cherokee lands east of the Mississippi in exchange for lands in Indian Territory. The land cession was opposed by the majority of the tribe and the Principal Chief John Ross, but the treaty was ratified by the US Senate. In 1839, after the Trail of Tears, Ridge and Boudinot were assassinated for their roles in the land cession.

## Early life

John Ridge was born to the Cherokee chief Major Ridge and his wife *Sehoya* around 1802 in their village of *Oothacaloga*, near present-day Calhoun, Georgia. The Cherokee were a matrilineal tribe, so he belonged to the Wild Potato Clan<sup>[1]</sup> through his mother, *Sehoya* (Susannah Catherine Wickett).<sup>[2]</sup> Ridge was often sick as a child.<sup>[3]</sup> He studied at the nearby mission school run by the Moravian Brethren at Spring Place, Cherokee Nation (now Georgia). It was founded on land given to them by his father's mentor and fellow former warrior, James Vann.

Ridge's father sent him to the Foreign Mission School in Cornwall, Connecticut in 1819, where he learned reading and writing in English and other subjects typical to middle-class education at the time. Many families in the town supported the school and were hospitable to its students. As the top-ranked student, Ridge was asked to write an essay for President James Monroe, to be presented by Jedidiah Morse.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Marriage and family

While at school in Cornwall, Ridge fell in love with Sarah Bird Northrup, the daughter of the school's steward. After two years, he convinced her parents to allow them to marry, which they did in January 1824.<sup>[5]</sup> The Cornwall community reacted angrily to the marriage of a Native American man and a white woman. Their unwillingness to accept his marriage reduced Ridge's admiration for European Americans and altered his hopes for future relations between the Cherokee and whites.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Career

After Ridge returned with his wife to the Cherokee territory, his fortunes in the political affairs of the Nation rose quickly. He became a leading member of the National Council, along with his cousin Elias Boudinot and his father's protégé, John Ross. He was highly respected by all the tribes across the Southern United States for his abilities and faithfulness to Indian welfare .

## Political life

Ridge's marriage was unusual. In the past, marriages between Europeans and Cherokee took place most frequently between European men, frequently fur traders, and high-status Cherokee women. They were strategic alliances believed to benefit both peoples, at a time when Cherokee chiefs sought more influence with the European Americans. Generally the man would live among the Cherokee; in the matrilineal culture, the children were accepted into the Nation as Cherokee.

Descendants of a Cherokee father and white mother, however, could have no true place in the tribe, as they would not belong to a clan. In 1825 the Council passed a law enabling children of such unions to have full Cherokee citizenship, as if of Cherokee descent on their mother's side.<sup>[6]</sup> By this time, Ridge's cousin Elias Boudinot (the oldest son of David Watie) had announced his engagement to another New England woman. Given the high status of the two young men, the new ruling made a place for their families and protected their children within the Cherokee Nation.<sup>[7]</sup>

As clerk of the Cherokee National Council, Ridge was part of delegations to Washington from the Council; in 1831 they protested Georgia's illegal annexation of that part of the Nation which lay within its territory. In 1832, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the associated case, *Worcester v. Georgia*, that Georgia's unilateral extension of its laws over Cherokee territory was illegal and unconstitutional. It ruled that the Cherokee Nation had sovereign status and appropriately would deal only with the US government. The delegation were dismayed to learn that President Andrew Jackson still supported removal of the Cherokee to lands west of the Mississippi River. Ridge reluctantly began to see the point of removal, which he had previously opposed.

Ridge and Boudinot both became leaders of the "Treaty Party," a group that advocated negotiation of removal under a treaty in order to protect Cherokee rights. They had begun to believe it was the only way to preserve the Cherokee

Nation, as European-American settlers were encroaching on their lands in present-day Georgia. They believed they had to give up the Cherokee land illegally annexed by Georgia. The majority of the Cherokee sided with the Principal Chief John Ross in opposing removal. Ross still hoped to make a settlement with the US allowing the Cherokee to stay in the east. Ridge hoped gradually to persuade the Nation of what he saw as the only way out of its dilemma, given the encroachment of European Americans.

Together with his father and Boudinot, Ridge signed the Treaty of New Echota in 1835 after final negotiations with a delegation in Washington City, D.C. They were part of the National Council's delegation, headed by Principal Chief John Ross, who still was trying to negotiate staying in the East. Since the treaty surrendered all Cherokee land east of the Mississippi River and against their wishes, the Ross faction, known as the National Party, regarded the Ridges and Boudinot as traitors. Despite the known opposition within the tribe and the lack of signature by the Principal Chief Ross, the US Senate ratified the treaty. President Jackson used it to justify the forcible Cherokee removal, in what is now known as the Trail of Tears.

The treaty provided for Cherokees who wished to remain in the east to do so. They would have to become citizens of the states where they resided and give up their Cherokee tribal status. This provision was widely ignored during the removal, and the US Army rounded up most Cherokee and their slaves from Georgia to take west. Among the Five Civilized Tribes, the Cherokee held the most slaves.

## Relocation

After the treaty signing, Ridge moved with his family, and those of his father, most of his siblings, his uncle (David Watie), and Watie cousins to what is now Indian Territory. This was years before the forced removal of most of the Cherokee in 1838. The Ridges and other families joined the "Old Settlers" of the Cherokee Nation West under Principal Chief John Jolly. Some of them had migrated west in the 1820s from North Carolina or Alabama.

On June 22, 1839, a group of 25 pro-Ross partisans of the "Late Comers" assassinated Ridge, his father, and Boudinot for having signed the treaty to cede the Cherokee lands. They attacked Stand Watie, but he survived. The attackers stabbed John Ridge 48 times, jumped on his chest, and kicked him repeatedly, all before his wife and children.

The attacks contributed to a wave of violence among the Cherokee that went on for years among the various partisan groups. The US representatives tried to negotiate a peace between the groups. Some of the enmity over the treaty was reflected in Cherokee alliances during the American Civil War. As it developed, Ross and a minority supported the Union. Stand Watie and a majority of the Nation (including most slaveholders) were pro-Confederacy and he served as a brigadier general in the Confederate Army. The pro-Confederacy faction were forced to accept conditions of a new treaty in 1866 after the United States won the war.

## Notes

- [1] <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=familyties&id=I35896>
- [2] Johansen and Pritzker, 777
- [3] "We Shall Remain: The Trail of Tears" ([http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremain/the\\_films/episode\\_3\\_trailer](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/weshallremain/the_films/episode_3_trailer)). *The American Experience*. WGBH-TV. April 27, 2009. . Retrieved January 30, 2011.
- [4] Jedidiah Morse (1822). *A report to the Secretary of War of the United States, on Indian affairs* (<http://books.google.com/books?id=MnRBAAAIAAJ&pg=PA275>). pp. 275–276. .
- [5] Carolyn Thomas Foreman (September, 1929). "The Foreign Mission School at Cornwall, Connecticut" (<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/Chronicles/v007/v007p242.html>). *Chronicles of Oklahoma* (Oklahoma Historical Society) 7 (3): 242–259. .
- [6] Yarbough, Fay. "Legislating Women's Sexuality: Cherokee Marriage Laws," *Journal of Social History* 38 (2004), p. 388
- [7] Gaul, Theresa Strouth, Ed. *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriett Gold and Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005, p. 16

## References

- Johansen, Bruce Elliot and Barry Pritzker. *Encyclopedia of American Indian History, Volume 2*. ([http://books.google.com/books?id=sGKL6E9\\_J6IC&lpg=PA777&dq="john ridge" clan 1839&pg=PA777#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=sGKL6E9_J6IC&lpg=PA777&dq=)) ABC-CLIO, 2007. ISBN 978-1-85109-817-0.
- Wilkins, Thurman. *Cherokee Tragedy: The Ridge family and the Decimation of a People*. Norman, OK: U of Oklahoma Press, 1986; ISBN 0-8061-2188-2 (1989 paperback edition).

## External links

- "John Ridge Family" (<http://www.paulridenour.com/jridge.htm>), Paul Ridenour genealogy website
  - John Ridge (<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=9436070>) at *Find a Grave*
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