John Ross (October 3, 1790 – August 1, 1866), also known as Guwisguwi (a mythological or rare migratory bird), was the Principal Chief of the Cherokee Native American Nation from 1828–1866. Described by European Americans as the Moses of his people, Ross led the Nation through tumultuous years of development, relocation to Oklahoma, and the American Civil War.

Between 1790 and 1865, the Cherokee attempted to become a nation state, lost their ancestral land, endured removal to the Indian Territory, and suffered the destructive Civil War, in which their early alliance with the Confederacy jeopardized their nation. Throughout these tumultuous years, the dominant political figure in the Cherokee Nation was John Ross, whose leadership spanned the entire period. As his mother was part Cherokee and belonged to the tribe, Ross belonged to her Bird Clan, as the people had a matrilineal system. By ancestry, he was one-eighth Cherokee and seven-eighths Scots, and he grew up in both Cherokee and frontier American environments. Educated in English by white men, he was a poor speaker of the Cherokee language, but his bi-cultural background allowed him to represent the Cherokee to the United States government. He became one of the wealthiest men of the Nation.

In terms of heritage, education, status, and economic pursuits, Ross closely resembled his political foes, President Andrew Jackson and Governor George R. Gilmer of Georgia. He was among the elite of the Cherokee Nation. By his own person, he called into question many of the 19th-century European-American assumptions about race and Native Americans.

The Cherokee Moses

Ross' life had a pattern similar to those of prominent Anglo-Métis in North America and Canada. Scots and English fur traders in North America were typically men of social status and financial standing who married high-ranking Native American women. Both sides believed these were strategic alliances, helping the Native Americans and the traders. They educated their children in bicultural and multilingual environments. The mixed-race children often married and rose to positions of stature in society, both in political and economic terms.
In the changing environment which the Cherokee encountered in the 19th century, they needed the skills and language which Ross had developed. The majority of Cherokee supported Ross, electing him as their principal chief in every election from 1828 through 1860. Given the controversy over the struggle over territory, a vocal minority of Cherokee and a generation of political leaders in Washington considered Ross to be dictatorial, greedy, and an "aristocratic leader [who] sought to defraud" the Cherokee Nation. Ross also had influential supporters in Washington, including Thomas L. McKenney, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs (1824–1830). He described Ross as the father of the Cherokee Nation, a Moses who "led...his people in their exodus from the land of their nativity to a new country, and from the savage state to that of civilization."[5]

Early life and education

Ross (also known by his Cherokee name, Guwisguwi) was born in Turkeytown, Alabama, along the Coosa River, near Lookout Mountain, to Mollie McDonald, a Cherokee woman of partial Scots ancestry, and Daniel Ross, a Scots immigrant trader. Born to a Cherokee mother, John Ross was considered born into her Bird Clan.[1][2]

Ross’ mother and grandmother were of mixed Scots-Cherokee ancestry. His great-grandmother Ghigooie, a “full-blood” Cherokee, married William Shorey, a Scottish interpreter. Their daughter Anna married John McDonald, a Scots trader.[6] In 1786 Anna and John’s daughter Mollie McDonald married Daniel Ross, a Scots trader who had begun to live among the Cherokee during the American Revolution.[7]

Ross spent his childhood with his parents in the area of Lookout Mountain. He saw much of Cherokee society as he encountered the full-blood Cherokee who frequented his father’s trading company. As a child, Ross participated in Cherokee events, such as the Green Corn Festival. The elder Ross was determined that John also receive a rigorous classical education. After being educated at home, Ross pursued higher studies with the Reverend Gideon Blackburn, who established two schools in southeast Tennessee for Cherokee children. Classes were in English and students were mostly of mixed race, like Ross. The young Ross finished his education at an academy in South West Point, Tennessee.[8]
Business activities

At the age of twenty, having completed his education and with bilingual skills, Ross was appointed as US Indian Agent to the western Cherokee and sent to their territory in present-day Arkansas. During the War of 1812, he served as an adjutant in a Cherokee regiment. He took part in fighting under General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend against the British-allied Upper Creek warriors, known as the Red Sticks.

Ross began a series of business ventures. He derived the majority of his wealth from cultivating 170 acres tobacco in Tennessee worked by twenty slaves.[9][10] In 1816 he founded Ross's Landing (now Chattanooga, Tennessee), served by a ferry crossing. In addition, Ross established a trading firm and warehouse. In total, he earned upwards of $1,000 a year ($13.7 thousand in today's terms). After Ross and the Cherokee were removed to Oklahoma, European-American settlers changed the name of Ross's Landing to Chattanooga.

In 1827, Ross moved to Rome, Georgia, to be closer to New Echota, the Cherokee capital, and leading politicians of the nation. In Rome, Ross established a ferry along the headwaters of the Coosa River close to the home of Major Ridge, an older wealthy and influential Cherokee leader. By December 1836, Ross's properties were appraised at $23,665 ($500837 today). He was then one of the five wealthiest men in the Cherokee Nation.[11]

Rise to national leadership

Political apprenticeship

The years 1812 to 1827 were a period of political apprenticeship for Ross. He learned how to conduct negotiations with the United States and the skills required to run a national government. After 1814, Ross's political career as a Cherokee legislator and diplomat progressed with the support of individuals such as the Principal Chief Pathkiller, Assistant Principal Chief Charles R. Hicks, and Casey Holmes, an elder statesman of the Cherokee Nation, as well as the women elders of his clan.

By 1813, as relations with the United States became more complex, older, uneducated chiefs such as Pathkiller could not effectively defend Cherokee interests. The ascendancy of Ross represented Cherokee recognition that an educated, English-speaking leadership was of national importance. Both Pathkiller and Hicks believed Ross could be a future leader of the Cherokee Nation; they trained him for this work. Ross served as clerk to Pathkiller and Hicks, where he worked on all financial and political matters of the nation.[13] They also steeped him in Cherokee tradition. In a series of letters to Ross, Hicks outlined what was known of Cherokee traditions.[14]

In 1816, the National Council named Ross to his first delegation to Washington. The delegation of 1816 was directed to resolve the sensitive issues of national boundaries, land ownership, and white encroachment on Cherokee land. Of the delegates, only Ross was fluent in English, making him the central figure in the negotiations. This was a unique position for a young man in Cherokee society, which traditionally favored older leaders.[15]

In November 1817, the Cherokee formed the National Council. Ross was elected to the thirteen-member body, where each man served two-year terms. The National Council was created to consolidate Cherokee political authority after General Jackson made two treaties with small cliques of Cherokee representing minority factions. Membership in the National Council placed Ross among the ruling elite of the Cherokee leadership. The majority of the men were wealthy, mixed-race and English-speaking, unlike most of the Cherokee, who still spoke only Cherokee.
Assumption of leadership

In November 1818, on the eve of the General Council meeting with the US Indian agent Joseph McMinn, who dealt with the Cherokee, Ross was elevated to the presidency of the National Committee. He held this position through 1827. The Council selected Ross because they perceived him to have the diplomatic skill necessary to rebuff US requests to cede Cherokee lands. In this task, Ross did not disappoint the Council. McMinn offered $200,000 US for removal of the Cherokee beyond the Mississippi, which Ross refused.[16]

In 1819, the Council sent Ross to Washington again. He was assuming a larger role among the leadership. The purpose of the delegation was to clarify the provisions of the Treaty of 1817. The delegation had to negotiate the limits of the ceded land and hope to clarify the Cherokee's right to the remaining land. John C. Calhoun, the Secretary of War, pressed Ross to cede large tracts of land in Tennessee and Georgia. Such pressure from the US government would continue and intensify. In October 1822, Calhoun requested that the Cherokee relinquish their land claimed by Georgia, in fulfillment of the United States' obligation under the Compact of 1802. Before responding to Calhoun's proposition, Ross first ascertained the sentiment of the Cherokee people. They were unanimously opposed to cession of land.

In January 1824, Ross traveled to Washington to defend the Cherokees' possession of their land. Calhoun offered two solutions to the Cherokee delegation: either relinquish title to their lands and remove west, or accept denationalization and become citizens of the United States. Rather than accept Calhoun's ultimatum, Ross made a bold departure from previous negotiations. He pressed the Nation's complaints. On April 15, 1824, Ross took the dramatic step of directly petitioning Congress. This fundamentally altered the traditional relationship between an Indian nation and the US government.

Never before had an Indian nation petitioned Congress with grievances. In Ross' correspondence, what had previously been the tone of petitions by submissive Indians was replaced by assertive defenders. Ross was able to argue subtle points about legal responsibilities as well as whites. [17] This change was apparent to individuals in Washington, including future president John Quincy Adams. He wrote, "[T]here was less Indian oratory, and more of the common style of white discourse, than in the same chief's speech on their first introduction."[18] Adams specifically noted Ross' work as "the writer of the delegation" and remarked that "they [had] sustained a written controversy against the Georgia delegation with greate advantage."[19] The Georgia delegation acknowledged Ross' skill in an editorial in The Georgia Journal, which charged that the Cherokee delegation's letters were fraudulent because they were too refined to have been written or dictated by an Indian.[20]

Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation

In January 1827, Pathkiller, the Cherokee's principal chief and last hereditary chief, and Charles R. Hicks, Ross's mentor, both died. In a letter dated February 23, 1827, to Colonel Hugh Montgomery, the Cherokee Agent, Ross wrote that with the death of Hicks, he had assumed responsibility for all public business of the nation. The year 1827 marked not only the elevation of Ross to principal chief pro tem, but also the climax of political reform of the Cherokee government.

The Cherokee Council passed a series of laws creating a bicameral national government. In 1822 they created the Cherokee Supreme Court, capping the creation of a three-branch government. In May 1827, Ross was elected to the twenty-four member constitutional committee. It drafted a constitution calling for a principal chief, a council of the
principal chief, and a National Committee, which together would form the General Council of the Cherokee Nation, a constitutional republic. Although the constitution was ratified in October 1827, it did not take effect until October 1828, at which point Ross was elected principal chief. He was repeatedly reelected and held this position until his death in 1866. He was very popular, among both full-bloods, who comprised three-fourths of the population, and mixed-bloods.\[12\]

The Cherokee had created a constitutional republic with delegated authority capable of dependably formulating a clear, long-range policy to protect national rights. They had a strong leader in Ross who understood the complexities of the United States government and could use that knowledge to implement national policy.

**Supreme Court litigation**

On December 20, 1828, Georgia, fearful that the United States would be unable to effect the removal of the Cherokee Nation, enacted a series of laws which stripped the Cherokee of their rights, suppressed their government, and regulated activities on their lands. They were calculated to force the Cherokee to remove.

Ross found support in Congress from individuals in the National Republican Party, such as senators Henry Clay, Theodore Frelinghuysen, and Daniel Webster and representatives Ambrose Spencer and David (Davy) Crockett. Despite this support, in April 1829, John H. Eaton, Secretary of War (1829–1831), informed Ross that President Jackson would support the right of Georgia to extend her laws over the Cherokee Nation. In May 1830, Congress endorsed Jackson's policy of removal by passing the Indian Removal Act. It authorized the president to set aside lands west of the Mississippi to exchange for the lands of the Indian nations in the Southeast.

When Ross and the Cherokee delegation failed in their efforts to protect Cherokee lands through dealings with the executive branch and Congress, Ross took the radical step of defending Cherokee rights through the U.S. courts. In June 1830, at the urging of Senator Webster and Senator Frelinghuysen, the Cherokee delegation selected William Wirt, US Attorney General in the Monroe and Adams administrations, to defend Cherokee rights before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Wirt argued two cases on behalf of the Cherokee: *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* and *Worcester v. Georgia*. In *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, Chief Justice John Marshall acknowledged that the Cherokee were not a sovereign nation, stating, "[T]he Cherokees as a state, as a distinct political society, separated from others, capable of managing its own affairs and governing itself, has, in the opinion of a majority of the judges, been completely successful." But he did not compel President Jackson to take action that would defend the Cherokee from Georgia's laws, because he did not find that the U.S. Supreme Court had original jurisdiction over a case in which a tribe was a party.

In 1832, the Supreme Court further defined the relation of the federal government and the Cherokee Nation. In *Worcester v. Georgia*, the Court found that Georgia could not extend its laws to the Cherokee Nation because that was a power of the federal government. Marshall stated that "the acts of Georgia are repugnant to the Constitution,
laws and treaties of the United States. They interfere forcibly with the relations established between the United States and the Cherokee nation, the regulation of which, according to the settled principles of our Constitution, are committed exclusively to the government of the Union." The Cherokee were considered sovereign enough to legally resist the government of Georgia, and were encouraged to do so.

The court maintained that the Cherokee Nation were dependent on the federal government, much like a protectorate state, but still a sovereign entity. But the dispute was made moot when federal legislation in the form of the Indian Removal Act exercised the federal government's legal power to handle the whole affair. The series of decisions embarrassed Jackson politically, as Whigs attempted to use the issue in the 1832 election. They largely supported his earlier opinion that the "Indian Question" was one that was best handled by the federal government, and not local authorities.

In an unusual meeting in May 1832, Supreme Court Justice John McLean spoke with the Cherokee delegation to offer his views on their situation. McLean's advice was to "remove and become a Territory with a patent in fee simple to the nation for all its lands, and a delegate in Congress, but reserving to itself the entire right of legislation and selection of all officers."

**Ross versus the Ridge Party**

McLean's advice precipitated a split within the Cherokee leadership as John Ridge and Elias Boudinot began to doubt Ross' leadership. In February 1833, Ridge wrote Ross advocating that the delegation dispatched to Washington that month should begin removal negotiations with Jackson. Ridge and Ross did not have irreconcilable worldviews; neither believed that the Cherokee could fend off Georgian usurpation of Cherokee land. Although Ridge and Ross agreed on this point, they clashed about how best to serve the Cherokee Nation.

In this environment, Ross led a delegation to Washington in March 1834 to try to negotiate alternatives to removal. Ross made several proposals; however, the Cherokee Nation may not have approved any of Ross' plans, nor was there reasonable expectation that Jackson would settle for any agreement short of removal. These offers, coupled with the lengthy cross-continental trip, indicated that Ross' strategy was to prolong negotiations on removal indefinitely. There was the possibility that the next President might be more favorably inclined.

Ross' strategy was flawed because it was susceptible to the United States' making a treaty with a minority faction. On May 29, 1834, Ross received word from John H. Eaton, that a new delegation, including Major Ridge, John Ridge, Elias Boudinot, and Ross' younger brother Andrew, collectively called the Ridge or Treaty Party, had arrived in Washington with the goal of signing a treaty of removal. The two sides attempted reconciliation, but by October 1834 still had not come to an agreement. In January 1835 the factions were again in Washington. Pressured by the presence of the Ridge Party, Ross agreed on February 25, 1835, to exchange all Cherokee lands east of the Mississippi for land west of the Mississippi and 20 million dollars. He made it contingent on the General Council's accepting the terms.

Lewis Cass, Secretary of War, believing that this was yet another ploy to delay action on removal for an additional year, threatened to sign the treaty with John Ridge. On December 29, 1835, the Ridge Party signed the removal treaty with the U.S., although this action was against the will of the majority of Cherokees. Ross unsuccessfully lobbied against enforcement of the treaty.

Those Cherokee who did not emigrate to the Indian Territory by 1838 were forced to do so by General Winfield Scott. This forced removal came to be known as the Trail of Tears. Accepting defeat, Ross convinced General Scott to allow him to supervise much of the removal process. On the Trail of Tears, Ross lost his wife Quatie, a full-blooded Cherokee woman of whom little is known. She died shortly before reaching Little Rock on the Arkansas River.21 Ross later married again, to Mary Brian Stapler.

Considering alienation of the land a capital crime, opponents of the treaty assassinated Boudinot, Major Ridge and John Ridge after the migration to Indian Territory. They also attacked Stand Watie, Boudinot's brother, but he
survived. Following removal to Indian Territory, there were years of violence between the factions. Dissent was exacerbated during the Civil War, when the majority of the Cherokee supported the Confederacy.

The two portions of the tribe tried to negotiate separately with the US government after the war, but it dealt only with the pro-Union faction, again headed by John Ross. He died on August 1, 1866 in Washington, DC while trying to negotiate a new treaty with the federal government. His remains were returned to Indian Territory for interment.

Recognition

The City of Chattanooga named the Market Street Bridge in Ross's honor, and a bust of Ross stands on the north side of the Hamilton County Courthouse lawn.

The city of Rossville, Georgia, just south of the Tennessee state line, is named in Ross' honor. It is the location of the "John Ross House," where the chief lived from 1830-1838 after the state illegally took his lands near the Coosa River. One of the oldest surviving homes in the Chattanooga area, it has been designated as a National Historic Landmark because of the importance of Ross and his leadership.[22]

Representation in other media

- John Ross's life and the Trail of Tears are dramatized in Episode 3 of the Ric Burns/American Experience documentary, We Shall Remain (2009).

Notes

[1] Moulton, John Ross, Cherokee Chief, 2
[8] Moulton, John Ross, Cherokee Chief, 5
[10] The Cherokee Nation jointly owned all land; however, improvements on the land could be sold or willed by individuals. It was passed through the matrilineal line, and property was controlled by the women of the tribe.
[17] This assertion is based on the records of the Congressional Serial Set, which are incomplete. However, the dates of extant memorials lend support to the idea that the Cherokee were the first nation to use Congress as a means of support.
At the time of her death, Quatie was buried in the Little Rock town cemetery; however, her remains were later moved to Mt. Holly Cemetery.

References


Further reading

Primary sources


Secondary Sources


External links

- The Trail of Tears and the Forced Relocation of the Cherokee Nation (http://www.nps.gov/history/NR/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/118trail/118trail.htm) a National Park Service Teaching with Historic Places (TwHP) lesson plan
- Walker County GA Attractions (http://www.walkercochamber.com/attractions.htm), Walker County, GA Chamber of Commerce
- "Ross, John (chief)". *Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. 1900.
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