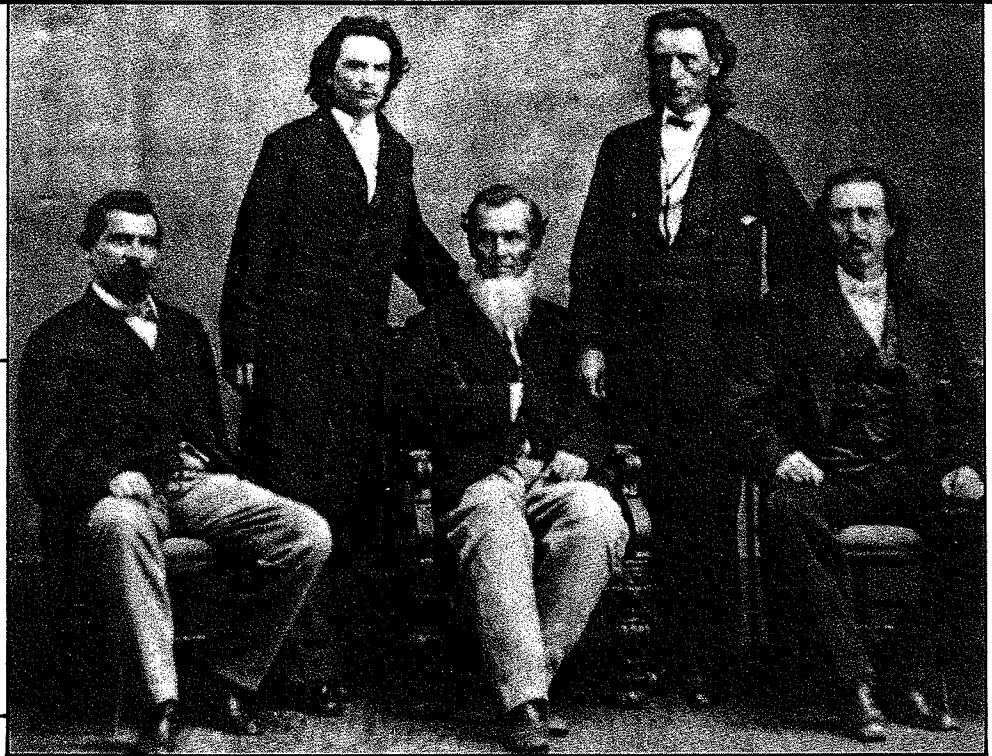


# Reconstruction and the Five Civilized Tribes

by Otis Hays, Jr.

*These representatives of the Cherokee nation went to Washington in 1866, the year after the Reconstruction conditions were announced by President Johnson.*



In September 1865, chiefs of the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Choctaw, and Chickasaw nations (known as the Five Civilized Tribes) were called to meet with U.S. Indian Affairs commissioners to discuss plans for Reconstruction. Major portions of the five Indian nations had supported the Confederacy during the war. The leaders now would learn what their people could expect for having done so. They feared that the penalties would be harsh, and they were right. Reconstruction would gradually destroy the independence of these tribes.

A generation earlier, the United States had sought the removal of the tribes from the southeastern states to "Indian country" west of the Mississippi River. Under

pressure from the U.S. government, Indian leaders reluctantly signed treaties that surrendered one hundred million acres of Indian land in North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi. In exchange, thirty-two million acres in Indian Territory (Oklahoma) were given to the Indians.

About fifty thousand Indians abandoned their hereditary homes and were herded westward under military guard. The Cherokee ordeal has come to be known as the Trail of Tears. The suffering of the other four tribes was equally great.

Although most of them survived the horrors of relocation, internal conflict arose when the Indians arrived in their

new homeland. Those who supported and those who opposed the signing of the removal treaties turned on one another with bloody results. Eventually, the violence ceased, as the leaders persuaded their people to live together in peace.

The removal treaties awarded a large tract of land to each tribe, and national boundaries separated the tribes. To govern themselves, the tribes adopted constitutions that combined democratic principles based on U.S. law and Indian traditions. Tribal laws were written and in turn enforced by Indian courts.

Most of the families lived on farm homesteads, while others bought slaves and built large plantations. By 1860, many of the Indians were living comfortably. But their peace was shattered when the Civil War erupted.

Most of the Indian slave owners were members of the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations, and those two tribes quickly gave their support to the Confederacy. In the other three nations, internal conflict raged, as pro-Union and pro-Confederate factions clashed. Regiments of Indian troops fought in several Civil War battles, often on opposing sides, both in Indian Territory and elsewhere.


As the fortunes of the Confederacy declined, so did those of the Indians, regardless of their allegiance. Not only were the Indians killing one another, but their homes were abandoned or burned, fields were untilled, and cattle were scattered and unclaimed. Even before the end of the Civil War, chaos consumed the tribes.

The leaders of the tribes grimly awaited the details of Reconstruction. At the 1865 meeting with the Indian Affairs

commissioners, they were told that the "Great Father" (President Johnson) was willing to return his "erring children" to his arms. But the forgiving father imposed the following conditions:

1. The Indians' slaves would be freed.
2. U.S. Army posts would be built in the midst of the five nations.
3. Railroads would be granted right of ways through Indian lands.
4. Some of the western lands given to the tribes by the removal treaties would be surrendered for white settlements and for the use of other Indian tribes.
5. Measures would be introduced that would eventually lead to U.S. territorial government for the Indian Territory.

While the five tribes were adjusting to the Reconstruction edicts, they rebuilt their homes and began to regain their prosperity. The new railroads that crisscrossed Indian lands carried masses of white settlers into the area, however, and soon non-Indians outnumbered Indians by three to one. The non-Indians demanded changes in each tribe's national political structure and legal system. Gradually, these changes occurred.

In 1890, Oklahoma Territory was created in the eastern part of what is now the state of Oklahoma. The five Indian nations still existed outside the new territory, but not for long. In 1898, Congress abolished the Indian courts and placed everybody, Indian and non-Indian alike, under U.S. law enforced by U.S. courts. Finally, in 1906, the Five Civilized Tribes agreed to abolish the remnants of their national governments. The following year, Oklahoma entered the Union as the forty-sixth state. 

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

## **Reconstruction and the Five Civilized Tribes**

**Directions:** Use the article to answer the following questions. CS means complete sentences.

1. List the names of the Five Civilized Tribes:

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2. During the war, which side did most people in the five nations support?

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3. Why do you think the Indians fought for the side that they did? (CS)

4. What hardships did the Indians suffer during the war? (CS)

5. How were the terms of Reconstruction different for Indians than the rest of the Confederacy? (CS)

6. How did the terms of Reconstruction affect the Indians long after the end of the war and Reconstruction? (CS)