THE INDIANS' CIVIL WAR
CHOOSING SIDES

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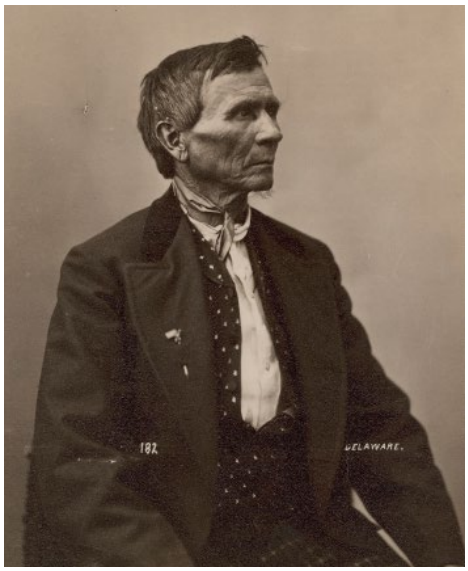
THOUSANDS OF NATIVE AMERICANS served in the Union and Confederate armies during the Civil War.[1] Thousands more participated less directly in the War between the States, aiding or sabotaging one side or another while remaining outside the military. Still others suffered as the war exacerbated internal tribal enmities or brought violence to their homelands. Native Americans' experiences in the Civil War were as diverse as the tribes themselves. From the Confederate rangers of the Great Smoky Mountains to Ulysses S. Grant's right-hand man, Native Americans significantly influenced the outcome of the war from both sides.

What motivated Native peoples to participate in the Civil War? They were not U.S. citizens and had been progressively dispossessed of their rights, lands, and lives in the decades leading up to—and during—the Civil War. Yet most Indians viewed participation in the war as an attempt to retain or even regain tribal autonomy. Native nations that allied with the federal cause did so with the hope that their treaties would be upheld or the alliance would enable them to forge better treaties and negotiate the return of some of their lost homelands. Many tribes that aligned with the Confederacy—and the majority of Native people who fought sided with the South—negotiated new treaties with the rebel government, resentful of the federal government's treatment in the preceding years. The government-run, forced removals of the 1830s were fresh in the minds of Southeastern peoples now living west of the Mississippi. Some of those removed had enslaved people and supported the Confederacy in order to defend slavery. Generally, patriotism toward the North or South was not a primary motivating factor; Native peoples were far more loyal to their own nations than to any occupying their homelands.

Approximately 3,530 Native Americans enlisted in the Union army.[2] A few Native nations and individuals gained a reputation for skill as guides and trackers. The Lenape (Delaware) served as the most notable intermediaries,

Henry Rice Hill (or SanJanMonEKah, Ho-Chunk), ca. 1900. A private in Company A of the Omaha Scouts during the Civil War, Hill wears a tail feather of a golden eagle in his hat to signify his warrior or veteran status. He holds a pipe tomahawk and wears a beaded choker and two bandolier bags. Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS-60910



Black Beaver (or Suck-tum-mah-kway, Lenape [Delaware], 1806–1880), photographed by Alexander Gardner during an 1872 Lenape delegation to Washington, DC. A guide, interpreter, and one of the most accomplished Indian scouts on the continent, Black Beaver offered his experience to the Union early in the Civil War, though well into his fifties.[3] NMAI P03344

interpreters, and guides. Ejected from their mid-Atlantic homelands, some Lenapes who settled in Kansas hoped to establish a new home by siding with the Union. Around 170 served, some raiding Confederate-allied tribes in Indian Territory, others acting as scouts and cavalrymen. Black Beaver was the most well known. In the 1840s, he had guided wagon trains west and had been the most accomplished Indian scout, commanding the only Native company—Black Beaver's Spy Company, a Texas mounted volunteer company of Shawnee and Lenape men—to serve during the Mexican War (1846–48).[4] During the Civil War, he warned federal troops of Confederate advances and led troops hundreds of miles through enemy territory without losing men or supplies.[5]

Some individuals, such as Private Austin George, a Mashantucket Pequot from Connecticut, were assigned to "colored" regiments and fought almost entirely with African American troops. George, previously a sailor who may have joined for economic reasons, was a member of the Thirty-First United States Colored Infantry of the Army of the Potomac.[6] Unsurprisingly, the "colored" regiments suffered from racism; they received less pay than their white counterparts and were assigned to rear-area duties such as guarding supply lines.

Long afflicted by social and economic discrimination in Virginia, Pamunkey people took on critical roles for the Union. After the war invaded their homelands in spring 1862, many Virginia tribes were forced to flee or became refugees. Union General George B. McClellan recognized that the nations of the Powhatan Confederacy would be able to navigate the complex terrain and rivers; he hired them as guides, river pilots, and spies. Most famous of the fourteen Powhatans to serve as guides was William Terrill Bradby (Pamunkey/Chickahominy). Bradby guided over land and sea, and he served as a spy for Pinkerton's Secret Service, which led espionage efforts on behalf of the Union army. Respected by his community after the war, Bradby became an entertainer, advocate, and adviser on Pamunkey culture to prominent anthropologists.[7]

Despite pressure and coercion to serve the Confederacy, many of the Lumbee people in North Carolina operated as citizen-guerrillas—not officially Union, but certainly anti-South. They rejected the South as racist and resented the subservient status imposed upon them by white southerners. In 1864, a teenager named Henry Berry Lowry and his Lowry Band (including family, other Indians, African Americans, whites, and escaped Union soldiers) became folk

ABOVE: Henry Berry Lowry (Lumbee, ca. 1845–?) Courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina

heroes. For ten years, the Lowry Band resisted, raided, killed, and otherwise undermined white supremacy, the North Carolina Home Guard, and the emerging Ku Klux Klan. They faced violence and retribution, yet they continued until 1874, when their last member died. Henry Berry Lowry's "outlaw" legacy is still honored by the Lumbee today.[8]

The most prominent Native American to serve in the Civil War was Ely Samuel Parker, a Seneca man from the Tonawanda Reservation in New York. Educated by his Native grandfather in the old ways and by Baptists in mainstream white ways, Parker read law, learned engineering, and was selected by his people as a tribal leader. He was active in Tonawanda tribal matters and cared for family and farm before receiving a commission in 1863 as a captain in the

RIGHT: William Terrill Bradby, dressed traditionally and holding a club, October 1899. Photo by De Lancey W. Gill. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution [NAA INV 06197600]

William Terrill Bradby (Pamunkey, 1833–?) and other men from Virginia's Pamunkey and Mattaponi Nations served as river pilots, land guides, and spies for the Union army during the 1862 Peninsular Campaign. They piloted steamers, tugboats, gunboats, and torpedo boats during the remainder of the Civil War.

Ely S. Parker, 1860–65. Photo by Mathew Brady, National Archives photo no. 529376

At the surrender at Appomattox in 1865, Ely S. Parker (Seneca, 1828–1895) was the highest ranking American Indian in the Union army, a lieutenant colonel. As General Ulysses S. Grant's secretary, he drafted the terms of surrender. A popular story states that Confederate General Robert E. Lee, noticing that Parker was an American Indian, remarked, "I am glad to see one real American here." Parker later recalled, "I shook his hand and said, 'We are all Americans.'"[9]

Union army. He served as assistant adjutant general, division engineer, and, after General Ulysses S. Grant assumed command of the Union army, acted as Grant's military secretary. By the end of the war, Parker had earned the rank of brevet brigadier general and, at Lee's surrender at Appomattox, drew up the documents of surrender while standing at Grant's side. Grant praised and valued Parker's talents; afterward, Grant acted as the best man at Parker's wedding and appointed him as the first Native American commissioner of Indian Affairs.

While the main battles between the North and South raged in the East, the United States waged a bitter military campaign to defeat American Indians in the West. Union-aligned forces, including units awaiting assignment and those diverted from Civil War battlefields, found themselves deployed against Native nations. The most infamous encounter occurred in 1864 at Sand Creek, where Colorado volunteer cavalrymen under the command of Colonel John Chivington massacred two hundred Cheyennes and Arapahos, mostly women, children, and elderly. A lesser-known but brutal attack was perpetrated in 1863 by California Volunteers, who killed an estimated 250 to 400 Northwestern Shoshone men, women, and children in Idaho.[10]

THE VAST MAJORITY of Native people who served in the Civil War fought for the Confederacy. After surviving removals, broken treaties, and other depredations enacted by the federal government, southern Indian nations sought to renegotiate their political situations with the new government, hoping to gain a stable land base. In some cases, such as the Catawba of North Carolina, entire tribes allied with the Confederacy.[11] In western North Carolina, William Holland Thomas's Confederate Legion of Cherokee Indians and Highlanders included four hundred Cherokees who had avoided removal beyond the Mississippi and followed a leader they knew and trusted. Active between 1862 and 1865, the legion played a critical role in defense of the Great Smoky Mountains. Led by Thomas, a white man who had been adopted by the Cherokee chief

General Ulysses S. Grant (fourth from left) and his staff, including Lieutenant Colonel Ely S. Parker (second from the right), late spring, 1864. Photo by Mathew Brady, National Archives photo no. 524444

Yonaguska as a child, the legion gained a reputation for ferocity and was the last Confederate unit east of the Mississippi River to surrender.[12] Ostensibly in return for their support of the South, North Carolina affirmed the Cherokee right to residency on the lands that Thomas had accumulated in their interest before the Civil War. Without the legacy of the Thomas Legion or the support of its commander, the Cherokee might not have retained any of their homelands east of the Mississippi; today these lands are called the Qualla Boundary Reservation, home to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians.

The Civil War left many Native communities destitute, perhaps none so much as those in Indian Territory, where the war exacerbated fissures existing prior to the tribes' removal from the east. The Confederate government took advantage, negotiating new treaties with leaders from the Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations. Many Native people had adopted Southern culture and attitudes, including the ownership of enslaved people. The Cherokee and Muscogee split along lines similar to those they had over Removal—resulting in infighting that decimated the world they had rebuilt. Some Native nations agreed to assist the Confederacy versus raising regiments; the Comanche, among others, signed a treaty with the Confederacy, raiding Union supply lines and otherwise supporting Southern efforts. In the end, the Civil War damaged some Native nations as deeply as had their removal, with consequences still felt today.