

THE GOLD RUSH IN GEORGIA, A DEFINING MOMENT

Ordinarily the discovery of gold would bring excitement and speculation, but not this time, at least not to Cherokees living in northwest Georgia in 1829. The pronouncement came as a bad omen, a tightening of the noose, or at least one more nail in the coffin of sovereignty. Since the summer of 1776 when more than 4,000 soldiers, mostly Georgians, had attacked Cherokee villages, intent upon completely annihilating the Cherokee Nation, numerous efforts had been made for Indian removal. Despite the obvious assimilation into the white man's culture by lowland Cherokees, where mixed bloods and whites had married and economically prospered, a multitude of tactics had been developed to remove them. Numerous treaties with the United States government had been signed and ignored, coupled with insidious laws passed by the Georgia legislature designed to divest tribesmen from their lands. In addition, between 1805 and 1833, the state of Georgia conducted no less than eight lotteries of Indian land they made eligible for possession, resulting in land grants to thousands of white Georgia families. Now December 11, 1829, the legislature infuriated by a recent declaration of the Cherokee Council that they were a sovereign nation, had passed its infamous "anti-Cherokee laws." A litany of restrictions were placed on Cherokees, and if any were violated it would result in a four year prison term at Milledgeville. Of course, the Nation had protested, and even when the Supreme Court eventually sided with them, that ruling was ignored by the government. In an earlier editorial in the Cherokee Phoenix, Editor Elias Boudinot had summed up the tribe's frustration noting "that the illustrious Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe were only tantalizing us, when they encouraged us in the pursuit of agriculture and government."

This official pronouncement of the discovery of gold in north Georgia only verified what had been suspected for a long time. As early as 1540, Hernando de Soto had found evidence of gold among tribes in the area and later Spanish miners maintained small settlements in the area until around 1700. One recent rumor recounted the story of an early settler who had found an eleven pound nugget, but not knowing its value, used it as a doorstep. However, on August 1, 1829, when the Milledgeville Georgia Journal announced that two gold mines had been discovered in Habersham County, the area was immediately deluged with prospectors. By the following spring, thousands of miners lusting for gold were in the area, 4,000 along Yahoola Creek alone. This sudden influx of unruly miners into the Cherokee Nation was known, even at that time, as "The Great Intrusion" and Cherokee authorities had no control over it, nor could they participate. Prospecting was denied Cherokees as a result of one of those laws passed the previous winter. In another editorial, Boudinot complained that, "Our neighbors who regard no law and pay no respects to the laws of humanity are now reaping a plentiful harvest...we are an abused people."

The center of the gold region, present day Lumpkin County, 50 miles northeast of Atlanta, grew to 5,000 residents literally overnight. To highlight its importance, Licklog, the county seat became known as Dahlonega, a Cherokee word for golden. For the most part placer mining, panning for gold that washed down into streams, was the means for

gathering these riches, although some mining did occur later. As other issues festered that ultimately led to the final removal of the Cherokees the gold rush continued, and more white miners settled in northwestern Georgia. Production was so high in 1838 the federal government opened a mint at Dahlonega. The craze would continue into the mid 1840s, but soon after many of these same miners would be lured west in 1849 by the cry of gold in California. Ironically, many used the California Trail that originated in Indian Territory, the new home of the Cherokees.

The discovery of gold in Georgia and California produced significantly different results. California was accepted for statehood in 1850 with a prospects for a dynamic future, but in Georgia, “The Great Intrusion” had created a dilemma for the Cherokees. At some point after the onslaught, Elias Boudinet, one who of those who had been a stalwart in the battle for sovereignty, conceded defeat, broke Cherokee law and signed the Treaty of New Echota. Was the gold rush his defining moment? Regardless, neither the Nation nor Boudinet would survive for long. The Trail of Tears that concluded in 1839 saw the end of the Nation in Georgia and Boudinet would be assassinated that same year in a place he previously had not known existed, Park Hill, Indian Territory.