

Echoes From the Past

THE CHEROKEE INDIAN SLAVE REVOLT OF 1842

Slavery in America has been called the “Peculiar Institution” because the Constitution written by the founding fathers touted the freedom of individuals in America. Thus slavery was “peculiar” because freedom was denied to Negroes who fueled the economic engine particularly in the South. As commerce between the United States and various foreign countries increased, so had the need for slaves. By 1820 there were 1.25 million slaves, 2.5 million by 1840 and just before the Civil War more than 3.75 million in the United States. Negro slaves outnumbered adult whites in the South many times over and the prospect of a slave uprising was often discussed.

Owning slaves was also practiced by the Five Civilized Tribes, most particularly among mixed-blood Indians who were the off-spring of white traders who had married Indian women. Tribes, particularly in the southeastern part of the United States, had begun to assimilate white culture as early as the mid-1700’s and in many instances that included owning large sections of land that required cultivation by many workers. While slaves worked for subsistence the initial investment was substantial. The value of a single slave purchased at auction ranged from \$500 to \$1,000 dollars and their value rose as the world-wide demand for cotton increased. Conditions of the life and the trials of a slave in America, just as they were described in the novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, were no different whether the owner was Caucasian or Indian. Although the slave owners’ treatment of their chattel would vary, the fundamental facts of ownership didn’t.

One exception to this relationship involved the Seminole Tribe. Seminoles took in fugitive slaves claiming them as their own property often to protect them from “slave-catchers” who pursued them for bounty. The fugitive was then allowed the freedom to raise crops and animals and otherwise function in the Seminole society, but in turn gave grain and livestock as tribute to their owners. They also were involved in a military alliance wherein they were permitted to carry weapons and assist the tribe when needed. In addition, some were permitted to intermarry with Seminoles.

After 1835 when the Five Civilized Tribes began removal to Indian Territory, those land owners with slaves brought them west and continued in the traditional relationship of master to slave some with large numbers, others with one or two. However, as Seminole slaves arrived in Indian Territory dressed in Seminole attire and carrying guns and knives, their counterparts took notice. The Seminole slaves established a farming community near Fort Gibson further compounding the concept of their independence. This difference was duly noted by restricted slaves, thus the seeds of discontent were sown.

By 1842, although not generally recognized by their Cherokee masters, this discontent grew to such serious proportions that a plot was hatched to escape to freedom. On November 15, rendezvousing at a predetermined location near Webbers Falls, about 35 men, women and children locked their masters in their cabins, raided a store for weapons and food and stole enough horses and mules for all to ride. Making good their escape the fugitives headed southwest, their goal was to reach Mexico where slavery was illegal.

When the escape was discovered, a posse of about 40 Cherokees gave chase into the Creek Nation. In the meantime, the fugitives had made good progress and by the time the posse caught up they had reached a valley ten miles beyond the Canadian River. The slaves, turning on the posse, engaged in a fierce gun battle with both sides suffering casualties. Given the resistance they encountered the posse members returned to Webbers Falls for reinforcements. On November 21st, 87 men resumed the pursuit picking up the runaways trail and encountering them again about seven miles north of the Red River. Starving and outnumbered the slaves surrendered and were returned to Webbers Falls. Ultimately, five were held for the murder of two slave bounty hunters they had killed and the rest were returned to their respective owners.

Blaming the influence of “free blacks” on the insurrection, on December 2nd the Cherokee Nation enacted a law ordering all free blacks, other than those freed by the Cherokees to leave the nation. While the November 15th, 1842 outbreak was the only one of its kind, a few slaves continued to attempt escape but none equaled the size or violence of the slave revolt of 1842.

