

THE CIVIL WARRIORS

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, STAND WATIE, AND THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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For the people I love, and to the memories, wisdom, and courage of two barrier-breaking patriots and statesmen, U.S. Marshal Frederick Douglass and Brigadier General Stand Watie, C.S.A., this volume is dedicated in honor and respect.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
James Reagan Fancher	
<i>Texas Woman's University</i>	
INTRODUCTION	xxvii
Jeffrey E. Anderson	
<i>University of Louisiana at Monroe</i>	
FIRST PART:	
Frederick Douglass – Black Republican Messenger of Liberty	1
PROLOGUE: Secessionist Seeds of Civil War – A Divided Republic	3
CHAPTER 1:	
Like Mother, Like Son – Douglass's Political Rise and Resistance to the “Slavery Party”	15
CHAPTER 2:	
From Activism to Action – Stepping Out in Faith and Advising a President	31
CHAPTER 3:	
From “Honest Abe” Lincoln to “King Andy” Johnson – The 1864 U.S. Presidential Election and Its Results	45
CHAPTER 4:	
From Plantation Enslavement to Capitol Hill – Douglass and the Black Lawmakers of Reconstruction Defy the “White Man’s Party”	65
CHAPTER 5:	
Guiding the Republic Into the Gilded Age – Douglass's Political Prominence Beyond Reconstruction	95
SECOND PART:	
Stand Watie – Southern Cherokee General and Defender	115
CHAPTER 6:	
Indigenous Origins in the Cherokee Ancestral Lands – The Trials and Triumphs of the Young Warrior Watie	117

CHAPTER 7: Trails of Many Tears – Indian Removal Policy and Watie's Early Years in the Indian Territory	127
CHAPTER 8: Secession, Suffering, and the Rise of a Southern Cherokee Brave	149
CHAPTER 9: Standing Firm Against the Foe – A Gallant Gray Knight of the Southern Cherokees Honors his Name	169
CHAPTER 10: Last Rebel Standing – Watie's Dogged Defiance Paves the Path to Peace	187
CHAPTER 11: Representing His People in Reconstruction – Watie the Wise Wins Against the Odds	225
EPILOGUE: Conclusion and Acknowledgments	241
NOTES	263
BIBLIOGRAPHY	349
INDEX	377

PREFACE

James Reagan Fancher
Texas Woman's University

“I have never felt myself isolated since I entered the field to plead the cause of the slave, and demand equal rights for all.”

- Honorable Frederick Douglass in his 1892 revised edition of
*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*¹

“I have always been opposed to killing women and children although our enemies have done it, yet I shall always protest against any acts of that kind.”

- Colonel Stand Watie, C.S.A., in a 24 April 1864 letter to his wife Sarah, quoted in *Cherokee Cavaliers: Forty Years of Cherokee History as Told in the Correspondence of the Ridge-Watie-Boudinot Family* by Edward Everett Dale and Gaston Litton²

In American history, few challenges have shaped our republic's development as powerfully and dramatically as the Civil War (1861-1865) and Reconstruction Era (1865-1877). These two intertwined episodes saw the United States of America divided, reunited, nearly divided again, and ultimately rebuilt, both physically and socially. These eras also saw the rise to prominence of two doggedly determined non-white American men whose efforts and struggles on behalf of their respective peoples propelled them to prominence and distinguished them among their contemporaries as truly *civil* warriors in an otherwise quite *uncivil* war and fragile peace. During and after the fratricidal conflict, the Honorable Frederick Douglass and Brigadier General Stand Watie persevered in serving their people's interests in resisting discrimination, winning the respect of friends and foes alike, and proving to be more similar than different in their character and actions.³

Frederick Douglass and Stand Watie: what, the reader may ask, could an escaped ex-enslaved man-turned-influential abolitionist politician and a slaveholding Southern Cherokee principal chief and Confederate States Army (C.S.A.) brigadier general possibly have in common? After all, did these two men not support and serve on opposite sides during the American Civil War? Of course, and they both similarly persevered against the odds stacked against them, led by example, and secured their respective places in American history in remarkably similar fashion as non-white men who rose to leadership and

influence during the same era. Both contributed, in their unique, respective ways, to the country's development while fighting rhetorically and physically for what they perceived to be the basic, God-given rights of their peoples. Douglass and Watie each made a mark and stood boldly for what they believed to be right, just, and honorable in defense of the people they loved, and their wartime and postwar actions contributed to the reshaping of a nation.⁴

Far from being passive onlookers during the war that ripped the republic in half, Douglass led by example and contributed to the liberation of the enslaved Black southerners via his recruitment work for the Union Army, and Watie did no less regarding his Southern Cherokee brethren, leading them first in fighting for the Confederacy and next into a lasting peace.⁵ The successes of these Black American and Southern Cherokee pioneers of leadership, their conquests of the odds, cannot and must not be forgotten by history. It is my hope to address some ongoing historiographical debates on both the freedmen's champion Douglass and the often-overlooked Southern Cherokee statesman Watie and emphasize each man's respective rise to leadership and prominence as well as the "how and why" surrounding their actions and decisions.

Had Frederick Douglass followed the path of abolitionist militant John Brown, or that of rebellious enslaved man Nat Turner, for example, he may not have risen from the shackles of slavery to national success as a persuasive and potent abolitionist speaker, writer, and leader, and his liberty crusade may have floundered in defeat like the uncivil revolts of Turner and Brown. Equally, had Stand Watie chosen the path of vengeance and sought violent retribution against his hated Northern Cherokee tormentors, his Southern Cherokee people and the Cherokee Nation overall may have suffered many more years of fruitless, sectarian bloodshed during and beyond Reconstruction. Both Watie and Douglass, however, rejected such uncivil and excessively vindictive paths, sometimes at great personal costs to themselves, but always in the perceived best interests of the people whom they sought to serve, liberate, and defend. Frederick Douglass and Stand Watie consistently proved to be calculating men in their respective journeys of triumph, rejecting the counterproductive path of personal political profit, and rising to leadership and respect among their peoples.⁶

That they both suffered defeats and setbacks along their respective journeys of triumph cannot erase the fact that they each struck powerful blows in defense of their causes, comrades, and fellow citizens, winning the respect of their allies and baffling their foes alike along the way. In doing so, both also set enduring examples of leadership and courage for those aspiring to lead others and accomplish great things in the present. While the white supremacist Democrat politicians of the postbellum American "New South" managed to gradually reverse the tide of progress to which Douglass, Hiram Rhodes Revels,

Joseph Hayne Rainey, and their fellow Black Republican champions of justice contributed, this regressive reversal cannot alter the fact that Black American men, including former enslaved people, not only voted but *won* election and, sometimes, *reelection* to public office for nearly a quarter century after the end of the Civil War.⁷

Equally, although his Southern Cherokee half of the Cherokee Nation found itself, like the majorities of the other Five Civilized Southern Indian Republics, on the losing side of the Civil War, Brigadier General Stand Watie's battlefield exploits and the inspiring leadership example that he set for his men could not be erased. General Watie and his comrades surrendered willingly as unconquered warriors whose desire to ease the suffering of their long-besieged people served as their chief motivation to lay down their arms.⁸ Even if strategically defeated in their respective struggles – unobstructed civil rights in the case of the Black Republicans and their white allies, and sovereignty for their people in “Indian Territory” (modern-day Oklahoma) for the Southern Cherokees – their great and numerous tactical victories resulted in an avalanche of achievements that survived every defeat handed to them and transcended time.⁹

Indeed, in just one of many intriguing similarities, both Douglass and Watie fathered five children, two daughters and three sons in each man's case, and both men were preceded in death by their first wives and several of their precious children. Frederick Douglass's 10-year-old daughter, Annie, passed away on the eve of the Civil War in 1860 and he lost his first wife Anna in 1882, while Stand Watie's first wife, Besty, died during childbirth in 1836 along with their baby girl and Stand's 12-year-old son, Cumiskey, passed away in 1863 in exile during the fratricidal conflict in and around Indian Territory. Both of Stand's other sons, Saladin and Watica, likewise passed away two-to-three years before their father, in 1868 and 1869, respectively, and Frederick suffered a similar blow three years before his own passing with the 1892 death of his second-eldest son, Frederick Douglass Jr.¹⁰

Yet these setbacks, excruciatingly painful as they doubtlessly were for both men having to bury their children, served as only some of the most difficult obstacles thrown across their respective paths on which they persevered nevertheless and along which they broke many barriers for their people as they overcame these daunting difficulties. Like the other determined men and women of color discussed in the preceding chapters of this work who served as some of their closest associates, neither Douglass nor Watie surrendered to the adversaries (and adversity) that they faced. Both men, rather, behaved as *actual* civil warriors before, during, and after a very uncivil war and emerged as barrier-breaking pioneers in their respective journeys in spearheading the causes of their peoples and conquering great heights, achieving victories that cannot be erased from history.¹¹

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INDEX

A

- A Creek Warrior for the Confederacy*
The Autobiography of Chief G. W. Grayson (Grayson), xvii
- A Trumpet of Our Own Yellow Bird's Essays on the North American Indian; Selections from the Writings of the Noted Cherokee Author, John Rollin Ridge* (Ridge), xvi
- A Wicked War: Polk, Clay, Lincoln, and the 1846 U.S. Invasion of Mexico* (Greenberg), 24
- A.M.E. Zion Church, xiv, 25, 242
- Abel, Annie Heloise, xv, 198
- Abraham Lincoln* (McPherson), 59
- Adair, Andrew, 152
- Adair, Charlotte, 144
- Adair, William P. "Bill", x, 178, 182, 196, 205, 225
- Adams, John, 97, 190
- Adams, John Quincy, 97
- Afghanistan, 147
- Agnew, Brad, 174, 197, 201
- Allegheny Mountains, 27
- al-Qaeda, 147
- al-Saud, Faisal ibn Abd al-Aziz, xxiii
- Alvarez, Jorge, 156, 252
- American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 25
- American Bible Society, 122
- American Civil War
- controversy still raging over, xxi
 - reasons for, 11
- American Historical Association (AMA), xix
- Ames, Adelbert, 87
- "Anaconda Plan", 166
- Anacostia (Washington, D.C. neighborhood), 80
- Anderson, Mabel Washbourne, 205
- Anderson, Robert, 9
- Anderson, Thomas F., 198, 239
- Andrews, William L., xiii
- Anglo-French-Ottoman-Sardinian siege of Sevastopol, 12
- Anthony, Aaron, 94
- Appalachian Mountains, 119
- Appomattox, Virginia, x
- Arkansas (State), 6, 107, 129, 140, 150, 156, 178
- Arkansas Gazette*, 137, 138
- Arkansas River, 129, 181, 188, 192, 201, 212, 232
- Arkansas State Troops, 174
- Armistead, Lewis, 174
- Armstrong Academy, Choctaw Nation, 227
- Army of Northern Virginia, 13, 52, 166
- Army of Tennessee, 166
- Army of the Frontier, 172, 175, 188, 193, 196, 197, 213
- Army of the Potomac, 52, 54
- Army of the Trans-Mississippi, 160, 166, 171, 176, 184, 211
- Army of Virginia (see Army of Northern Virginia), 52
- Articles of Confederation, 190
- Articles of Confederation Entered Into Between Muscogees, Seminoles, Choctaws, and Chickasaws and the Confederate States of America*, 160

Assing, Ottilie, 21
 Astor, Aaron, 50
 Auld, Hugh, 17, 18, 20
 Auld, Thomas, 17, 18, 20, 93
 Frederick Douglass's
 forgiveness of, 243
 "Aunt Katy", 16

B

Bailey, Betsy, 15, 244
 Bailey, Harriet, 15, 16, 94, 113, 244
 literacy and intelligence, 16
 Baker-Fancher wagon train party, 6
 Baltimore, Maryland, 17, 56
 Barnett, Timothy, 254
 Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 191
 Battle of Antietam, 52
 Battle of Barren Fork, 198
 Battle of Chancellorsville, 173
 Battle of Elkhorn Tavern (See
 Battle of Pea Ridge), xvi
 Battle of Gettysburg, 54, 174
 Battle of Honey Springs, 184, 187
 Battle of Pea Ridge (or Elkhorn
 Tavern), xvi, 170, 173
 Battle of Prairie Grove, 178
 Battle of the Wilderness (1864), 174
 Battle of Wilson's Creek, 158
 Baumfree, Isabella (see Sojourner
 Truth), 28
 Beauregard, P. G. T., 10, 57, 154, 156
 Bell, James, 226
 Bell, James Adair, 226
 Bell, James M., 181
 Bell, John, 144
 Bell, John Adair, 137, 142, 144
 co-authorship of letter
 protesting killings of Treaty
 Party leaders, 138
 Bentley, Emerson, 85
 Benton County, Arkansas, 140
 Berlin Military Academy, 170

Biden, Joseph R., xix
 bin Laden, Osama, 147
 Black American Union troops, 40, 41, 43, 51, 56, 57, 59, 75, 185, 197, 202, 207, 243
 Black Codes, 106
Black Indians
 A Hidden History (Katz), 155
Black Prophetic Fire (West and
 Buschendorf), xiv
BlackPast.org, xv
 Blackwell, Morton, xvii
 Blaine, James G., 77, 98
 Bleeding Kansas, 156
 Blight, David, xiv, 15, 18, 21, 22, 41, 82, 246, 248
 Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, 140
 Blunt, James, 181
 Blunt, James G., 175, 181, 184, 193, 196, 205, 217, 224
 Boggy Depot, Choctaw Nation, 198, 228
 Boissoneault, Lorraine, 85
 Bonaparte, Napoleon, 120
 Bonham, Texas, 167, 188, 192
 Booth, John Wilkes, 59
 Borland, Margaret, 222
 Boston Anti-Slavery Society, 20
 Boston, Massachusetts, 131
 Boudinot and Watie Tobacco
 Company, 243
 Boudinot, Elias (sponsor and
 mentor of Buck Watie), 122
 Boudinot, Elias C., xi, 165, 200, 202, 213, 217, 226, 234
 Bourbon Democrats, 102
 Bowie knife, 135
 Bradford, Sarah Hopkins, 72
 Britain, 20, 101, 120
 British Isles, 20
 Brooks, Preston, 6
 Brown Pryor, Elizabeth, 8, 184
 Brown, John, viii, 8, 27, 28
 Brown, John Young, 89
 Bruce, Blanche K., x, 90, 96
 as Douglass's best man, 80
 Buchanan, James, 6, 36

Buckingham, William Alfred, 48
Buffam, James, 20
Burnside, Ambrose E., 52
Buschendorf, Christa, xiv, 51
Bush, George W., xx
Butler, Andrew, 7
Butler, Benjamin F., 191
Butler, Matthew C., 88

C

Cabell, William, 184
Calhoun, Georgia, 128
Camden, South Carolina, 200
Camp Napoleon Treaty, 218
Camp Watie, Choctaw Nation, 198
Canadian District, Cherokee Nation, 234
Canadian River, 188, 192
Candy, Mary Anne Watie, 126
Carnival of the Confederacy, 40
Cedar Hill, 80
Champions of the Cherokees Evan and John B. Jones (McLoughlin), 118
Charleston, South Carolina, 9
Checote, Samuel, 254
Cherokee 1st Mounted Rifles, 170
Cherokee Advocate, 117
Cherokee Braves, x, 166, 167, 172, 180, 181, 183, 185, 189, 191, 196, 198, 204, 212, 218, 223, 225, 235, 254
Cherokee Cavaliers Forty Years of Cherokee History as Told in the Correspondence of the Ridge-Watie-Boudinot Family (Dale and Litton), xv
Cherokee Civil Warrior Chief John Ross and the Struggle for Tribal Sovereignty (Weeks), 253
Cherokee freedmen, 155, 180
Cherokee freedwomen, 156, 223
Cherokee Golden Age, 144, 180

Cherokee Mounted Rifles, 158, 178, 202
Cherokee Nation, xviii, 122, 123, 125, 127, 129, 131, 139, 143, 151, 153, 157, 158, 163, 175, 179, 181, 210, 231, 233
Confederate federal courthouse in, 165
occupation by Army of the Frontier, 175
Reconstruction Era politics in, 236
Stand Watie's role in helping reunification of, 234
Cherokee Nation General Council, 236, 243, 251
Cherokee Nation Government, 119
Cherokee Nation of Georgia, 126
Cherokee Nation Supreme Court, 124, 125
Cherokee National Council, 152, 153
Cherokee people, 117, 119, 131, 152
introduction of Christianity, 119
Cherokee Phoenix, 125, 130, 195
Cherokee reunification
Stand Watie's key role in, 238
Cherokee Treaty of 1846, 143
Cherokee veterans of U.S. military, 128
Chicago, Illinois, 54, 164
Chickasaw Nation, 127, 159, 188, 205, 215
Chinese immigrants, 71
Chinese immigration, 71
Chisholm Trail, 222
Choctaw Confederates The American Civil War in Indian Country (Yarbrough), 159
Choctaw Nation, 127, 134, 159, 188, 191, 198, 205, 215, 224, 227, 233, 239

- Confederate federal courthouse in, 165
- Chupko, John, 158
- Civil Rights Act of 1871, 80
- Civil War in Indian Territory, 155, 169, 173, 254
- Clarksville, Texas, 161
- Clarkson, Thomas, 34
- Clay, Henry, 3
opposition to President Polk's war on Mexico, 12
- Cleveland, Stephen Grover, 98
- Clinton, Mississippi, 88
- Cobb, Howell, 36
- Colbert, Winchester, 159, 220
- Colfax Massacre, 89
- Colfax, Schuyler, 73
- collectives
in connection with author's historical theory, xxiv
- Columbia, Tennessee, 49
- Compromise of 1850, 10, 25
- Compromise of 1877, 91, 92
- Confederate Cherokee soldiers, 146
- Confederate Congress, 165, 190, 200
- Confederate government
inherent weaknesses and ineffectiveness of, 190
- Confederate government
struggles in supplying Confederate Indian troops, 188
- Confederate High Command, 158, 192
- Confederate Indian Brigade, 254
- Confederate Indian refugees, 218
- Confederate Indian Republics, xv, 218
- Confederate Indian soldiers, 56, 158, 171, 188, 197, 201, 207
- Confederate States Army (C.S.A.), vii, 40, 57, 158, 166, 176, 188, 190, 211, 243
- Confederate States of America, 189
- Confederate States of America
War Department, 58, 181
- Confer, Clarissa, 167, 180, 254
- Conkling, James, 42
- Constitution of the Confederate States, 189
- Constitutional Convention, 33, 36
- Continental Army, 122
- Cooley, Dennis N., 226
- Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, 255
- Cooper, Douglas, 170, 176, 182, 183
- Cornwall, Connecticut, 122, 123
- Covey, Edward, 29, 114
- Covid-19 pandemic, 251
- Cowskin Prairie, Cherokee Nation, 179, 181
- Crawford, Thomas Hartley, 138
- Crimean War (1853-1856), 12
- Crockett, Texas, 213
- Cunningham, Frank, xvi, 117, 124, 142, 158, 165, 176, 179, 181, 188, 208, 217

D

- Daily Vicksburger*, 87
- Dale, Edward Everett, xv
- Dallas Herald*, 176, 210, 211, 213
- Dallas, Texas, 176
- Davis, Jefferson, xxiii, 9, 36, 188, 189, 200, 210
- De Large, Robert Carlos, 58
- De Morse, Charles, 183, 187, 213
- Declaration by the People of the Cherokee Nation of the Causes Which Have Impelled Them to Unite Their Fortunes With Those of the Confederate States of America*, 162
- Delaware Nation, 230
- Democratic Party
and support for Manifest Destiny, 3

- local leadership's instigation of Opelousas Massacre, 87
opposition to freedmen's enfranchisement, 72
repudiation of Emancipation Proclamation, 54
support for slavery and opposition to Black rights, 23, 24
support for war on Mexico, 24
Dennet, Daniel, 86
Dickson, James R., 86
Doaksville, Choctaw Nation, 214, 225, 238
as Stand Watie's main wartime guerrilla base, 221
Dole, William P., 172
Doolittle Sr., James Rood, 215
Douglas, Stephen, 7, 164
Douglass Jr., Frederick, 18, 106
Douglass, Anna Murray, 18, 23, 72, 80, 82, 97
Douglass, Annie, 29
Douglass, Charles Remond, 18, 38, 80
Douglass, Frederick, vii, viii, x, xi, xiv, 52, 54, 61, 74, 163, 164, 241, 245
act of self-defense against Edward Covey, 29
appointed as Minister Resident to Haiti, 104
appreciation of Abraham Lincoln, 48
as Minister Resident and Consul General in Haiti, 109
as Republican political figurehead and influencer, 80
as Sunday school teacher, 19
assisting in escape of enslaved people, 72
birth, xxii, 242
changed perception of Abraham Lincoln, 149
changed perspective on Abraham Lincoln, 36
chosen by Kentucky Republican delegates as presidential nominee in 1888, 104
clarification of Three-fifths Compromise, 33
criticism of Abraham Lincoln, 41
death, 242
debate on U.S. Constitution with MP George Thompson, 33
defense of Black American rights, viii, 14, 242, 245, 250, 255
denouncing of communist uprisings and violence in France, 82
denouncing of Christian hypocrisy regarding slavery, 26
denouncing of communist violence, 249
denouncing of Democrats at the "slavery party", 25
escape from slavery, 20, 108
Executive Mansion meeting with President Johnson, 61
financial struggles faced by, 243
first visit with President Abraham Lincoln, 40
forgiveness of longtime foes, 244
forgiveness of Thomas Auld, 93
gradual acceptance and support of Abraham Lincoln as Republican leader, 36
hiring of tutor to educate eldest daughter, 18
impact on Robert E. Lee and Confederate Congress
support for Black Confederate troops, 58
inspired by mother Harriet Bailey, 16

- letter to Senator Henry Clay, 24
 licensed preacher in A.M.E.
 Zion Church, 242
 marriages, 23, 80
 on Democrat support for
 slavery and opposition to
 Black rights, 80
 on Henry Clay's hypocrisy for
 being a slaveholder, 24
 on Republican Party
 membership, 80
 original surname, 18
 perception of George
 Washington as quietly anti-
 slavery, 32
 perception of John Brown's
 plan as counterproductive,
 27
 perception of U.S. Constitution
 as anti-slavery document, 31
 perceptions of Christian
 hypocrisy, 19, 20
 personal wealth at time of
 death, 250
 physical threats and attacks
 endured by, 26, 27
 political agitation, 46
 political agitation and
 leadership, 23, 29
 political influence, xxi
 possible American Indian
 ancestry, 15, 16
 praise for President Ulysses S.
 Grant, 80
 prioritizing societal
 improvement over personal
 feelings, 245
 promotion to Recorder of
 Deeds, 96
 promotion to U.S. Marshal of
 District of Columbia, xiii, 93,
 242
 proposal for Black Special
 Forces scouting units, 47
 record of consistent anti-
 slavery activism, xviii
 recruitment campaign for
 Union Army, viii, 14, 36, 37,
 38, 40, 55, 57, 113, 243
 reluctance to embrace
 Abraham Lincoln as
 Republican leader, 35
 second Executive Mansion
 meeting with President
 Abraham Lincoln, 47
 staunch opposition to
 Democratic Party, 77
 staunch support for Republican
 Party, 80
 suffering as enslaved youth, 114
 support for Chinese immigrant
 rights, 71, 100
 support for freedmen's
 enfranchisement, 14
 support for Japanese
 immigrant rights, 71
 support for Republican Party,
 247
 support for women's rights,
 100, 242, 245
 third Executive Mansion
 meetinf with President
 Lincoln, 59
 three autobiographies authored
 by, 20
 vigor and athleticism, 95
 work ethic, 250
 Douglass, Helen Pitts, 80, 97, 101
 Douglass, Lewis Henry, 18, 38, 61,
 80
 Douglass, Rosetta, 18
Douglass' Monthly, 35, 36
 Downing Party, 233
 Downing, George T., 61
 Downing, Louis, 178, 179, 181,
 226, 233, 238
 Dray, Philip, 17
Dred Scott v. Sandford (1857), 7
 Drew, John, 161, 170, 173
 Dutch Billy (Stand Watie's bugler),
 181
 Dwyer, John, xvi, 120, 124, 134,
 143, 144, 158, 164, 208, 235

E

Eastern Shore
region of Maryland, 15
Eaton, Rachel, 136, 176
Edgefield, South Carolina, 88
Edison, Jaden, 12
Edwards, Kyle A., 249
Egypt, 102
1864 presidential election season, 46
1864 U.S. presidential election, 56
Elk Creek, Cherokee Nation, 187
Elliott, Robert Brown, x, 96
Emancipation Proclamation, 35, 36, 180
Democrat opposition to, 42
Emerson, Ralph Waldo
quote on Mexican-American War, 5
Enfield rifle, 189
England, 20
England's grocery, 140
Equal Rights Party, 83
Evangelical Christian denominations, 117

F

Fannin, Texas, 192, 221
Fayetteville, Arkansas, 153
Fenton, Laurence, 20
Fields, James, 122
15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 70
55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, 39
54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, 37
Firmin, Antenor, 109
First and Second Enforcement Acts, 80
First Battle of Bull Run (or Manassas), 158
First Battle of Cabin Creek, xvi, 39, 184

1st Indian Brigade, 39, 56, 158, 160, 192, 201, 223, 225
1st Kansas Colored Infantry, 184, 206, 207
1st Seminole Battalion, 196
1st Seminole Regiment, 196
First Seminole War (1814-1819), 131
Five Southern Indian Republics (or "Five Civilized Tribes"), 127, 133, 150, 154, 155, 158, 162, 188, 190, 237, 243
Folsom, Israel, 122
Folsom, McKee, 122
Foreign Mission School, 122
Foreman, James "Jim" attempt on Stand Watie's life, 140
Fort Arbuckle, 155
Fort Blunt, 182, 183
Fort Cobb, 155
Fort Gibson, 129, 137, 181, 183, 184, 197, 198, 201, 210, 212, 225, 230
Fort Scott, 184, 205, 209
Fort Smith, 129, 181, 182, 188, 198, 201, 225, 226, 227, 236
Fort Smith Treaty, 227
Fort Sumter, 9, 28, 154
Fort Towson, 205, 220, 238
Fort Washita, 155
Fort Watie, 142
Foster, Charles W., 42
Fought, Leigh, 21
Four Took Freedom
The Lives of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Robert Smalls, and Blanche K. Bruce (Sterling and Logan), xiii
14th Amendment, 72
France, 101
Franklin, Benjamin, 36
Franklin, Tennessee, 50
Franks, Kenny, xvi, 135, 143, 158, 217, 226

Frederick & Anna Douglass in Rochester New York: Their Home Was Open to All (O'Keefe), xiii
Frederick Douglass
Freedom's Voice, 1818-1845 (Lampe), 31
 promotion to Recorder of Deeds, xiii
Prophet of Freedom (Blight), xiv, 21, 246
Self-Made Man (Sandefur), 15, 246
Frederick Douglass in Ireland
The Black O'Connell (Fenton), 20
Frederick Douglass in Washington, D.C.
The Lion of Anacostia (Muller), xiii
Frederick Douglass Republicans
The Movement to Re-Ignite America's Passion for Liberty (Smith and Smith, Sr.), xiii, 250
Frederick Douglass' Paper, xiii, 26
 Free Church of Scotland, 20
 Freedman's Savings Bank, 243
 freedmen, xi
 Freedmen's Bureau, 69
 Fremont, John C., 46
 Fugitive Slave Act (1850), 10, 25

G

Gaddis, John Lewis, xix
 Gaines, W. Craig, 171
 Galveston, Texas, 166, 193
 Gano, Richard M., 198, 206
 Garfield, James A., xiii, 96
 Garibaldi, Giuseppe, 10
 Garrett, Richard, 59
 Garrison, William Lloyd, 21, 26, 31, 35, 245
 differences with Frederick Douglass, 28

Garrisonian abolitionists, 22
 General Council of Indian Territory
 Stand Watie's participation in, 236
 General Council of the Choctaw Nation, 160
General Stand Watie's Confederate Indians (Cunningham), xvi, 117
George B. McClellan
The Young Napoleon (Sears), 13
 Georgia (State), 122, 127, 222
 white whiskey peddlers in, 118
 Georgia Guard, 130, 137
 Gherardi, Bancroft, 109, 110
 Gold, Harriet Ruggles, 122
 Goodnight, Mary Anne "Molly" Dyer, 222
 Gradual Abolition Act, 28
 Graham, Lawrence Otis, 17
 Grant, Ulysses S., x, xi, 10, 39, 40, 50, 57, 80, 188, 195, 213, 220, 223
 defeat of first KKK, 80
 Grayson, George W., xvi, 160
great man theory
 author's proposal for reworking and reinterpreting, xxi, 244
great man theory of history, 244
 Greeley, Horace, 45
 Greenberg, Amy S., 3, 24, 51
 Greeneville, Tennessee, 49
 Grierson, Benjamin H., 191
 "Grierson's Raid", 191
 Griffiths, Julia, 21, 22
 guerrilla warfare, 147
 Guiteau, Charles, xiii, 97

H

Haiti, 109
 Hallowell, Normal P., 39
 Hamilton, Alexander, 190
 Hamlin, Hannibal, 9, 49
 Hampton III, Wade, 88
 Harper's Ferry, Virginia, 27

Harris, Cyrus, 159
Harrison, Benjamin, 114
Hartwell, Alfred S., 39
Haun's Mill Massacre, 6
Hauptman, Laurence, 167
Hayes, Rutherford B., 89
Henley, Elizabeth "Quatie" Brown, 125
Henry, Patrick, 190
Hicks, Brian, 125, 130, 131
Hicks, Eli, 144
Hicks, Isabella Hargrove, 144
Hillsborough, North Carolina, 200
Himrod, New York, 35
Hindman, Thomas, 175, 178
Holy Bible, 16, 130
Honey Creek, Cherokee Nation, 144, 152, 183, 237, 251
John Ross's supporters burning of Stand Watie's home, 183
Stand Watie's rebuilding of family's home, 237
Hooker, Joseph "Fighting Joe", 52, 163, 173
Hopkins, Henry, 205, 206, 209, 210
Hoskin Jr., Chuck, 251, 255
Howard, Jacob, xxiii
Howard, Oliver O., 69
Humboldt, Kansas, 229
Hunt, Caleb S., 73
Hypolite, Florvil, 109, 110

I

Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman, xxiv
Illinois (State), 3
Indian Boarding Schools, 118
Indian Division of Indian Territory, 215
Indian Home Guard, 197
Indian Rebel Yell, 170, 202
Indian Removal Act, 136, 146
Indian Territory, 131, 146, 147, 157, 165, 176, 182, 188, 192, 197, 228, 254

abandonment of by Union Army, 155
and Union leadership's desire to use for mounting Texas invasion, 196
individuals in history in connection with author's historical theory, xxiv
Ireland, 20
Italy, 101

J

J. R. Williams
Stand Watie's capture of, 201
Jackson, Andrew, 49, 126, 132
Jackson, Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall", 8, 53, 173
Jacksonian Democrats, 127, 151, 237
and Indian Removal, 130, 144
James, Jesse, 195
Jefferson, Thomas, 36, 122, 190
Jim Crow laws, 105, 107
Johnson, Andrew, 44, 52, 58, 72
birth, 49
picked as Lincoln's running mate to capture War Democrat votes, 55
political ideology of, 49
rabid white supremacy, 60
rabid white supremacy of, 50
reasons given for opposition to Black suffrage, 62
staunch opposition to Black rights, 50
support for John Ross against Stand Watie, 229
Johnson, Nathan, 18
Johnson, Richard Mentor, 138
Johnson, Robert Ward, 199
Johnston, Joseph E., 57
Jones, Evan, 117, 233
1859 visit to Fayetteville, Arkansas, 153
Jones, John, 61

Jones, John B., 118
 Jones, John Paul, 27
 Jones, Trevor M., 179
 Juarez, Benito, 185, 193, 217
 July, Flying T. Johanna, 222
 "Jump Jim Crow" (minstrel song), 23
 Jumper, John, 158, 196, 207, 208, 223, 254

K

Kanard, Moty, 158, 188
 Kansas (State), 163
 Kansas-Nebraska Act, 10
 Kansas-Nebraska scheme, 25
 Katz, William Loren, 155
 Keetoowah (Cherokee abolitionist society), 179
 Kengor, Paul, 11, 156, 172, 230, 253
 Kiamichi Mountains, 196, 224
 Kilmeade, Brian, xiv, 14, 29, 36, 41, 42
 King George III, 120
 Kiowa tribe, 165
 Kirby-Smith, Edmund "Ted" or "Seminole", 198, 212, 217
 Knight, Wilfred, xvi, 124, 143, 158, 234
 Knights of Death, 136, 140
 Knights of the Golden Circle, 154, 156, 252
 Knights of the White Camellia, 85
 Ku Klux Klan (KKK), x

L

La Grange, Tennessee, 191
 Lampe, Gregory P., 31
 Langston, John Mercer, 96
 Lea, Luke, 151
 Lee, John Doyle, 6
 Lee, Robert E., x, xxiii, 6, 8, 13, 52, 173, 211, 220, 248

on Black American Confederate troops, 57
 reluctant and agonizing decision to join Confederacy, 9
 Levine, Robert, xiv, 51
Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (Douglass), xiii
Life of General Stand Watie
The Only Indian Brigadier
General of the Confederate Army and the Last General to Surrender (Washbourne Anderson), xv
 Limestone Prairie, Cherokee Nation, 202
 Lincoln, Abraham, xi, xiv, 7, 9, 10, 29, 36, 43, 51, 59, 114, 159, 162, 163, 176, 180, 255
 "Spot Resolutions" in Congress, 24
 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas, 7, 8
 and criticism of George McClellan, 12
 and humoring of Hooker's dictatorship proposal, 53
 and uncertainty of victory in 1864 presidential election, 48
 as congressional opponent of President Polk's war on Mexico, 3
 attacked and canceled by Democrat newspapers for opposing Mexican-American War, 24
 congressional opposition to President Polk's war on Mexico, 24
 pragmatism in rejection outside observers' "advice", 10
 Litton, Gaston, xv
 Logan, John A., 98
 Long, Jefferson F., 76
 Longstreet, James, 52, 57
 Louisiana Territory, 120

Lynch, John R., 90

M

M1841 Mississippi rifle, 189
Mackey, Miles, 122
Madison, James, 36
Manassas, Virginia, 108
Manifest Destiny Democrats, 143
Martin, John Sella, 79
Marx, Karl, xxiv, 250
Maryland (State), 15
Massachusetts (State), 6
Matthews, Asa C., 220, 221
Maxey, Samuel B., 205, 211
May, Sebastian, 86
McClellan, George B., 12, 52, 163,
 166
 and criticism of Abraham
 Lincoln, 12
 Democratic Party nominee for
 president, 55
 Democratic Party politics of, 13
 rejection of Black troops in
 Union Army, 39
 replaced by Lincoln as army
 commander, 52
 repudiation of Emancipation
 Proclamation, 55
 staunc opposition to
 emancipation of enslaved
 people, 12
McCulloch, Henry E., 39
McDaniel, Caleb, 12
McFeely, William, 15, 16, 18
McIntosh, Chilly, 158
McIntosh, Daniel, 158
McLoughlin, William G., 118
McMichael, Morton, 45
McMickle, Marvin A., 247
McPherson, James M., 59
Meade, George, 39, 54
Mechanics Institute of New
 Orleans, 84
Menard, John Willis, 73, 74
Meridian, Mississippi, 191

Mexico, 122, 193
Middle Boggy Depot, Choctaw
 Nation, 198
Mikko, Sonuk (or Billy Bowlegs),
 158
Miles, Tiya, 155
Milliken's Bend, Louisiana, 39, 40,
 56
Millwood, Cherokee Nation, 151
Minié ball, 174
*Miscegenation Indorsed by the
 Republican Party* (Democrat
 political pamphlet), 47
Mississippi (State), xxiii, 76
Mississippi River, 129, 165, 190,
 196
Missouri (State), 145, 178
Missouri Compromise (1820), 10
Missouri Digital Heritage
 Collection, xvii
Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT)
 Railroad, 238
Monroe, James, 122
Montgomery, Alabama, 189
Moore, Lindley Murray, 20
Moravian Church, 124
Moravian Church Missionary
 School, 122
Mormons, 6, 144
Morris, Jr., Kenneth B., 247
Morris, Robert, 32
Mott, Lucretia, 69
Mount Zion Chapel, 19
Mountain Meadows Massacre, 6,
 144
Mouton, Gary, 125
Mudd, Samuel, 59
"mugwumps", 98
Muller, John, xiii, 41, 80, 101
Murrell, George, 197
Murrell, Minerva, 197
Muscogee Creek Nation, 127, 158

N

Nagle, Rebecca, 167, 255

Napoleon III (Louis Bonaparte), 185, 193
 Natchez, Mississippi, 90, 223
 National Convention of the Colored People, 84
 National Party, 117, 136, 137, 142, 179, 245
 National Party-Treaty Party feud, 244
 Nauvoo Legion, 6, 144
 Nebraska (State), 163
 Nebraska Territory, 152
 Neosho Valley, 198
 New Bedford, Massachusetts, 18, 19
 New England (region), 122
 New Hampshire (State), 25
New National Era, xiii, 77, 80, 81, 82, 243
 New Orleans, Louisiana, 47, 69, 73, 84, 166, 191
 New South, xiv
 New York (State), 27
 New York City, New York, 23, 25
 Nightingale, Florence, xxiii
 9th Kansas Cavalry, 184
North American and United States Gazette, 45
 North Carolina (State), 122
 North Texas (region), 168, 177, 183, 188, 189, 209, 224
 Northern Cherokee people, 144, 157, 167, 178, 179, 181, 182, 188, 226, 227, 242
 Northern Division of Louisiana, 226
 Nueces Strip, 4

O

O'Keefe, Rose, xiii, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 29
 Oakes, James, xiii, 14, 29, 35, 36, 41, 164
 Obama, Barack H., xx
 Oberg, Michael, 12

Ohio River, 129
 Oklahoma (State), 157
 Oklahoma Panhandle, 235
 Old Fort Wayne, 142
 Old Middle Boggy River, 227
 Old Settlers, 136, 137
 Old South, 164
 Oothcaloga, Cherokee Nation (pre-removal), 128
 Opelousas Massacre, 87
 Opelousas, Louisiana, 85
 Opothleyahola, 158
 Ordinance of Secession, 9
 Oregon (State), 163
 Organization of American Historians (OAH), xix
 Oskison, John M., 125
 Osterhaus, Peter Joseph, 170, 173
 Overland Campaign, 54

P

Pakenham, Edward, 121
 Pardo Bazan, Emilia, xxiii
 Paris Commune, 249
 Paris, Texas, 192, 211
 Park Hill, Cherokee Nation, 183, 197, 254
 Pearce, Nicholas Bartlett, 174
 Pegg, Thomas, 178, 179
 Pemberton, John, 39
 Pennsylvania (State), 173
 Perry, Scott, 247
 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 35, 45, 123, 142, 167, 178
 Phillips, Wendell, 38
 Phillips, William, 179, 181, 182, 184, 196, 201, 205, 230
 Pickens, Francis, 9
 "Pickett's Charge", 174
 Pierce, Franklin, 6
 zeal in defending slavery and slaveholding, 25
 Pike, Albert, 161, 164, 176
 Pinchback, P. B. S., 84

"Pins" (derisive term for Northern Cherokees), 194
Pitchlynn, Peter P., 159, 221
Plains Indians, 199
Plains tribes, 134, 165
Pleasant Bluff, Cherokee Nation, 201
Poinsett, Joel Roberts, 138
Polk, James Knox, 12, 142, 143
and triggering of Mexican-American War, 3
assertion that Mexico attacked first, 4
claim that Mexico had attacked first, 24
preferential treatment for Brigham Young's Mormon militiamen over Stand Watie's Southern Cherokee soldiers, 144
Poor Sarah, or the Indian Woman (Watie/Boudinot), 145
Post, Amy, 20
Post, Isaac, 20
Prairie Grove, Arkansas, 178
Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction, 159
Prussian Army, 170
Pushmataha, 120

Q

Quakers, 20
Quantrill, William, 195, 199
"Quantrill's Raiders", 195
Queen Elizabeth I, 34

R

Radical Republican abolitionists, 181
Radical Republicans
 staunch abolitionism of, 10
Rainey, Joseph H., x, xi, 70, 80, 84, 89

delivery of final speech in Congress, 91
longest-serving Black lawmaker of Reconstruction, 76
Raleigh, North Carolina, 49, 85
Ransier, Alonzo, 84, 90
Rayford, Logan, 17
Reading The Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters (Brown Pryor), 8
Reagan, Ronald, 20, 95
Reconstruction: Voices from America's First Great Struggle for Racial Equality (Simpson), 91
Reconstruction Amendments, 88
Red Fox
 Stand Watie's Civil War Years (Knight), xvi
Red River, 177, 183, 189, 192, 214, 232, 233
Red River Country, 222
Red River County, Texas, 161
"Red Shirts", 88
Reese, Charles, 236
Reese, Susanna, 122
Republican Central Committee of Monroe County, 80
Republican Party
 anti-slavery and pro-Black rights, 17
 founded as anti-slavery party, 7
Revels, Hiram R., x, xi, 70, 80
 possible American Indian ancestry, 74
 Union Army service, 75
Rice, Thomas Dartmouth
 "Daddy", 23
Richardson, Chaney, 156
Richmond Times Dispatch, xvii
Richmond, Texas, 189
Richmond, Virginia, 10, 11, 58, 159, 164, 178, 181, 188, 189, 199, 217
Ridge, John, 122, 123, 124, 131, 143, 195, 237, 253
 murder of, 137

- Ridge, John Rollin, xi, xvi, 143, 145, 153
witnessing of father John
 Ridge's murder at early age, 145
- Ridge, Major, 123, 128, 129, 131, 151, 195, 214, 237, 253
intention to prevent genocide of Cherokee people, 132
 murder of, 137
- Rio Grande River, 223
- River, Grand, 212
- River, Verdigris, 212
- Rochester, New York, xiii, 28, 42, 72, 80
- Rogers, Clem, x, 156, 178, 182, 196, 238
- Rogers, Elizabeth, 156
- Rogers, Mary, 238
- Rogers, Will "Cherokee Kid", 156, 178, 238
- Rogers, William, 138
- Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Digital Library Collections, xvii
- Rose Cottage (John Ross's plantation), 197
- Ross Party (see also National Party), 131
- Ross, Allen, 136
- Ross, John, 117, 127, 143, 151, 176, 178, 180, 183, 226, 227, 228, 235, 239, 245, 254
adversarial relationship with Stand Watie, xv
alleged role in defending murderers of Treaty Party leaders, 138
and Cherokee negotiations in Washington, D.C., 128
as slaveholder, 154, 155, 253
attacks on Stand Watie's reputation, 229
former friendship with Stand Watie, 118
former friendship with Watie family, 125
- immediate refusal to prosecute killers of Treaty Party leaders, 136
- initial declaration of neutrality in Civil War, 157, 158
- refusal to punish murderers of Treaty Party leaders, 138
- Stand Watie's offer of peace to, 243
- supporters' burning down of Stand Watie's plantation home, 182
- switching of sides to the Union, 173
- Ross, William Potter, 183
and Stand Watie's sparing of, 192, 193
- Rush, Christopher, 19
- Rusk, Texas, 182, 189, 192, 198

S

- Saline County, Kansas, 198
- Saloman, Frederick, 176
- San Antonio, Texas, 222
- Sand Town, Cherokee Nation, 212
- Sandefur, Timothy, 246
- Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Bradford), 72
- Schermerhorn, John F., 128
- Scotland, 20
- Scott, Dred, 7, 32
- Scott, Sutton S. (Confederate Indian Affairs Commissioner), 187
- Scott, Winfield, xiii, 9, 166
- Seacole, Mary Jane, xiii
- Sears, Stephen W., 13
- secession winter (1860-1861), 35, 154, 181
- Second Battle of Cabin Creek, xvi, 56, 206, 210, 212, 213, 254
- 2nd Cherokee Mounted Rifles, 170
- 2nd Colorado Infantry, 184
- Second Continental Congress, 122

- 2nd Indian Brigade, 196
2nd Kansas Cavalry, 207
2nd Kansas Infantry, 202
Seidule, Ty, 11
Seminole Nation, 127, 158
Sequoyah, xi, 121, 122, 124, 127
Sevastopol, Czarist Russian Empire, 12
Seward, William H., 9, 38
and perceived threat to Five Southern Indian Republics, 163
Seymour, Horatio, 54
Shaw, Robert Gould, 37
Sheridan, Philip H., 14
Sherman, John, 72, 105
Sherman, William T., 14, 222
Shreveport, Louisiana, 167, 213, 217, 225, 226
Sigel, Franz, 170
Simpson, Brooks D., 91
Skullyville Prairie, Choctaw Nation, 203, 227
slavery debate
interconnectedness with states'
 congressional
 representation, 12
Smalls, Robert, x, 41, 58, 70, 113
Smith, James McCune, 94
Smith, Karnie C., 250
Smith, Keith Carl, xiii, xiv, 17, 31, 35, 250
Smith, Sr., Karnie C., xiii, xiv, 17, 31, 250
Smithsonian Magazine, 85
"Solid South", 89
South Carolina (State), 9, 76, 80, 122
pro-slavery "fire-eating" politicians in, 35
Southeastern Woodlands Nations, 134
Southeastern Woodlands peoples, xv, 120, 146, 162
Southeastern Woodlands
 Republics, 120, 134
Southern Cherokee Government, 119
Southern Cherokee Nation
 Executive Office, 225
Southern Cherokee people, viii, xi, xvi, xx, xxi, xxvi, 142, 144, 149, 155, 156, 157, 158, 163, 165, 167, 169, 177, 179, 181, 182, 188, 210, 215, 220, 221, 224, 225, 226, 227, 231, 236, 237, 239, 242, 250, 253
as refugees and exiles in North Texas, 192
Southern Cherokee refugees
 difficulties in North Texas, 193
Southern Cherokee troops, 39, 181
 in Confederate States Army (C.S.A.), 189
Southern Horrors
 Lynch Law in All Its Phases
 (Wells-Barnett), 112
Southern Indian Republics, 150, 160
Southern Indians, xvii
Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), 147
"Spot Resolutions", 24
Springfield, Massachusetts, 27
Springfield, Missouri, 151
Springplace, Georgia, 124
St. Landry Parish, Louisiana, 85
Stand Watie and Company, 151
Stand Watie and the Agony of the Cherokee Nation (Franks), xvi, 135
Stand Watie Manuscript
 Collection of the Helmerich Center for American Research, xvii
Stanton, Edwin, 42
Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, 69, 245
Starr, Nancy Bell, 193
Steal Away to Jesus, 134
Stephens, Alexander H., 189
Sterling, Philip, 17
Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 6
Stuart, J. E. B. or "Jeb", 8, 53
Sumner, Charles, 7, 72, 80

- Sunni Islamic law, 102
 Sutton, Victoria, 16
 Swimmer, Ross O., xvii
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, 134
 Syracuse, New York, 98
- T**
- Tahlequah, Cherokee Nation, 162, 175, 176, 177, 226
 Talbot County, Maryland, 15, 93
 "talking leaves", 121
 Taney, Roger B., 7, 32
 Taylor, Zachary, 4
 Tecumseh, 120
 Tennessee (State), 122
 Tennessee River, 129
 Tenskwatawa, 120
 10th Kansas Infantry, 175
 Texan cattle drives
 Stand Watie's role in enabling, 222
 Texas (State), 165, 196
 Texas Road, 184, 209
The American Indian as Participant in the Civil War (Abel), xv, 198
The Arkansian, 153
The Camden Confederate, 200
The Columbia Democrat, 140
The Crockett Quid Nunc, 213
The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (Marx), xxiv
The Failed Promise
 Reconstruction, Frederick Douglass, and the Impeachment of Andrew Johnson (Levine), xiv
The Frederick Douglass Papers, xv
The Hillsborough Recorder, 200
The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta
 The Celebrated California Bandit (Ridge), 145
The Muqaddimah - An Introduction to History

- The Classic Islamic History of the World* (Ibn Khaldun), xxiv
The New York Times, xv, 36, 210, 221
The North American Review, xv, 96, 101, 106, 110
The North Star, xiii, 24
The Oklahomans
 The Story of Oklahoma and Its People Volume One, Ancient Statehood (Dwyer), xvi, 120
The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader (Andrews), xiii
The Planter's Banner, 87
The President and the FreedomFighter
 Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Their Battle to Save America's Soul (Kilmeade), xiv
The Radical and the Republican
 Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics (Oakes), xiii, 35
The Red Record
 Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States (Wells-Barnett), 112
The Second Battle of Cabin Creek
 Brilliant Victory (Warren), xvi, 205
The Standard, 161, 213
The Texas Tribune, 12
 3rd Indian Home Guard, 181, 184
 3rd Wisconsin Cavalry, 184
 Thompson, George Thompson, 33
 Thompson, Jacob, 36
 Thompson, Johnson, 155
 Three-fifths Compromise, 33
Ties That Bind
 The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom (Miles), 155

- Toward the Setting Sun*
John Ross, the Cherokees, and the Trail of Tears (Hicks), 130
- Trail of Tears, 22, 118, 119, 125, 133, 237
- Trans-Mississippi Theater (TMT), 56, 188, 190
- Treaty of New Echota, 128, 129, 130, 131, 237
- Treaty of Paris (1783), 122
- Treaty of Washington (1866), 231, 232, 234
- Treaty Party, 129, 130, 137, 151, 228, 244, 253
- Trump, Donald J., xix
- Truth, Sojourner, xi, 26, 69
 birth name of, 28
- Tsalagi*, 121
- Tubman, Harriet, 69, 72
- Turner, Nat, viii
- Tustenuggee, Halleck, 170
- Tyler (or Texas) rifles, 189
- U**
- U.S. Army, 131, 141
- U.S. Congress, 27, 73, 238
- U.S. Constitution, 35
 Douglass's perception of as anti-slavery document, 31
- U.S. Military Academy at West Point, 11
- U.S. War Department, 143
- Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe), 6
- Underground Railroad, 15, 72
- Union Army, 10, 36, 188, 211, 243
- Union League of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 45
- Union Navy, 113, 166, 193
- United States of America, 120
- Uwatie, David, 120, 122, 128, 214
- V**
- Van Buren, Martin, 5, 126
- Vann, C. N., 254
- Vann, John, 122, 254
- Veatch, James C., 225
- Vicksburg Campaign, 39, 40, 56
- Vicksburg, Mississippi, 39, 42, 54, 166, 188, 191, 223
 Grant's siege and capture of, 40
- Virginia (State), xxiii, 16
- W**
- Waco, Texas, 239
- Walker, Tandy, 56, 192, 196, 202, 218, 223
- Wallace, Daniel Webster "80 John", 222
- Ward, Rochelle Allred, 155, 223
- Warmoth, Henry Clay, 86
- Warren, Steven, xvi, 205, 208
 contradiciton of W. Dale Weeks's claims, 254
- Washbourne Anderson, Mabel, xv, 124
- Washbourne, J. W., 157, 236
- Washington Telegraph, xvii
- Washington, D.C., 4, 10, 36, 73, 80, 92, 118, 120, 124, 142, 163, 234
- Washington, George, 32, 36, 122, 190
- Washington, Louisiana, 86
- Watie, Betsy, 144
- Watie, Buck, 243
 appeal to fellow Christians on behalf of Cherokee people, 123
- Watie, Buck (or Elias Boudinot), xi, 118, 122, 123, 131, 132, 143, 145, 151, 195, 237, 243
 education, 123
 intention to prevent genocide of Cherokee people, 132
 murder of, 137
 opposition to white whiskey peddlers and alcohol in Cherokee Nation, 118
 work as newspaper editor, 124

- Watie, Charles, 142, 181, 193, 226, 236
 inheritance of enslaved people from father David Uwatie, 149
- Watie, Charlotte Jacqueline, 236
- Watie, Char-wah-you-kah, 142
- Watie, Eugene Cumiskey, 192
- Watie, John, 142, 143, 236
 inheritance of enslaved people from father David Uwatie, 149
- Watie, Minnehaha Josephine "Ninnie", 151
- Watie, Saladin Ridge, 143, 144, 181, 193, 204, 213, 243
- Watie, Sarah Bell "Sally", 143, 144, 181, 183, 193, 210
- Watie, Solon Watica, 151, 236
- Watie, Stand, vii, viii, x, xi, xxii, 16, 56, 118, 131, 142, 143, 145, 147, 151, 177, 180, 183, 187, 197, 210, 224, 227, 239, 241, 245, 254
 1840 visit to Washington, D.C., 138, 142
 1859 visit to Fayetteville, Arkansas, 153
 1866 visit to Washington, D.C., 227, 239
 1867 visit to Washington, D.C., 234
 act of self-defense against James "Jim" Foreman, 140
 adversarial relationship with John Ross, xv
 after-action report on Second Cabin Creek victory, 212
 approachability, 206
 as Clerk of Cherokee Nation Supreme Court, 124
 as slaveholder, 155
 as Speaker of Cherokee National Council, 152
 baptism of, 124
 birth, 128, 242
 birth name and meaning in Cherokee language, 124
 brutality falsely attributed to, 216
 Clerk of Cherokee Nation Supreme Court, 242
 co-authorship of letter protesting the killings of Treaty Party leaders, 137, 138
 command of Southern Cherokee and white Arkansas militia unit, 156
 concern for Cherokee civilians, 177
 concerns for Southern Cherokee people's needs, 219
 conclusion of ceasefire agreement, 220
 death, xvi, 237, 242
 defeat of planned Union invasion of North Texas, 219
 defeat of Union military leadership's planned invasion of North Texas, 188
 defense of Cherokee semi-autonomy, 150
 defense of Southern Cherokee people, 221
 defense of Southern Cherokee rights, viii, 242, 250, 256
 desire to avenge murdered loved ones, 137
 desire to execute operations against Union forces in Arkansas, 175
 desire to prevent Jacksonian Democrats' genocide of Cherokee people, 151
 desire to prevent new outbreak of sectarian feud with Ross clan, 152
 devout Christian and family man, 145
 disapproval of atrocities committed by both sides, 198

- early urging of Cherokee leadership to join Confederacy, 158, 161
- education, 124
- elected principal chief of Southern Cherokees, 173, 179, 181, 188, 211, 225, 253
- emphasis on guerrilla PSYOPS, 215
- emphasis on guerrilla reconnaissance operations, 177, 197
- escape from Ross Party would-be assassins, 135
- exaggerated Union claims about, 216
- faithful Rebel despite Confederate government failures to supply Indian Brigade, 188
- false portrayal of as bloodthirsty fanatic, 172
- financial struggles faced by, 236, 243
- forgiveness of longtime foes, 244
- former friendship with Ross family, 125
- former friendship with John Ross, 118
- frequent visits to Arkansas, 150
- inheritance of enslaved people from father David Uwatie, 149, 243
- initial postwar decision to remain in Choctaw Nation, 232
- knightly character of, x, 199, 238
- last C.S.A. general in the field to surrender, 220, 239
- letter emphasizing importance of communication, 174
- letter emphasizing regular correspondence between commanders, 161
- letter urging Confederate support for starving Cherokees, 176
- letter urging Texans to help feed starving Southern Cherokee refugees in North Texas, 218
- locally respected as ex-C.S.A. brigadier general and Southern Cherokee principal chief, 239
- marriages, 144, 252
- membership in Georgia Guard, 130
- membership in Knights of the Golden Circle, 154, 156
- mercy for captured lifelong foes, 195
- mercy on captured lifelong foes, 194
- military leadership, xxi, 39, 56, 166, 170, 171, 173, 175, 176, 178, 181, 182, 183, 188, 189, 191, 192, 196, 200, 206, 210, 211, 212, 213, 223
- motivation to join Confederacy and save Cherokee semi-sovereignty, 154
- motivations to join Confederacy, 10
- nuanced pro-slavery stance, xviii
- offer to lead ex-Confederate Cherokee troops against Plains tribes, 235
- offer to organize Southern Cherokee unit for U.S. Army in Mexico rejected by Polk's War Department, 144
- only American Indian general in the Civil War, 200, 239
- opposition to Kansas abolitionist militants in Indian Territory, 152
- perception of Abraham Lincoln, 149, 163, 164

- perception of John Ross as tyrant, 144
- perception of U.S. government as threat to Cherokee Nation, 157
- physical description of, 214
- poorly supplied by Confederate government, 193
- prioritizing societal improvement over personal feelings, 245
- promotion to brigadier general, 56, 200, 243, 254
- promotion to colonel, 158, 161
- proud and devoted father, 204
- PSYOPS against Union Army of the Frontier, 215, 217
- raid into Missouri's Neosho Valley, 198
- rebuffing of John Rollin Ridge's request to help kill John Ross, 146
- rejection in attempts at Southern Cherokee independence, 235
- rejection of revenge against Ross clan, 169
- religious beliefs, 122, 130, 255
- resentment of federal intervention among the Cherokee people, 133
- retaliatory burning of John Ross's plantation home, 197
- return as Clerk of Cherokee Nation Supreme Court, 151
- Ross Party's murders of family members, 244
- ruthlessness in warfare, 167, 169, 173
- sadness regarding false accusations of atrocities, 199
- scalping incidents at Pea Ridge (Elkhorn Tavern) blamed entirely on, 172
- self-defense against attack by James "Jim" Foreman, 155
- sparing of captured Ross supporters, 173
- spending of last dollars to put daughters through school, 237
- support for Treaty Party, 129
- trial for self-defense killing of James "Jim" Foreman, 141
- willingness to work with former foes, 251
- willingness to work with longtime foes, 144
- work as assistant newspaper editor, 124
- work ethic, 243
- Watie, Thomas Black, 142, 237
- murder of, 142
- Webber, Charles, 182
- Webber's Falls, Cherokee Nation, 175, 181, 183, 236
- Weeks, William Dale, 11, 125, 156, 172, 176, 230, 253
- Weer, William, 175
- Weigley, Russell F., 222
- Welles, Gideon, 9
- Wells-Barnett, Ida B., 112, 113
- West Gulf Blockading Squadron, 193
- West, Cornel, xiv, 51
- Whig Party, 24, 26
- founded by Henry Clay, 3
- Whipper, William, 61
- "White Liners", 87
- "whiteness" concept promoted by "fire-eaters", 23
- Wilberforce, William, 34
- Williams, John, 86
- Willis, "Aunt" Minerva, 134
- Willis, "Uncle" Wallace, 134
- Wilmot Proviso, 5
- Wilmot, David, 5
- Wilson, A. W., 157
- Wilson, Beverly, 86
- Wilson, Thomas Woodrow, 80, 99
- Wise, Henry A., 150
- Women in the World of Frederick Douglass (Fought)*, 21

Woodhull, Victoria, 83

Worcester v. Georgia (1832), 118,

131

Worcester, Samuel, 118, 132, 135

Y

Yarbrough, Fay A., 159

Young, Brigham, 6, 144

X

X, Malcolm, xxiii



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