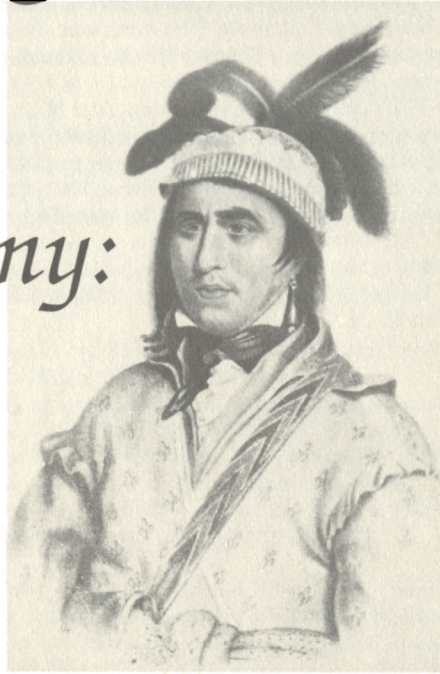


Indian Soldiers for the Gray Army:



Confederate Recruitment in Indian Territory

By William H. Graves

One of the most unusual aspects of the American Civil War was the participation of approximately 12,000 American Indians from Indian Territory fighting in the army of the Confederate States of America. Considering that most of these Indians had been expelled from the South and that the war had a devastating effect upon them (22 percent of the Cherokees, for example, perished during the war), why these Indians joined the Southern cause is an important question.¹

INDIAN SOLDIERS

In general, Southerners did not hold Indians in high esteem, but a combination of factors made Indian Territory and its inhabitants important to the southern cause. Indian Territory resources were important and its strategic location would be vital when conflict developed. Officials in Arkansas and Texas knew this especially well. Secessionists in each state seized the opportunity to secure the region and its spoils, actions completely sanctioned when a Confederate national government was formed.

Following Abraham Lincoln's election as president of the United States and the secession of South Carolina, disunionists in other states moved quickly to advance their cause prior to formation of a national slave government. Texas and Arkansas moved immediately to secure Indian Territory for the South. On January 19, 1861, Arkansas Governor Henry M. Rector wrote to Cherokee Principal Chief John Ross urging him to join formally with the new Southern government.² The Arkansas *Gazette* on May 4, 1861, asked that "provision be made for the Indian Country West of us for all of the Indians are our friends" and then boldly declared that "further provision should be made for the admission of the Indian Territory into the Southern Confederacy as a slave state."³ On February 17, 1861, Texas sent three state commissioners to Indian Territory "to secure the friendship and cooperation" of the Five Civilized Tribes. They treated with the Indians and returned to Texas reporting that "the active friendship of these [nations] is of vital interest to the South."⁴

Indian Territory was important to the South because it was geographically between the two states and many of its Indians practiced slavery, especially important given the abolitionist sentiment in Kansas. In addition, it could serve as a buffer zone to protect the Confederacy from possible Union invasion.⁵ If the Indians joined the South and raised troops to protect their lands, white troops could be used for service elsewhere. Economically, Indian Territory could furnish lead, grain, meat, cattle, hides, and horses.⁶

In Arkansas there were close ties between state officials and some of the Indian leaders. The United States Southern Superintendent for Indian Affairs was Elias Rector, brother of the Arkansas governor. Elias Cornelius Boudinot, a prominent Cherokee mixed-blood and an avowed secessionist, was a member of the Arkansas secession convention.⁷

When the Confederate national government was formed it sanctioned these states' actions and then established its own relations

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

with the Indians. At his inauguration Confederate President Jefferson Davis called for establishing good relations with the Indians. On February 20, 1861, the Provisional Confederate Congress charged its acting secretary of war with "all matters and things connected . . . with the Indian tribes." On March 4 Congress authorized Davis to send a special agent to negotiate with the Five Civilized Tribes. He complied with this request on March 5, appointing Albert Pike, an Arkansas lawyer and sometime Indian legal counsel, to go to the Indian Territory and negotiate treaties with the Indians. Ten days later Davis recommended that the Congress establish a Bureau of Indian Affairs and appoint a commissioner of Indian affairs.⁸

In the meantime the Union government, in effect, abandoned Indian Territory, not so much by design, but due to a combination of forces and circumstances beyond its control. The northern government had neither time nor circumstances in its favor. Some blame for Confederate success can be directed at the Buchanan administration for its do-nothing policy at this critical time. During the crucial period between Lincoln's election and his inauguration, Southerners moved swiftly to exploit their advantage. The Lincoln administration did not have a good grasp of the status quo in Indian Territory and with the majority of its attention focused on eastern matters, it could not be expected to have an Indian policy or the means to implement one. If this were not enough, other factors worked to sever the long-standing relationship between the Indians and the United States.

Economically, politically, and in many ways, socially, the Five Civilized Tribes were tied to the slave states. In 1860 transportation and communication were poor in Indian Territory and its residents had limited access to outside information. Roads were bad or impassable much of the time and the telegraph did not yet penetrate its boundaries. Most of its rivers flowed through Arkansas and Texas and supplies came through these states. At Fort Smith, Arkansas, the United States administrative center for Indian Territory, most of the civilian employees and many of the soldiers were Southerners.⁹

It might seem odd that the Five Civilized Tribes would ally with the South considering their experiences at Southern hands early in the nineteenth century. Although many of the Indians despised the southern states, especially Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi,

they held greater animosity towards the United States government, which had actually forced their removal.¹⁰

Since the 1830s most of the United States officials administering to these Indians were from the South and this was true in 1860 as well. Douglas H. Cooper, the Choctaw and Chickasaw agent, was from Mississippi; William H. Garrett, the Creek agent, from Alabama; Andrew J. Dorn of the Neosho River Agency was from Arkansas; and Matthew H. Leeper of the Leased District from Texas.¹¹ Elias Rector, the United States Southern Indian Superintendent was from Arkansas. David S. Buice in his study of the Five Civilized Tribes



A former friend to the Five Tribes, Albert Pike served the Confederacy by negotiating treaties of alliance with the territory's Indian nations (Photos courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society unless noted).

found that this "southernness" among United States officials was so well entrenched that the superintendent and his agents hired civil servants and agency employees on the basis of their pro-slavery feelings.¹²

When secession became fact, these officials used their full influence with the Indians to promote the southern effort. Each resigned his United States commission and served the Confederacy as agent, advisor, or soldier. Their influence proved crucial to winning the Indians to secession. Their resignations and the Union withdrawal from its Indian Territory posts and from Fort Smith meant that no one spoke for the Union during this critical period.

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

The Lincoln administration slowly turned its attention to Indian Territory, but experienced little success during the early phase of the war. Months passed before new Union agents were placed in the field and in the interim the Indians aligned with the Confederacy. Not until May, 1862, was William G. Coffin, the new Union southern superintendent, on the scene. Lincoln's first choice refused the post. William Quesenbury of Arkansas declined Lincoln's offer to be Creek agent. Another Arkansawyer, John Crawford, accepted the position of Union Cherokee agent, then used his office to promote the Southern cause.¹³



Native Americans, such as this prosperous family in front of their impressive two-story log structure, were sought-after allies in the War between the States.

In the first few months after secession southern operatives used several kinds of pressure to get the Indians to join the South. They played on historical circumstances and took advantage of the poor communication in Indian Territory and the absence of Union counterpressure to feed the Indians half-truths skillfully woven into convincing arguments. In some cases they simply lied to the Indians or threatened them.

The Indians were told that unless they joined with the South their lands would be taken from them. This statement carried some weight as the United States had moved most of the Indians to the territory from their traditional homelands. Until 1854 the area comprising the future state of Kansas had been the northern part of Indian Territory. Its creation as a separate territory led to the expulsion of some Indians who had been relocated there. In addition, agents had been among the Indians prior to secession asking the principal chiefs of the tribes how many of their people would accept allotment of their lands in severalty.¹⁴ In 1857 Kansas territorial governor Robert J. Walker proposed that Indian Territory be made a state, arguing that "the Indian treaties would pose no obstacle to the accomplishment of this goal."¹⁵ In 1860 while speaking at the Republican National Convention, William H. Seward proposed amazingly that "Indian Territory south of Kansas must be vacated by the Indians."¹⁶ It was easy for southern interests to weave these statements together to put fear into many Indians about Union motives.

The secessionists argued that disunion meant that the United States government would collapse and not be able to meet its treaty obligations with the Indians. This threat held weight for two reasons. First, the United States owed money to several of the Indian nations from earlier treaty provisions, and some Creeks and Seminoles, for example, had additional claims pending against the United States. Both Agent Cooper and Commissioner Pike had worked with the Indians on treaty claims and their opinions were very persuasive. Second, the United States held almost \$3.4 million in trust funds for its Indian Territory charges. Nearly \$3 million of this amount was deposited in the banks of slaveholding states.¹⁷ Disunionists used these arguments to convince the Indians that Confederate defection would deprive the Union of its ability to meet its obligations to them.

Those who favored secession also played on internal divisions within many of the Indian societies. Few full blood Indians owned slaves and they had little sympathy for the southern cause, but many of the mixed-bloods were slave owners and hoped to use secession to improve their position, both economically and politically. In addition, long-standing feuds in some of the Indian societies made it easy for the Confederates to implement a divide-and-conquer strategy. Among the Cherokees, for example, a thirty-year-long feud had split the nation and led to terrorism and politi-



John Conner, seated third from left as a member of an 1866 delegation to Washington, was an articulate spokesman against Confederate policies in the pre-war period (Courtesy Western Collections, University of Oklahoma Library).

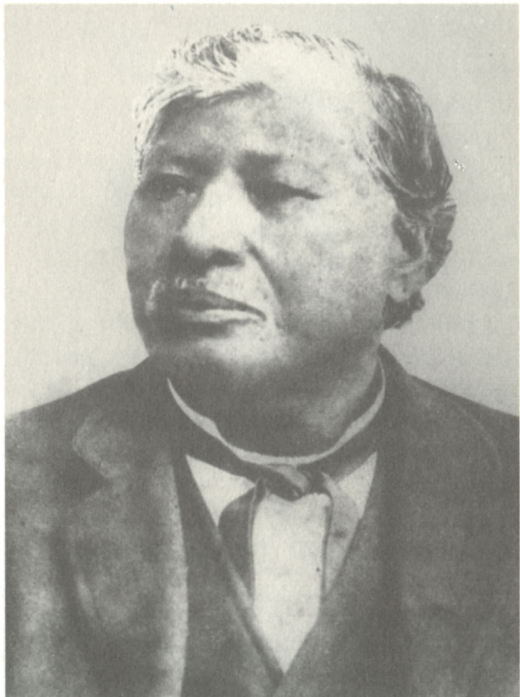
cal assassination.¹⁸ Many Indians tried to avoid the coming war and were manipulated, in some cases by their own leaders. In the Seminole Nation most favored neutrality, but Seminole Principal Chief John Jumper favored secession. With little firm support from his people, he committed the Seminoles to the South and severely split the Seminoles into two armed camps.¹⁹

More powerful and revealing evidence of Confederate overtures to the Indians, however, are first hand accounts from those who experienced these proposals. John Conner, a Delaware Indian, expressed his fear about allotment in severalty in a letter of January 30, 1860, writing, "We are surrounded on all sides by white men who use all Their Powers to get us to divide our land. We see what other nations have done by dividing their reservations and they have made themselves Miserable By doing so."²⁰ Bob Butler remembered that the Cherokees had embraced secession because the United States "withdrew all of its armed forces and all of its civil and executive officers from the Cherokee country and left the Cherokees entirely exposed to the threatened horrors of invasion of their country by . . . armed enemies."²¹ Sarah Aklin Odom, a

mixed-blood Creek, reported that the Creeks were divided by secession because "some of the wealthier Creeks owned slaves and they believed in slavery."²²

J.W. Stephens, another mixed-blood Creek, stressed that many Creeks favored secession because they were slave owners and "they knew if the South was beaten, it meant the slaves would be freed and they had paid many thousands of dollars for them at the Slave Market in New Orleans."²³ Jim Tomm, a Creek freedman, characterized Albert Pike's role when he wrote that "The government owed the Indians some money and wouldn't pay it to them and Mr. Pike promised them if they joined the south, that the south would give them money, protect them from the north with guns and ammunition and lots more."²⁴ Pas ko fa, second chief of the Seminoles, remembered Pike telling the Indians that "we must fight for our country. [I]f we did not fight the cold people would come and take our country from us . . . the northern people had not land enough and they would come and take our land from us . . . and then we might go without any."²⁵

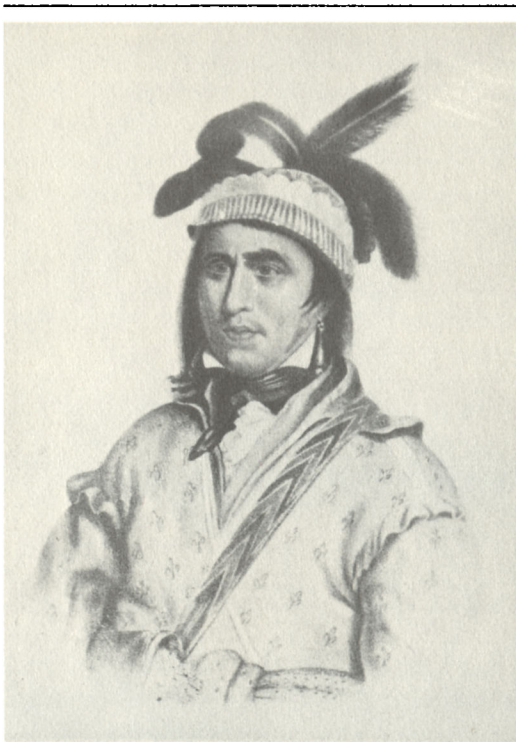
Intertribal disputes and leaders who favored secession, such as Seminole chief John Jumper, led some tribes into the conflict who otherwise might have remained neutral.



THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

There are two letters, however, written by Indians early in the war that clearly show the dilemma facing many of the loyal Indians. On September 18, 1861, two Creek Indians, White Chief and Bobb Deer, wrote to President Lincoln through an interpreter asking what to do about the Confederate overtures. The letter said:

Owing to the want of correct information as to the condition of the Country and Government our people are in great distress. Men have come among us, who claim to represent a new Government, who tell us that the Government represented by our Great Father in Washington, has turned against us and intends to drive us from our homes and take away our property. They tell us that we have nothing to hope from our old Father and that all of the friends of the Indians have joined the New Government. And that the New Government is ready to make treaties with the Indians and do all and more for them than they can claim under their old treaties. They ask us to join their Armies and to help sustain the Government that is willing to do so much for us. But we doubted their statements and promises and went to talk with the Agent and Superintendent which our Ffather has always kept among



Within three months of his eloquent, but unheeded plea to the president, Opothle Yahola and his band of neutralist Creeks found themselves fighting Confederate troops during a harsh winter as the Indians made their way to the relatively safe haven of Kansas (Courtesy WHC).

INDIAN SOLDIERS

us but they were both gone. And then some of our people began to think that our Great Father had forsaken us . . . we most earnestly ask that some persons shall be sent here . . . and then make known . . . the condition, policy, and wishes of the Government as far as the interests of the Indians are concerned.²⁶

Another powerful letter was written on August 15, 1861, by Opoth le hoyola [Opothle Yahola], an aged Creek leader who wrote to Lincoln asking for guidance. He wrote:

Now I write to the President our Great Father who removed us to our present houses. We made a treaty and you said in our new houses we should be defended from all interfering forces, any people, and that no white people in the whole world should ever molest us but the land would be ours as long as the grass grew and the water run. And should we be injured by anybody you would come with your soldiers and punish them. But now the wolf has come. Men who are strangers tread our soil. Our children are frightened and the mothers cry out for fear. There our Great Father was strong and now we raise our hands to him for help to keep off the intruder and make our houses happy as they used to be. Our Great Father was always near and stood between us and danger.

We his children want it to be so again and we want you to send us word what to do. We do not hear from you and we send a letter and we pray you to answer it. Your children want to hear your word and feel that you do not forget them.

I was at Washington where you treated with us and now white people are trying to take our people away to fight against us and you. I am alive. I well remember the treaty. My ears are open and my memory is good. This is a letter of

your children by

Opoth le hoyola²⁷

Faced with such pressures the Five Civilized Tribes, and several other Indian nations, signed treaties and fought with the Confederacy. Their actions split the tribes and proved disastrous when the South lost the Civil War. After the war the United States punished the loyal as well as the disloyal Indians. Confederate overtures to the Indians cost much more than most could have predicted.

ENDNOTES

* William H. Graves received his masters and Ph.D. in history from Florida State University. He and his wife were killed in a traffic accident in Floyd County, Kentucky, on August 1, 1987. At the time of his death, he was an Assistant Professor of History at Prestonsburg Community College, Prestonsburg, Kentucky. This article is based on his paper "Indian Soldiers for the Gray Army: The Unusual Story of Confederate Recruitment of American Indians During the Civil War" which he had intended to

THE CHRONICLES OF OKLAHOMA

present at the Northern Great Plains History Conference at Sioux Falls, South Dakota in October, 1987. The paper was read at the conference by a colleague.

¹ For specific figures concerning Indian participation in the war, see Edward E. Prag, "The Confederate Diplomacy with the Five Civilized Tribes," (Master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1966); Michal O. Roark, "American Indians in Oklahoma: Population Distribution and Culture Areas," (Master's thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1975); and Donald Englund, "A Demographic Study of the Cherokee Nation," (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1973).

² *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols., (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880–1891), Ser. I, Vol. I: 683–684 (hereafter cited as *OR*).

³ (Little Rock) *Arkansas Gazette*, May 4, 1861.

⁴ *OR*, Ser. IV, Vol. I: 322–325.

⁵ See William H. Graves, "The Five Civilized Tribes and the Beginning of the Civil War," *Journal of Cherokee Studies*, 10 (Fall, 1985); Wiley Britton, *The Civil War on the Border* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1890); Charles Francis, "Confederate Ascendancy in Indian Territory, 1860–1861," (Master's thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1963); James Monaghan, *Civil War on the Western Border, 1854–1865* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1955); and Larry C. Rampp and Donald L. Rampp, *The Civil War in Indian Territory* (Austin, Texas: Presidial Press, 1975).

⁶ *Ibid.*; Arrell M. Gibson, *A Guide to Regional Manuscript Collections in the Division of Manuscripts, University of Oklahoma Library* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960).

⁷ See Edward E. Dale and Gaston Litton, eds., *Cherokee Cavaliers: Forty Years of Cherokee History as Told in the Correspondence of the Ridge-Watie-Boudinot Family* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), xix, xxi; Annie H. Abel, *The American Indian as Slaveholder and Secessionist: An Omitted Chapter in the Diplomatic History of the Southern Confederacy* (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1915), 19; and Muriel H. Wright, "Notes on Colonel Elias Cornelius Boudinot," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, 41 (Winter, 1963–1964): 382–407.

⁸ *Journal of Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861–1865*, in *United States Senate Documents, No. 234, 58th Cong., 2nd sess., 7 vols.*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), I: 69, 142.

⁹ David S. Buice, "The Civil War and the Five Civilized Tribes: A Study in Federal-Indian Relations," (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1970), 16–17; Gaston Litton, *History of Oklahoma*, 5 vols. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1957), I: 189.

¹⁰ See the discussion of motives in Arrell M. Gibson, *The Chickasaws* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

¹¹ All who have written about agents make this point. Douglas H. Cooper served with Jefferson Davis during the Mexican War and was appointed Choctaw and Chickasaw agent in 1853 by Davis while Davis was secretary of war. See W. David Baird, "Peter Pitchlynn: Choctaw Delegate," (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1968), 126–127.

¹² Buice, "The Civil War and the Five Civilized Tribes," 17.

¹³ The best treatment of Lincoln's Indian policy is David A. Nichols, *Lincoln and the Indians: Civil War Policy and Politics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 27–28. He claims that Lincoln's Indian policy "did not inspire confidence in Indian country" and "left the tribes with no alternative but to join the South."

INDIAN SOLDIERS

¹⁴ Letter of Cyrus Kingsbury to Rev. S.B. Treat, April 20, 1860, Cyrus Kingsbury Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma (hereafter cited as WHC).

¹⁵ This is an often cited quote for which this author has yet to find an original citation. The quote here is from Buice, "The Civil War and the Five Civilized Tribes," 25.

¹⁶ This is an often cited quote. Both Gibson and Abel use it, but its original source is yet to be found by this author. For the quote here, see Buice, "The Civil War and the Five Civilized Tribes," 25.

¹⁷ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1860*, 242, Appendix III.

¹⁸ See Gaston and Litton, *Cherokee Cavaliers*.

¹⁹ This author treads lightly here as percentages are difficult to determine, but a reading of the Seminole correspondence in *Letters Received By the Office of Indian Affairs, Seminole Agency, 1824–1876*, Microcopy #234, Roll 803, 1859–1867 (hereafter cited as LR, OIA, SA), and Edwin C. McReynolds, *The Seminoles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957) indicates little real support among the majority of the Seminole people for secession or a southern alliance.

²⁰ Letter of John Conner to Peter Pitchlynn, January 30, 1860, Peter P. Pitchlynn Collection, WHC.

²¹ Bob Butler Interview, *Indian Pioneer Papers*, 14: 79, WHC (hereafter cited as IPP).

²² Sarah Aklin Odom Interview, IPP, 65: 59–60, WHC.

²³ J.W. Stephens Interview, IPP, 87: 194, WHC.

²⁴ Jim Tomm Interview, IPP, 91: 327, WHC.

²⁵ Letter of Pas ko fa to Abraham Lincoln, March 10, 1864, LR, OIA, SA.

²⁶ Letter of White Chief and Bobb Deer to Abraham Lincoln, September 18, 1861, *Letters Received By the Office of Indian Affairs, 1821–1881, Creek Agency, 1824–1876*, Microcopy #234, Roll 230, 1857–1863 (hereafter cited as LR, OIA, CA).

²⁷ Letter of Opoth le hoyola to Abraham Lincoln, August 15, 1861, LR, OIA, CA.