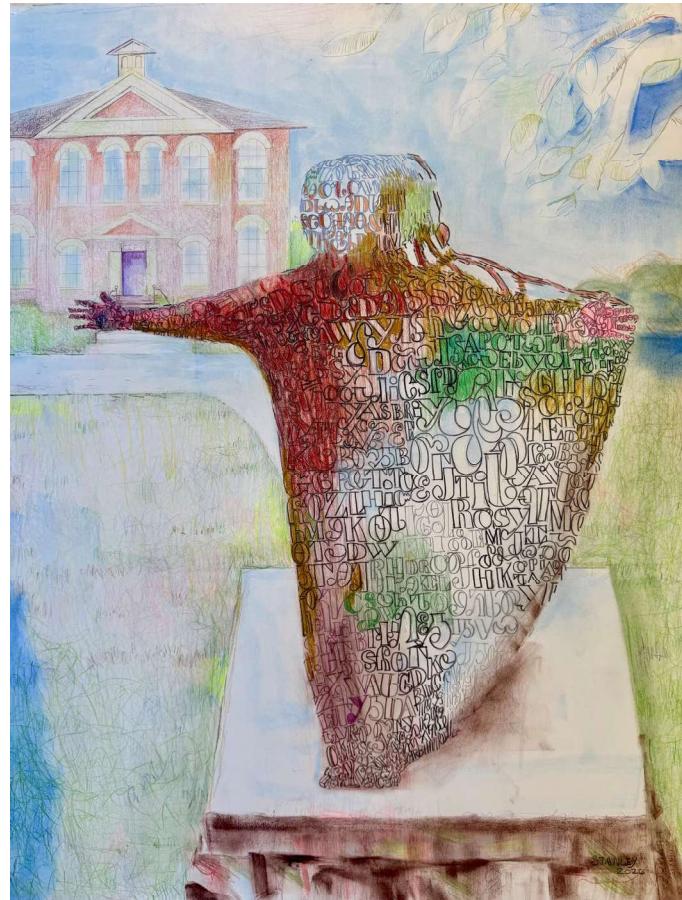


Impact of Slavery on Cherokee Nation's 19th Century Economy and Infrastructure

January 27, 2026



Cherokee Freedmen
Monument Illustration
Courtesy of Cherokee Nation Artist Stanley Boydston

“This monument symbolizes, the thousands of Cherokee Freedmen and their descendants, whose contributions, presence, and legacy have always been woven into the fabric of the Cherokee Nation. Our stories, like this image, are layered with history culture and the Cherokee syllabary—reminding us that we are not just a part of the past, but vital to our future within the Cherokee Nation.”

—Melissa Payne

The Principal Chief's Task Force to Examine the Impact of Slavery on Cherokee Nation's 19th Century Economy and Infrastructure: Final Report

Introduction

The Cherokee Nation (“the Nation”), through Executive Order 2020-05 and its 2024 addendum, has reaffirmed its commitment to equal opportunity and to addressing historical patterns of disenfranchisement, including those affecting Cherokee citizens of Freedmen descent. To begin this work, the Principal Chief convened a task force to examine how Black chattel slavery shaped the Nation’s 19th century economy, infrastructure, and historical narrative. This report summarizes the task force’s initial findings, references, and recommendations. The full charge establishing the Principal Chief’s Task Force to Examine the Impact of Slavery on Cherokee Nation’s 19th Century Economy and Infrastructure follows:

Task Force Charge

By Executive Order 2020-05 (Order on Equality) and the 2024 Executive Order Addendum, it is in the best interest of the Cherokee Nation to ensure that equal opportunity and equal protection under the law are at the forefront of policymaking, programs, and initiatives. It is the policy of the Principal Chief and the Executive Branch to consider any historical acts of disenfranchisement, exclusion, or unequal treatment of groups within Cherokee society, including Cherokee citizens of Freedmen descent. It is in Cherokee Nation’s national interest to study and examine the impact of Black chattel slavery, beginning with a threshold examination of economic and infrastructure related subjects. Understanding the Nation’s use of slave labor in building the Nation, both physically in terms of building structures but also the economy and socio-economic makeup of the Cherokee Nation, ensures this is included in the greater narrative of Cherokee history. Relatedly, Cherokee Nation must examine how slavery is depicted, interpreted, and otherwise described at its historical sites and published materials. Therefore, the Principal Chief’s Task Force to Examine the Impact of Slavery on Cherokee Nation’s 19th Century Economy and Infrastructure is hereby established.

Overview of Task Force Work Plan

The task force sought to examine the impact of Black chattel slavery on the 19th century Cherokee Nation economy and infrastructure development through a thorough review of historic auction and market, records, as well as archival data related to the sale of enslaved individuals. This required an understanding of the use of slave labor in Cherokee Nation prior to, during, and following the forced removal of Cherokees and their slaves from their eastern homelands. Additionally, the task force sought to examine

the impact of slavery on the socio-economic makeup of Cherokee Nation and the tribe's intellectual ties to slavery. The task force also reviewed how slavery is depicted, interpreted, presented, or omitted at Cherokee-owned and -operated historic sites and Cherokee Nation-authored and -published works or other materials. Furthermore, a register for Cherokee Nation-constructed buildings and structures built with slave labor will be created, and recommendations for areas of further study will be made.

The task force sought to research each of the areas outlined in the executive order and to produce a report identifying basic facts, providing informative yet summary answers, raising questions, and acknowledging the need for deeper inquiry. Weekly meetings were held to discuss research updates and key findings. A list of research materials identified and used by the task force is attached to the end of this report.

Executive Summary

The adoption and use of slave labor in Cherokee Nation provided a distinct economic advantage to slaveholders as compared to their non-slaveholding counterparts. Prior to the forced removal of Cherokees from their eastern homelands, slavery was practiced in both the East in Cherokee Nation and in the Western Cherokee Nation among the Old Settlers.

The adoption of slave labor caused a socio-economic shift in Cherokee Nation by creating class and cultural divisions that previously did not exist. This information is reflected in the 1835 census and the 1838 claims that were completed prior to removal.

Slave labor was used both pre- and post-removal to construct homes, businesses, and government buildings.

Historical Summary

According to documented accounts, the practice of Black chattel slavery occurred in Cherokee Nation as early as the late 18th century. Although slave labor was used primarily for agricultural purposes, the income earned by slaveowners was used to diversify business investments to include taverns, inns, ferries, and mills, and one can infer that slave labor was used to operate these businesses as well. Slave labor was also used for general house duties such as cleaning, cooking, and caretaking and in skilled trades such as brickmaking.

There is little information available on Cherokee citizens participating in slave auctions and markets; however, it is likely that Cherokees purchased individuals from the Charleston and Augusta/Hamburg markets due to their proximity. After the federal government's ban on the importation of enslaved individuals in 1808, slaveowners in Cherokee Nation relied on natural increase, local markets, and marshals' sales as their primary sources to purchase enslaved individuals.

In addition to Cherokees purchasing and selling enslaved people, there is documentation of enslaved individuals, such as Prince (1834) and Dorcas Buffington (1856), utilizing the Cherokee legal and economic systems to purchase their own freedom.

Data shows a distinct increase in wealth among slaveholders. While some data exists on the monetary values of individual slaves (in the form of purchase prices at public sales or rewards for the return of runaway slaves), there is little information available to illustrate effectively the market rate of procuring slave labor across Cherokee Nation outside of a few individual bills of sale. The valuation information located by the task force is listed in the table below:

Year	Details	Record Source or Location
1819	\$100 reward – Robert, a runaway mulatto believed to be headed for the Cherokee Nation along the Arkansas River	<i>Louisianian</i> , June 5, 1819
1829	Sold to highest bidder – one man named Peter; levied as property to satisfy a bond	<i>Cherokee Phoenix</i> , June 24, 1829
1830	Rachel (age 9), Tom (age 7), Joe (age 6), and Clarressa (age 5) are sold from Robert B. Vann to George C. Benge for an undisclosed sum	Henderson Collection, Cherokee National Research Center
1831	Public auction – sold to highest bidder on a credit of 12 months – two boys (names and ages not listed)	<i>Cherokee Phoenix</i> , October 1, 1831
1831	\$40 reward – one runaway mulatto woman (name not listed)	<i>Cherokee Phoenix</i> , October 12, 1831
1832	\$20 reward – one woman (name not listed)	Halliburton 53 (<i>Cherokee Phoenix</i> , February 4, 1832)
1832	\$9.12 1/2 – receipt for services – one hired man (name not listed) for one year by Elias Boudinot from George Lowrey	Andrew Nave Collection, John Vaughn Library Special Collections, Northeastern State University
1834	Prince (likely the father of Lucy Prince) purchased his own freedom for \$150	Cherokee Supreme Court docket, 1834, University of Tennessee Libraries
1845	Administrator's sale – between 30 and 40 young negroes and horses belonging to the estate of Joseph Vann will be sold to the highest bidder on June 17, 1845	<i>Arkansas Intelligencer</i> , May 13, 1845

1847	Mary (age 26) and her three children – Nancy (age 5), Caroline (age 4), and James (age 1) – sold by the estate of Joseph Phillips to Stand Watie for the sum of \$900	Cherokee Nation Papers, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma
1850	Peter (age 18) is sold by Susan Coodey to John Ross for the sum of \$400	John Ross Papers, Helmerich Center for American Research, Gilcrease Museum
1850	One boy named Grigg, traded from John Rollin Ridge to Mr. Eryart or Mr. Caldwell to satisfy a mortgage payment to Stand Watie in the amount of \$535	Cherokee Nation Papers, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma
1851	One woman, name unreadable (age 28), sold by Johnson Foreman to Maria Colston for the sum of \$650	Foreman Collection, Cherokee National Research Center
1853/5	George (age 40), his son Henry (age 7), and a girl named Adeline (age 8) sold by the estate of William Coody to John Ross for the sum of \$750	Henderson Collection, Cherokee National Research Center
1856	Patrice (age 37) and two boys, Andrew (age 4) and Sandy (age 2), sold by Jacob and Sebrina Croft to Stand Watie for the sum of \$1300	Cherokee Nation Papers, Western History Collection, University of Oklahoma
1856	Dorcus Buffington purchased her own freedom for an unknown amount	Dawes Testimonial Packet, National Archives and Records Administration

The adoption of slave labor caused a socio-economic shift in Cherokee Nation by creating class and cultural divisions. The slaveholding, or planter, class comprised about 6.74% of households in Cherokee Nation pre-removal and was made up largely of mixed-blood families with ties to white ancestors. This information is found in the 1835 census and the 1838 claims that were completed prior to removal. The use of slave labor correlates to an overall shift in Cherokee Nation from a subsistence-based economy to a more capitalist approach.

During the forced removal of Cherokees from their homelands in the East, enslaved people were forced to accompany their owners. Tasks during the arduous journey included clearing obstructions from roadways, hunting and cooking, serving as watchmen, and general caretaking.

Following removal, Cherokee Nation had to rebuild in Indian Territory. Slave labor played a large part in clearing land, fencing fields, rebuilding homes, farming, and saline

(salt) operations, as well as general house duties. Unfortunately, there is no census on which to rely for demographic information such as population, number of slaves per household, or crop yields. It is reasonable to conclude that at least some slave labor was used to build government buildings such as the Supreme Court building and the seminaries, as well as homes and farms.

The concept of slavery in Cherokee Nation evolved over time, from a practice of captivity of other Indians primarily driven by concepts of kinship, to a race-based ideology introduced by European settlers. Black chattel slavery continued to be supported by tribal law until the Cherokee Nation's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Emancipation was reaffirmed in Cherokee Nation's 1866 treaty with the federal government, but it would take many generations for Cherokee Freedmen and their descendants to obtain their full treaty-protected rights as Cherokee Nation citizens.

Note on Historical Sources

The historical record used for this report is incomplete in three ways. First, all historical research begins with incomplete evidence, which requires careful inference or acceptance of uncertainty. Second, the history of Native peoples, including the Cherokee Nation, is fragmented due to disrupted recordkeeping, jurisdictional changes, and losses over time. Third, the history of Black enslaved people is even more limited, with many surviving documents reducing individuals to financial entries rather than reflecting their full humanity. However, records such as the Cherokee Supreme Court Docket and Dawes Commission testimony provide rare glimpses into individual agency, documenting instances where people like Prince and Dorcas Buffington successfully negotiated the purchase of their own freedom. These gaps shape the evidence available and the conclusions that can be drawn.

Summary of Task Force Findings by Objective

- I. Examine the impact of Black chattel slavery on the 19th century Cherokee Nation economy and infrastructure development.
 - a. Cherokee Nation's economy and infrastructure development did benefit directly from the implementation and use of Black chattel slavery, starting primarily in the 19th century.
 - b. Cherokee Nation's laws, at various points in history, supported the legal establishment of slavery within Cherokee Nation until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.
 - c. Black chattel slavery served as a primary engine for the Cherokee Nation's economic transition and infrastructure growth in the 19th century. Federal "civilization" policies sought to transform Cherokees from a

subsistence-based hunting society into "herdsmen and cultivators" who embraced private property and capital accumulation.

- i. Infrastructure and Construction: Enslaved labor was foundational to the physical development of the Nation. Enslaved men provided the skilled and manual labor required to construct stately brick manor houses, such as the Chief Vann House (Diamond Hill), which was intended to signal Cherokee permanence and "civilization" to white Americans. Furthermore, enslaved workers fired the bricks used for both the Vann manor and the Cherokee Council House at New Echota. *See additional structures built using slave labor under Objective IX below.*
- ii. Commercial Transportation: The development of internal commerce relied on enslaved labor to build and operate ferries (such as Vann's Ferry) and toll roads. Wealthy Cherokee entrepreneurs like James Vann used their political influence to ensure that the U.S. Federal Road passed through their land, allowing them to use enslaved labor to service travelers at inns and taverns.
- iii. Industrial and Resource Development: Slavery facilitated the operation of specialized industries, including gristmills, sawmills, and whiskey stills. Salt springs, which were communal property leased for profit, were operated using enslaved labor to extract salt for sale to neighboring states.
- d. Plantation Agriculture: Slavery created a distinct wealth gap and class stratification within the Nation. By 1835, slaveholding households (a very small percentage of the Cherokee Nation population) farmed an average of 75 acres, while non-slaveholders averaged only 11 acres. This labor allowed elite Cherokees to produce surplus cotton, corn, and livestock for export to markets as far as New Orleans. To put this disparity in today's monetary terms, if the farmland was valued at an average of \$5,000-\$10,000 per acre, that gap would equal between \$320,000-\$600,000 in land value alone. In addition to the land value gap, there is monetary value of the crop-yield as well. Using corn as an illustrative crop, the slaveholders would earn approximately \$50,000 more per year from their crop yield than non-slaveholding Cherokees. (Assuming 175 bushels per acre at \$4.50 per bushel.)

II. Examine historic auctions, market, and records data related to the sale of enslaved individuals.

- a. There is weak documentation of original captors of Caribbean imports.
- b. Pre-removal records indicate that Cherokees purchased enslaved individuals from markets in Charleston and Augusta/Hamburg.

- c. After the 1808 ban on the import of enslaved individuals, Cherokees relied on natural increase, local markets, or marshals' sales.
- d. Post-removal records indicate that Cherokees relied on markets along the Arkansas River corridor – primarily Van Buren (AR), Fort Smith (AR), and Webbers Falls (OK).
- e. There is documentation of slaveholders hiring-out (renting) slave labor to non-slaveholders. This created yet another stream of income for slaveholders, which served to widen the wealth gap between slaveholders and non-slaveholders.
- f. Historical records from the 19th century establish that the Cherokee Nation treated enslaved individuals as taxable chattel property and liquid assets. These "assets" were often used to settle debts and satisfy court judgments.
 - i. Market Valuations: In 1809, the Cherokee Agency conducted a statistical survey valuing the Nation's 583 enslaved individuals at \$300 each. The \$300 valuation represents as significant capital investment compared to the \$10 to \$60 valuation of a typical Cherokee log home. By 1835, the census recorded a total of 1,592 enslaved people within the Nation, with approximately one slave for every 10.5 Cherokee citizens.
 - ii. Specific Auction and Record Examples:
 - 1. *The Vann Estate*: James Vann owned 115 enslaved people in 1809, representing nearly 20% of the total enslaved population in the Nation at that time.
 - 2. *Public Auctions at New Echota*: In June 1829, Cherokee Marshal Joseph Lynch advertised the public sale of a "likely negro boy named George" to satisfy the debts of Ambrose Harnage.
 - 3. *Bond Satisfaction Sales*: In September 1831, Marshal Lynch auctioned "one Negro man named Peter" to satisfy a bond for Edward Hicks.
 - 4. *James Pettit Judgment*: A court-ordered sale included an enslaved man named Gabriel to satisfy a \$500 judgment against James Pettit.
 - 5. *Estate Liquidations*: The estate of T.B. Adair was liquidated through a twelve-month credit auction of "three negroes, Joe, his wife Nelly and child".
 - 6. *Inter-Tribal and External Trade*: Cherokee planters purchased slaves from New Orleans markets and from white traders in Arkansas and Tennessee. For example, in 1838,

Lewis Ross (brother of Chief John Ross) transported 500 slaves from Georgia to the Cherokee Nation for sale to other Cherokee citizens.

- g. Understanding the use of slave labor in the Cherokee Nation pre-removal.
- h. Although slave labor was used primarily for agricultural purposes, the diversification of business investments to include taverns, inns, ferries, mills, etc., meant slave labor was used to operate these businesses.
- i. It should be noted that the profits generated through slave labor, primarily agricultural labor, were used to invest in these diverse business ventures.
- j. Other uses of slave labor included domestic tasks (cooking, cleaning, nursing, childcare, etc.), skilled labor (such as brickmaking), and other tasks such as translating.

III. The impact that slavery had on the socio-economic makeup of Cherokee Nation.

- a. The institutionalization of Black chattel slavery in the 19th-century Cherokee Nation fundamentally transformed its socio-economic makeup, shifting the society from an egalitarian, subsistence-based culture to a stratified class hierarchy driven by plantation agriculture and mercantile capitalism.
- b. Cherokee Nation's transition to a capitalist economy and use of slave labor created an elite planter class, small in numbers but extremely influential in the Nation's government.
- c. Slavery facilitated a drastic shift in traditional gender roles. As men took on the role of plantation masters, they entered the agricultural sphere—historically a female domain—while Cherokee women were relegated to a diminished domestic sphere focused on spinning and weaving. This shift in the "domestic" space coincided with the political disenfranchisement of women and the consolidation of power in a centralized republic governed by the small percentage of slaveholding men. The political influence of this class was absolute; for instance, 11 of the 12 signers of the 1827 Cherokee Constitution were slaveholders.
- d. The socio-economic impact of slavery on the Cherokee Nation was like the weaving of a double-walled basket; while the outer layer displayed the "civilized" progress of a sovereign republic, the inner structural integrity was comprised of an exploited labor force that was systematically excluded from the benefits of that very progress.

IV. Use of slave labor during the forced removal of the Cherokee people.

- a. The use of slave labor during the forced removal primarily benefited slaveholders, but some benefit was experienced by the larger group. Enslaved persons cleared obstructions from roadways, cooked meals,

hunted, served as night watchmen, and provided general caretaking to their owners.

V. Use of slave labor in the Cherokee Nation post-removal.

- a. The use of slave labor in Indian Territory post-removal was pivotal to the building of a new Cherokee Nation. Enslaved people cleared land for improvements, fenced fields, cut logs for construction, built structures, constructed docks, and planted crops. Cherokee families in possession of enslaved people were able to rebuild their lives at a much faster pace than those without access to slave labor.

VI. Cherokee Nation's intellectual ties to slavery.

- a. Cherokee Nation's intellectual ideas of slavery evolved significantly over time, from the practice of captivity of other Indians primarily driven by an absence of kinship among Cherokee communities, to an adopted system driven by capitalistic values and racial ideology from European settlers.
- b. African and Cherokee cultural exchange over time occurred in areas, including, but not limited to, agriculture, textile production, and regional herbal medicine.

VII. The manner in which slavery is depicted, interpreted, presented, or omitted at Cherokee-owned and -operated historic sites and Cherokee Nation-authored and -published works or other materials.

- a. The depictions and interpretation of slavery within Cherokee Nation's historic sites and museums are currently limited, largely due to the specific scope and interpretive strategy established for each site. Of Cherokee Nation's seven museum properties, the Cherokee National History Museum is the only site that directly includes content related to slavery and Cherokee Freedmen within its interpretive materials.
- b. Among the seven museums, one historic building, the Cherokee National Supreme Court Museum, was constructed prior to emancipation and has been concluded to have been built, at least in part, using slave labor under the supervision of a general contractor. Further study is needed to determine the extent to which enslaved labor was used; however, the confirmed involvement of enslaved workers should be memorialized and incorporated into the building's interpretive narrative. At present, the museum's interpretation does not include specific content addressing slavery or Cherokee Freedmen.
- c. To ensure a more complete and accurate representation of Cherokee Nation's history, it is recommended that Cherokee Nation pursue additional research on the role and experiences of enslaved people and Cherokee Freedmen across all historic sites. Findings from this research should be integrated into a unified interpretive strategy, ensuring that the

history of slavery – its impact, legacy, and connection to each site – is consistently and thoughtfully presented throughout all Cherokee Nation museums.

VIII. Creation of a register for Cherokee Nation-constructed buildings and structures constructed using slave labor.

- a. Based on societal conditions of the time, it is reasonable to conclude that the following buildings were constructed, at least partially, with slave labor:
 - i. The Cherokee National Supreme Court Museum in Tahlequah, OK, which once housed both Cherokee Nation's judicial branch as well as the *Cherokee Advocate* offices; Cherokee National Historic Register (CNHR) 005, National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) 74001657
 - ii. The Lewis Ross home, later the Cherokee Orphan Asylum, in Salina, OK; CNHR 015, NRHP 83002092
 1. The springhouse is the only remaining structure.
 - iii. The original Cherokee Female Seminary in Park Hill, OK; CNHR 006, NRHP 74001658
 1. Three columns of the original structure remain standing.
- b. It is reasonable to include that enslaved people constructed, at least partially, private or domestic structures located within Cherokee Nation:
 - i. Rose Cottage in Park Hill, OK; CNHR 009
 - ii. Hunter's Home Historic Site in Park Hill, OK; CNHR 008, NRHP 70000530

IX. Make recommendations for further study of the aforementioned related subjects.

- a. Recommendations for further study include, but are not limited to:
 - i. Research the earliest-documented use of Black chattel slavery in Cherokee Nation. This will likely require investment in visits to archives in the southeastern United States.
 - ii. Examine Cherokee Supreme Court dockets, Dawes Commission testimonies, and pension applications to identify and document instances of self-purchase and manumission.
 - iii. The creation of a fellowship, or other such position, for a scholar or post-doctoral student to examine surviving records over a multiyear period. This will require investment in compensation for the fellow, as well as refinement of research parameters and goals.
- X. Conduct the foregoing examination and threshold reviews, identifying basic facts, providing informative yet summary answers, raising questions, or acknowledging the need for deeper inquiry.

Task Force Recommendations

1. Support in-depth research.
 - a. Develop a comprehensive source guide or annotated bibliography identifying archival collections, published works, and other materials related to Cherokees and slavery that require detailed review and analysis in future phases of work.
 - b. Support primary source research in identified repositories through employment opportunities and/or a fellowship program.
 - c. Provide grant funding to external institutions to digitize relevant records, once identified, and ensure they are accessible for future research.
2. Establish the Register of Slave-Built Structures and develop interpretation protocols: Complete the planned creation of the register for Cherokee Nation-constructed buildings and structures built using slave labor. Following the establishment of this register, a focused effort should be made to examine and revise how slavery is depicted, interpreted, presented, or omitted at these identified Cherokee-owned and -operated historic sites.
3. To ensure a more complete and accurate representation of Cherokee Nation's history, it is recommended that Cherokee Nation pursue additional research on the role and experiences of enslaved people and Cherokee Freedmen across all historic sites. Findings from this research should be integrated into a unified interpretive strategy, ensuring that the history of slavery – its impact, legacy, and connection to each site – is consistently and thoughtfully presented throughout all Cherokee Nation museums.

Jan. 27, 2026

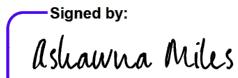
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Submitted by Task Force Members

- Melissa Payne, Cherokee Freedmen Community Liaison

Signed by:


- Ashawna Miles, Cherokee Nation Director of Self Governance

Signed by:


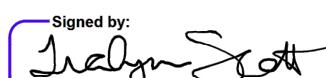
- Shella Bowlin, Cherokee Nation Secretary of State

Signed by:


- Mark Harrison, Cherokee Freedmen Art and History Project Committee Member

Signed by:


- Tralynna Scott, Cherokee Nation Special Envoy to U.S. Dept. of Treasury and Cherokee Nation Businesses Chief Economist

Signed by:


- Travis Owens, Cherokee Nation Businesses, Vice President of Cultural Tourism

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List of additional persons related to the drafting of this report:

- Adrienne McMurray, CNB Senior Administrative Assistant
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Research Materials

The sources below were consulted by the task force during the course of research. This is not a comprehensive list of relevant sources. The task force recommends that the development of such a list be a focus of future work.

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Cherokee Phoenix

Cherokee Advocate

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- Act to prevent amalgamation with colored persons, 19 September 1839

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- Report of George Butler, Cherokee Agent, 1859
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