

Resource 11:

Catharine Beecher's Campaign Against Indian Removal



[Left] Attributed to W & F Langenheim, *Catharine Beecher*, 1848. Daguerreotype. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, A102-438-1z.
[Right] Augustus Washington, *Lydia Sigourney*, 1852. Watkinson Library, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut.

After the Revolution, and especially in the boom times after the War of 1812, white settlers and individual states claimed Cherokee lands that occupied much of what is now the southeastern United States. In 1828, Georgia passed laws that challenged Cherokee sovereignty within the state. After Andrew Jackson was inaugurated in March 1829, he supported Georgia's claims, not surprisingly since he was elected largely because he favored Indian removal.

Eight months later, Jeremiah Evarts, a missionary who worked among the Cherokees, encouraged a massive petition campaign against the

impending Indian Removal Act. On December 1, 1829, educator Catharine Beecher wrote this circular, which was published unsigned on Christmas Day. Beecher—older sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe—and Lydia Sigourney, her colleague at the Hartford Female Seminary in Connecticut, organized the petition effort, drawing on their many contacts in education and benevolent societies. Petitions were an acceptable medium for women's opinions, but in Beecher and Sigourney's campaign, women worked collectively, nationwide, on a heated political issue. They were venturing into areas where they were expected to remain silent.

Despite these efforts, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act on

May 28, 1830. The Trail of Tears—the forced march of the Cherokees to Oklahoma Territory—began in 1838. The failure of the women's petition effort, and the reports of Cherokee deaths and suffering, led many to see parallels to the plan to end slavery by sending freed slaves to Africa. Some in the antislavery movement abandoned colonization as unworkable and unjust, and became full-fledged abolitionists. But Catharine Beecher was not among them. She continued to favor colonization, and saw abolitionists like Angelina Grimke Weld as dangerous radicals.

Sources: Catharine Beecher, *Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, Addressed to Miss A. D. Grimke* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837), <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abesceba2t.html> (accessed by M. Waters, 10-26-2016); Theda Purdue, *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents*, rev. ed., (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

Discussion Questions

- ★ What does this circular reveal about the political engagement of women in the 1820s?
- ★ What could women do to express their disapproval of a government policy? How effective was this tactic?
- ★ Why was petitioning considered an appropriate way for women to express their opinions?

Circular Addressed to Benevolent Ladies of the United States

Ever since the existence of this nation, our general government . . . [has] acknowledged . . . [the Indian] people, as free and independent nations, and has protected them in the quiet possession of their lands. . . .

But the lands of this people are claimed to be embraced within the limits of some of our Southern States, and as they are fertile and valuable, they are demanded by the whites as their own possessions, and efforts are making to dispossess the Indians of their native soil. And such is the singular state of concurring circumstances, that it has become almost a certainty, that these people are to have their lands torn from them, and to be driven into western wilds and to final annihilation, unless the feelings of a humane and Christian nation shall be aroused to prevent the unhallowed sacrifice. . . .

Have not then the females of this country some duties devolving upon them in relation to this helpless race? . . . It may be, that female petitioners can lawfully be heard, even by the highest rulers of our land. . . .

This communication was written and sent abroad solely by the female hand. Let every woman who peruses it . . . endeavor by every suitable expedient to interest the feelings of her friends, relatives and acquaintances, in behalf of this people, that are ready to perish. A few weeks must decide this interesting and important question, and after that time, sympathy and regret will all be in vain.

[Catharine Beecher], "Circular Addressed to Benevolent Ladies of the U. States," December 1, 1929. Theda Purdue, *The Cherokee Removal: A Brief History with Documents*, rev. ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2016. The complete text is at <http://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CherokeePhoenix/Vol2/no39/pg2col3bp3col2b.htm>.