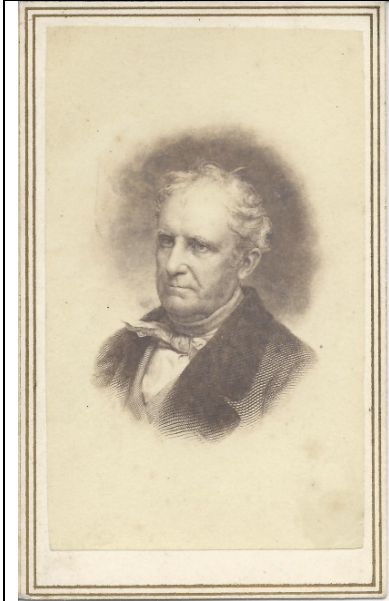


Chapter 78 -- Rigged Treaties Begin To Move The Indians West



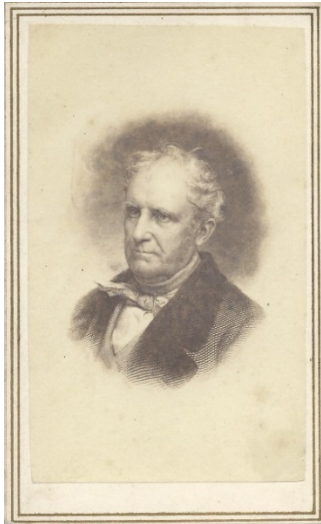
Dates:
1825

Sections:

- Adams Wishes For Fair Treatment Of The Native American Tribes
- Georgia Forces Adams's Hand In Support Of "Indian Removal"

Time: 1825

Adams Wishes For Fair Treatment Of The Native American Tribes



Like all Presidents before him, JQ Adams struggles over how best to deal with America's native tribes.

He clearly agrees with conventional wisdom that Indians are "lesser" than their European counterparts, and recognizes the intense pressure from frontiersmen to grab their land and turn it over to white settlers.

Yet, like his predecessors in office, he is hesitant to act.

Moral qualms play a role here. After all, the tribes have occupied the continent for generations before the white man arrived, and uprooting them by force smacks of injustice.

But the hesitancy seem to run deeper than that.

James Fennimore Cooper's Novels
Portray "Noble Savage" Indians

The answer may lie in the Enlightenment writing of the Frenchman, Henri Rousseau, familiar fare for many early presidents. Rousseau touts the vision of what he calls the "noble savage," uncorrupted by the greed and ruthlessness of modern society. These are truly free men, not slaves, living independently off the land, governed by the communal will of their tribe – all virtues that resonate with the American spirit.

Nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state, when placed by nature at an equal distance from the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man.

This image of the “noble savage” is also reinforced at the time by the author, James Fennimore Cooper, who stands alongside Washington Irving as the nation’s first popular story-teller. While Irving’s tales poke fun at the Dutch knickerbockers of New York, Cooper’s fame rests on the adventures of the frontiersman, Natty Bumppo, and his loyal Mohican companions, Chingachgook and Uncas.

These two are neither fully civilized nor Christian, but they do exhibit native intelligence, personal courage, and intense loyalty for their American friend – all traits that suggest a “capacity for growth” almost never accorded the fully beaten down Africans.

In turn, this seems to prompt the early Presidents not to enslave the Indians, but to reform them – to help them realize their potential under the guiding wing of a benevolent “Great White Father.”

Monroe’s 1817 Inaugural Address captures the obligations he feels America owes its first inhabitants:

*With the Indian tribes it is our duty to cultivate friendly relations and to act with kindness and liberality...
Equally proper is it to persevere in our efforts to extend to them the advantages of civilization.*

Adams’s 1825 speech reinforces the same theme in his wish to...

Extend equal protection to all the great interests of the nation (and) promote the civilization of the Indian tribes.

But it will not take long for the new President to discover that all the high-minded talk of “civilizing the noble savages” counts for little against the growing demands of speculators and settlers intent on driving the Indians off their historical homelands.

Time: 1825-1827

Georgia Forces Adams’s Hand In Support Of “Indian Removal”

The day before Adams takes office, the Treaty of Indian Springs is approved by the Senate. The terms have supposedly been worked out between chiefs of the Creek and Cherokee tribes in Georgia and two U.S. Commissioners – with the Indians ceding their lands in Georgia and Alabama in exchange for equal acreage in the west and a cash bonus of \$400,000. September 1, 1826 is set as the deadline for the tribes to move west.

But the deal is fraudulent, top to bottom, the work of only one Creek leader, John McIntosh, and Georgian officials eager to line their own pockets. When McIntosh is murdered by rival chiefs for his betrayals, the matter comes to Adams’s attention.

The President’s response is indecisive.

Even though he has signed the Treaty, he is troubled by the reports of fraud, and orders a halt to state land surveys scheduled to start sixteen months hence. This triggers a violent response from Governor George Troup of Georgia, who threatens to defy the President and begin the survey at once. At this point General Edmund Gaines is dispatched to investigate further. He sides with the Indians and reports that Troup is a “madman.” In turn, Adams signals Troup that U.S. military forces are to be used against any attempt by the state to enter the lands.

After Troup backs off, Adams tells the Creeks that Congress is unlikely to deny the original Treaty unless it can be replaced with a new one involving a land trade. The tribes meet and offer an option, but Adams tells them their proposed boundaries are unacceptable. Adams turns to his Cabinet in search of a solution.

Secretary of War Barbour argues for gradual diffusion of the Indians rather than any mass exodus, in hopes of seeing them assimilated into white civilization. Clay finds this impractical, saying that the Indians, like the Africans, are an inferior race, and will never be successfully integrated.

Senator Howell Cobb of Georgia, a rising southern spokesperson, tells Adams that his delegation will be forced to side with Jackson unless he acts immediately to enforce the original treaty. In characteristic fashion, Adams fires back at Cobb:

We could not do so without gross injustice. As to Georgia being driven to support General Jackson, I feel little care or concern for that.

After more pressure from Adams, the Creeks agree on January 24, 1826, to the Treaty of Washington, which fails its critics on two counts. First, it cedes more, but not all of their Georgia lands; second it sets a precedent whereby the U.S. officially recognizes the Indian tribes as “sovereign nations.”

Adams forwards the new Treaty to the Senate, but Governor Troup says that he plans to start surveying the land immediately, on the grounds that...

Georgia is sovereign on her own soil.

Clay urges Adams to send federal troops in to force Troup’s hand, but the President opts to push the Creeks once again to surrender more territory. And they do. On November 13, 1827 they cede their remaining land in Georgia in exchange for another \$42,000 and a promise that the government will protect them as they move west -- a promise ignored when the time comes.

Not only has Adams alienated Georgians and looked weak throughout the negotiations, he also concludes, in hindsight that he has violated his own ethical standards along the way.

These (treaties) are crying sins for which we are answerable, and before a higher jurisdiction.

While unknowable, it may be that his sense of failure over treatment of the Indians will lead on to his often heroic stances later in life on behalf of the African slaves.