

CHAPTER 9

Indian Perspectives on the
Civil War

Historians often view the American Civil War as a conflict in which brother fought brother. For some Indians embroiled in the fighting, this was figuratively, if not literally true, as tribes fractured along longstanding divisions as well as over the question of slavery. Just as many Indians thought that Britain was more likely to safeguard Indian independence than the United States, some tribes thought that their freedom would be more secure under the Confederacy. Ironically, this was especially true among the tribes that southern states had forced the federal government to remove to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. The Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Creeks held slaves, and this fact figured importantly in their decision to side with the Confederate States of America, although tribesmen were divided on the issue. Elsewhere, the issues of the Civil War were not important to Indians, but the disruptions that the war caused meant that the United States could not effectively administer reservations or protect the frontier. Still other Indians, especially in the eastern states, enlisted in the Union Army to fight as scouts and regulars. The Union victory meant that tribes that sided with the Confederacy would suffer losses of land as well as the destruction of property that the war entailed.

DOCUMENTS

In 1862, the Dakota Sioux living in Minnesota were in a desperate condition. The reservation agent had not adequately supplied them with food and other necessities, while greedy traders exploited the impoverished Dakotas. In Document 1, Wabasha, a Dakota leader, explains how traders took advantage of his people and finally provoked war. In Indian Territory, the Cherokees were divided on the issue of fighting with the Confederacy or the Union. The Cherokee Stand Watie, who became Brigadier General in the Confederate army, was the most prominent Indian military leader to emerge during the war. Document 2 is a letter from his wife Sarah, who urged her husband to watch over their son Saladin, and another relative named Charles.

Document 3 is Stand Watie's reply to Sarah. While these letters show how intensely personal the fighting was (some of the enemy were mentioned by name), they are also remarkable because they are so similar to the letters of thousands of white soldiers and their wives. Document 4 is the conscription law that the Chickasaw nation passed pursuant to their treaty with the Confederate States of America. Document 5 is the Chickasaw governor's proclamation calling on able-bodied men to volunteer for military service. Document 6 is U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Dennis N. Cooley's account of a council with the tribes that had signed treaties with the Confederacy. In addition to making new treaties, the Indians were also compelled to cede territory to the United States.

1. Wabasha (Dakota) Explains How Nefarious Trading Practices Caused the 1862 Minnesota War, 1866

I went to Washington the first time as I have stated above [1837]. I went again a second time [1858] before [after?] our removal to Red Wood. I went for this purpose; I had then sold our lands from east to west, from sunrise to sunset. I went to secure a reservation for my people. The Great Father put a garrison of soldiers near our country at Red Wood [Fort Ridgely], and before going to Washington I collected the chief men of the tribe and took them to the fort; some of them failed to come. I spent half a day in hunting them up, and getting their signatures to a letter that they wished to write to the President [Franklin Pierce]. The soldiers were put there to take good care of us and see that we were not interfered with by the whites. I told the commandant at the fort that I wished him to write a nice letter for us. I told him that I had always been brought up as an Indian, had worn a blanket and feather, painted my face and carried a gun. I wished him now to write to the Great Father that I had determined to leave off these things. I said write that I am determined to leave the war path, and to leave off drinking whiskey, and give up plundering and thieving, and I want you to give me your ways. I know that your ways are good, and that your people obtain land and hold it, they plant corn and raise domestic animals. I wish you to give my people land where we may do the same. If we are left without a country, we will be obliged to go out on the plains. We would be in danger of perishing by cold and starvation; and then there are other tribes that live there that are likely to make war on us. I wish, therefore, the Great Father to give us land on the Minnesota River, and to help us to live like whites. I took this letter and carried it to Washington. After a few days I had an interview with the President. He shook hands with me, and told me to tell him all that I wanted. I said, my Father, all that I wish is written in this letter, and I handed him the letter. (Little Crow and Little Six were the only chiefs that did not sign the letter.) A few days afterwards, I was called to the Interior Department to attend to our business. I was told that our request had been granted, and that a reservation

From *Papers Relating to Talks and Councils Held with the Indians in Dakota and Montana Territories in the Years 1866-1869* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 90-91. This document can also be found in Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, eds., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of the Minnesota Indian War of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 28-31.

had been appropriated for us at Red Wood on the Minnesota River, and that each head of a family should have assigned to him 100 acres of land; 80 of prairie and 20 of timber. When I saw our Great Father, I spoke to him about what was my chief desire, which was to have land. The traders were constantly following me for other purposes, and opposing me bitterly; but I paid no attention to them—I shut my ears against them. I only desired to get a title to lands and fix my people so that they could live. I made a treaty at this time, and lands were given to us at Red Wood, on both sides of the Minnesota River. I went home, and lived upon the land, and built houses there. The Great Father told me, before leaving, that he wished us to be well off, but that the whites would endeavor to get this land from us, and that the traders were like rats; that they would use all their endeavors to steal our substance, and that if we were wise, we would never sign a paper for anyone. If we did so, he said, we would never see 10 cents for all our property. I remembered the words of our Great Father and I knew that they were true. I was, consequently, always afraid of the traders.

Two years after this, when we had gathered our corn, we all went out on the fall hunt for furs. After we had been out some time the traders, the most active of whom was Mr. [Nathan?] Myrick, sent out for the chief to come in to sign papers for him in reference to selling the land on the north side of the Minnesota River [1858]. I refused to go in. The others, I am told, went home and signed some papers and received for doing so, horses, guns, blankets, and other articles. They told me this after I came home. I always refused to sign papers for the traders, and they therefore hated me. By the result of this paper signed without my consent or knowledge, the traders obtained possession of all the money coming from the sale of the land on the north side of the Minnesota River, and also half of our annuity for the year 1862. When this became known to the young men of the tribe, they felt very angry. The tribe then assembled a council of soldiers near Wakutes' house, and invite me to attend. In that council it was determined that they would not submit to having half of their annuity taken from them, and it was ordered that all Indians should draw their annuity in full from the disbursing officer, and refuse to pay the credits to the traders for that year. I made a speech in council and told the Indians that I thought it was proper that they should obtain their whole annuities and refuse to pay the traders, and that I did not want the half-breeds to be admitted to our councils; that they had always been the tools of the traders, and aided them to deceive the Indians. After this council I thought about this matter a great deal, but heard nothing about it further until early one morning, as I was making a fire, an Indian on horseback rode up to my house and said that the Indians were fighting the traders. I asked him the cause of this sudden outbreak. He said that some of Little Six's band had killed some whites in the big woods and had come back determined to kill all the traders, and that fighting had already commenced. I got on my horse and rode up to the store. I saw that the traders were already killed. I then went to Mr. [Philander] Prescott's house; he was an Indian farmer and a half breed. I told him to write me a letter to the fort, for that I would have no part in this matter. I was determined to fly to the whites. Mr. Prescott was very much frightened and did not write the letter well. I then went home and sent word to Wa ku ta [Wakute] and Hu sha sha [Red Legs], who had not yet heard of the outbreak. I then wished to go to the fort, but found it impossible for I was afraid of the Indians.

2. Letter from Sarah C. Waite (Cherokee) to Her Husband, Stand Waite, During the Civil War, 1863

My dear half

I have just got home from Rusk and found Grady here and a letter from you dated the 27th of April it gave me a great deal of pleasure to know that you still have time to write and cast a thought on home and home folks Mr. Kelly and W. Fields will start as soon as I finish my letter. I have not had a chance to write you a long letter since you left. Grady tells me that Charles and Saladin have killed a prisoner write and tell me who it was and how it was, tell my boys to always show mercy as they expect to find God merciful to them. I do hate to hear such things it almost turns me crazy to hear such things I find myself almost dead sometimes thinking about it. I am afraid that Saladin never will value human life as he ought. If you should ever catch William Ross dont have him killed I know how bad his mother would feel but keep him till the war is over. I know they all deserve death but I do feel for his old mother and then I want them to know that you do not want to kill them just to get them out of your way. I want them to know you are not afraid of there influence. Always do as near right as you can. I feel sorry that you have such a bad chance and so much to do be careful of yourself. We have not a bit of water here we almost starve for water. Old man Martin is sick I have not seen him since you left. he started the next day after you left and went to some house some fourteen miles of. I expect he will die. He has the consumption. Sister Nancy I do not think will live through the summer she wants me to go and stay with her while she lives. She cant walk across the house tell Major Bradley to hunt me up and I will take care of him if I go to Rusk for the summer. I will get me a house in Bellview so the children can go to school it (is) impossible for (me) to stay here I will get some one to stay and take care of our corn it will do to fatten our horses you must write every chance and direct it to Landa gin and let him mail it to Rusk Bellview, it looks like I cant live and not hear from you. You must write and tell me when it will be safe to come. I sent the bay horse the black was to poor to go. I will bring him. you can either send that back or keep him till I come. I can sell him for six hundred here I have not time to say good by. Yours

S. C. Waite

Write soon.

3. Letter from Stand Waite (Cherokee) to His Wife, Sarah C. Waite, 1863

My dear Sarah:

I have not heard from you since your letter brought in by Anderson. When Medlock went away I was out on a scout. I went to Tahlequah and Park Hill. Took Dannie Hicks and John Ross. Would not allow them killed because you said Wm.

From Edward E. Dale, ed., "Some Letters of General Stand Waite," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 1 (1921): 231, 30–59.

From Edward E. Dale, ed., "Some Letters of General Stand Waite," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 1 (1921): 231, 30–59.