"A Most Sacred Duty"

WOMEN IN THE ANTIREMOVAL MOVEMENT, 1829-1838

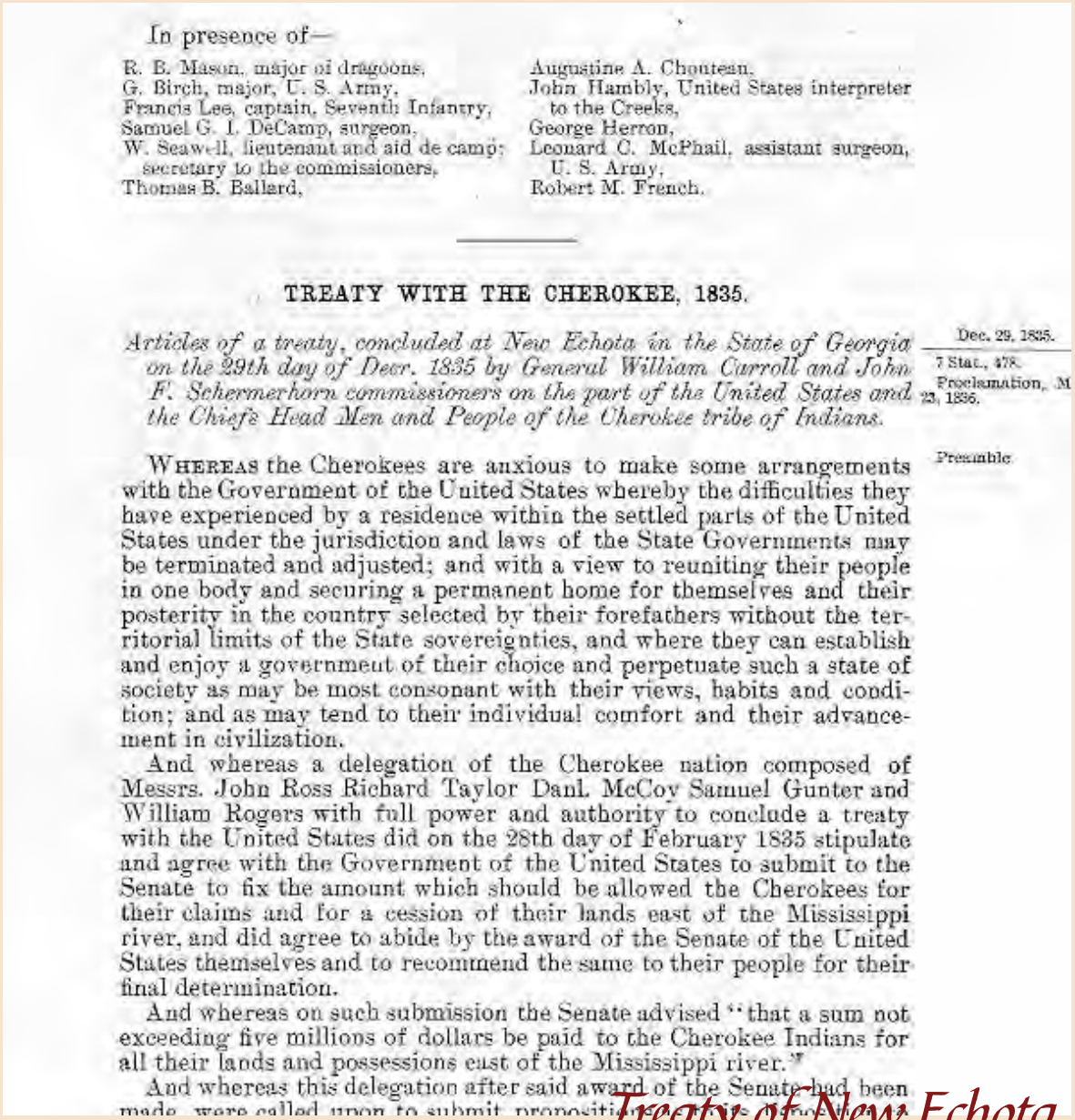
by Natalie Joy

Opposition to Indian removal is generally less well known than other reform movements of the antebellum period, but, like antislavery, it too was an international, interdenominational, and multiracial movement. It was also a movement, like antislavery, in which women played a crucial role. Throughout the 1830s women signed petitions protesting Indian removal in great numbers, the first time they had done so on a national issue.[1] Some submitted their own petitions, separate from the men of their communities, and some signed their names to mixed-sex petitions. There were two major waves of antiremoval petitioning; both received significant participation from women. The first occurred between 1829 and 1830 in response to the Indian Removal Bill, a hallmark of President Andrew Jackson's new administration. Largely orchestrated by Catharine Beecher, this fascinating episode has been the subject of recent scholarship.[2] The second wave of female petitioning, which occurred in 1838, has not received the same degree of attention, despite its connection to both the earlier antiremoval petition campaign and the burgeoning antislavery movement.[3] In my work I seek to understand how this later petition campaign against removal of the Cherokee Nation developed, its relationship to the first antiremoval petition campaign, and its intersection with abolition.

The Indian Removal Act was signed into law on May 28, 1830. This legislation discouraged antiremoval reformers, and there was a noticeable recession of antiremoval activity in the next few years as slavery began to dominate national politics and reform activity. But many



Catharine Beecher



In presence of—

R. B. Mason, major of dragoons,
G. Birch, major, U. S. Army,
Francis Lee, captain, Seventh Infantry,
Samuel G. I. DeCamp, surgeon,
W. Seawell, lieutenant and aid de camp; secretary to the commissioners,
Thomas B. Ballard,
Augustine A. Chouteau,
John Hambly, United States interpreter to the Creeks,
George Herron,
Leonard C. McPhail, assistant surgeon, U. S. Army,
Robert M. French.

TREATY WITH THE CHEROKEE, 1835.

Dec. 29, 1835.
7 Stat., 478.
Proclamation, May 23, 1836.

Articles of a treaty, concluded at New Echota in the State of Georgia on the 29th day of Decr. 1835 by General William Carroll and John F. Schermerhorn commissioners on the part of the United States and the Chiefs Head Men and People of the Cherokee tribe of Indians.

Preamble.

WHEREAS the Cherokees are anxious to make some arrangements with the Government of the United States whereby the difficulties they have experienced by a residence within the settled parts of the United States under the jurisdiction and laws of the State Governments may be terminated and adjusted; and with a view to reuniting their people in one body and securing a permanent home for themselves and their posterity in the country selected by their forefathers without the territorial limits of the State sovereignties, and where they can establish and enjoy a government of their choice and perpetuate such a state of society as may be most consonant with their views, habits and condition; and as may tend to their individual comfort and their advancement in civilization.

And whereas a delegation of the Cherokee nation composed of Messrs. John Ross Richard Taylor Danl. McCoy Samuel Gunter and William Rogers with full power and authority to conclude a treaty with the United States did on the 28th day of February 1835 stipulate and agree with the Government of the United States to submit to the Senate to fix the amount which should be allowed the Cherokees for their claims and for a cession of their lands east of the Mississippi river, and did agree to abide by the award of the Senate of the United States themselves and to recommend the same to their people for their final determination.

And whereas on such submission the Senate advised "that a sum not exceeding five millions of dollars be paid to the Cherokee Indians for all their lands and possessions east of the Mississippi river."

And whereas this delegation after said award of the Senate had been made, were called upon to submit propositions [illegible]

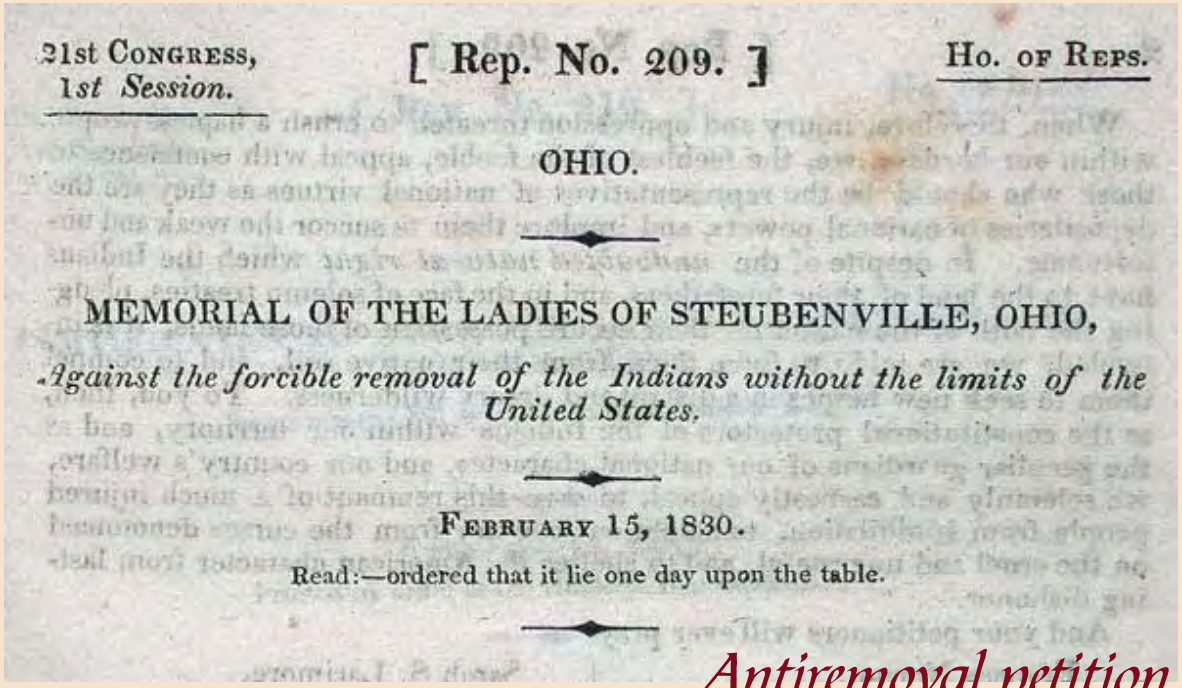
Treaty of New Echota

reformers did not forget about the plight of Indians, and the reemergence of anti-removal activity in 1838 provides evidence of the continuing saliency of this issue for such reformers.

The second major wave of petitioning developed in response to President Martin Van Buren's proposed enforcement of the Treaty of New Echota, which had been ratified by the Senate in 1836. Petitions protesting enforcement of the Treaty of New Echota and consequent removal of the Cherokee Nation poured in throughout the spring of 1838. These petitions bore strong similarity to those that had been sent in the earlier petition campaign. Petitioners urged Congress to halt enforcement of the treaty, which they argued would be an irreversible blot on the new nation's character and standing in the world should it be carried out.

As before, women from many towns and cities in the North and West submitted petitions to Congress protesting the Treaty of New Echota and its pending enforcement. A particularly interesting example of such activism comes from Concord, Massachusetts, where, in the spring of 1838, a group of women sent a petition to Congress protesting the Treaty of New

Echota. This antiremoval petition was submitted by 206 women, many of whom belonged to the recently formed Concord Female Antislavery Society. Sandra Petrulionis has expertly documented the extent to which Concord's women were at the forefront of abolitionist activity in this period, but their antiremovalism has not received equal attention from scholars.[4] The efforts of these antislavery women in this antiremoval petition campaign provides evidence of the centrality of women to many antebellum reform movements. In October of 1837, not long after a visit from Sarah and Angelina Grimké, the Concord Female Antislavery Society was formed. Its founding members included Mary Brooks, Prudence Ward, Susan Garrison, Cynthia, Sophia and Helen Thoreau, Mary Wilder, Susan Barrett, Maria Prescott, and Lidian Emerson.[5] There is a close correlation between the women of the Concord Female Antislavery Society and those who signed the 1838 petition protesting Cherokee removal. Mary Wilder's name appears first on the petition, suggesting that she was probably the initiator of the petition. Henry David Thoreau's mother Cynthia, his aunts Elisabeth, Maria, and Jane, and his sisters



21st Congress, 1st Session. [Rep. No. 209.] Ho. of Reps.

OHIO.

MEMORIAL OF THE LADIES OF STEUBENVILLE, OHIO,

Against the forcible removal of the Indians without the limits of the United States.

February 15, 1830.

Read:—ordered that it lie one day upon the table.

Antiremoval petition

Helen and Sophia, all signed the petition. Ralph Waldo Emerson's wife Lidian, and Ruth Emerson, his mother, both signed their names. At least two free black women, Susan Garrison and her daughter Ellen Garrison, also signed the Concord petition.[6]

A group of men from Concord submitted a similar petition to Congress protesting the Treaty of New Echota. Signers included Concord's most illustrious resident, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose name appears second on the petition.[7] But Emerson's most famous expression of antiremovalism was a letter he wrote on April 23, 1838, to President Van Buren protesting the impending removal of the Cherokee Nation.[8] Despite the fame Emerson has achieved for this letter, it appears from the documentary evidence that his wife, Lidian, played the more significant role in directing Concord's response to the Cherokee removal crisis of 1838.[9] In a letter to her sister, Lucy Jackson



Lydia Maria Child

Brown, dated April 23, 1838, Lidian Emerson strongly implies that it was she who convinced her husband to do something on behalf of the Cherokees. "Mr. Emerson very unwillingly takes part in public movements like that of yesterday preferring individual action," she wrote, going on to suggest that only when her husband was convinced (possibly by her) that "this occasion seemed to require all modes of action" did he participate.[10] She encouraged her sister to do the same thing in Plymouth, urging her to speak to some of their mutual female friends "that they may mention it to the gentlemen most likely to care that something be done."[11] Lidian Emerson's efforts seem to have paid off. Though the women of Plymouth did not send an antiremoval petition to Congress in 1838, the men of Plymouth did, and it is signed by at least one of the men Emerson suggested her sister seek out.[12] It is possible that many other women acted in similarly covert ways. Unless they left a record of their actions, as Lidian Emerson did, historians can never be sure if such covert activity was common.

The removal of Native Americans from their lands and the relocation and enslavement of Africans were interlocking processes. This undeniable fact convinced many antislavery reformers—in Concord, Massachusetts, and elsewhere in the North—to expand their sphere of activity. Petition campaigns against the Indian Removal Bill and Treaty of New Echota attest to the saliency of these issues for northern reformers concerned with the growing political influence and territorial expansion of the slaveholding South. The 1838 antiremoval petition campaign did not stop removal of the Cherokee people, but it does provide evidence of a persistent concern for Indians interwoven with rising antislavery sentiment. The antiremoval movement also reveals a more complex picture of women's work in antebellum politics. Lydia Maria Child, abolitionist and antiremovalist, likely spoke for many such women when she wrote in 1836 that all Americans should help the "oppressed, whose relief has become to us a most sacred duty."[13] Women like those of the Concord Female Antislavery Society were often at the forefront of such actions, signing petitions, writing letters, and goading their (often) reluctant menfolk to action.

Natalie Joy *is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at UCLA. Her research interests include politics, gender, and race in the antebellum U.S., with a particular focus on interracial or cross-racial reform efforts. This talk is taken from her dissertation, "Hydra's Head: Fighting Slavery and Indian Removal in Antebellum America," which explores the intersection of the antislavery and anti-Indian removal movements, with particular attention to the role of women. She is a 2007-08 AAUW American Dissertation Fellow. She gave a CSW talk on this topic on November 28, 2007.*

NOTES

1. Mary Hershberger, "Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999), 15.
2. "Mobilizing Women, Anticipating Abolition: The Struggle against Indian Removal in the 1830s," 15; Alisse Portnoy, *Their Right to Speak: Women's Activism in the Indian and Slave Debates* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
3. Kathryn Sklar does include three of the 1838 petitions in her document project on women's involvement in the antiremoval movement. Kathryn Kish Sklar, "How Did the Removal of the Cherokee Nation from Georgia Shape Women's Activism in the North, 1817-1838?" (State University of New York at Binghamton, 2004). *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000*. http://www.alexanderstreet6.com/wasm/index.html,
4. Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
5. *To Set This World Right*, 18-9.
6. Memorial of 206 women of Concord, Massachusetts (SEN25A-H6); 25th Congress; Records of the United States Senate, Record Group 46, Box 132; National Archives, Washington, D.C.; According to Sandra Petrulionis, Susan Garrison, her husband John, a former slave, and their daughter Ellen were members of Concord's free black community. Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right*, 11; 19.
7. Memorial of the inhabitants of Concord, Massachusetts (SEN25A-H6); 25th Congress; Records of the United States Senate, Record Group 46, Box 132; National Archives, Washington, D.C.
8. William Lloyd Garrison reprinted it in his *Liberator* and titled it "Words Fitly Spoken." *Boston Liberator*, June 22, 1838.
9. Delores Bird Carpenter, ed., *The Selected Letters of Lidian Jackson Emerson* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), xvii.
10. *The Selected Letters of Lidian Jackson Emerson*, 74-5.
11. *The Selected Letters of Lidian Jackson Emerson*, 75.
12. Memorial of the citizens of Plymouth, Massachusetts (SEN 25A-H6); 25th Congress; Records of the United States Senate, Record Group 46, Box 132; National Archives, Washington, D.C.
13. Lydia Maria Francis Child, *The First Settlers of New-England* (Boston: Munroe and C.S. Francis, 1836), 282.