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IN THEIR WORDS

MANUSCRIPTS IN THE VERMONT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



This occasional section draws attention to the outstanding manuscript holdings of the Vermont Historical Society by presenting transcribed letters, diary entries, memoirs, and other documents. Editing has been kept to a minimum, but punctuation, capital letters, and paragraphing have been added for clarity. Following the manuscript material is information about its physical dimensions, location in the library, and provenance.

A Vermonter on the Trail of Tears, 1830–1837

On December 28, 1829, President Andrew Jackson, addressing the first session of the Twenty-first Congress, presented his vision for the peaceful removal of the Five Civilized Tribes¹ from the southern United States. In the preceding decades these Indian nations had been forced to cede much of their lands to the U.S. government; however, they still retained large, semi-autonomous territories, which the southern states were eager to possess. Jackson's speech pointed out the Indians' suffering under the recent extension of state law over them in Alabama and Georgia (which he had tacitly allowed) and the ongoing destruction of their culture by the advancement of white civilization. The only solution to "preserve this much injured race" was their removal to lands west of the Mississippi.²

After months of debate, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, which was signed by President Jackson on May 24, 1830. The act provided for

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the emigration of the southern tribes to the Indian Territories, located in modern-day Oklahoma. Individual Indians could voluntarily sell their private "allotments" (often parceled out in previous treaties) and remove to the West, where they might dwell under their own government, free from white interference. Upon the act's passage, numerous white settlers and speculators flooded into the northern Creek lands in Alabama, anticipating the eventual removal of the natives. In June 1830 William J. Beattie of Ryegate, Vermont, settled among the Creek Indians. He had come south to seek his fortune, which became inextricably linked to that of the Creek peoples.

The Beattie Family Papers at the Vermont Historical Society contain over a decade of correspondence and other materials associated with William's activities in the South. The collection's letters and legal documents reveal William's undefined mercantile activities, land speculation, and involvement with the emigrating Creek Indians. Included here are two documents dated in 1833, which link him to a group of Creeks who sought to remove themselves to Texas. Correspondence not represented here indicates that William was later employed with the Alabama Emigrating Company. This was a private firm hired by the federal government to assist in the forced removal of the Creeks when the Second Creek War broke out in the spring of 1836.

The nature of this "war," largely provoked by the U.S. government's lack of resolution in dealing with illegal white settlers on Creek lands, was a matter of immediate debate. That the government was conveniently using the hostilities as an excuse to forcibly emigrate the Creeks seemed undeniable to some. Vermont Representative Horace Everett was one such skeptic, asking his colleagues in June 1836 "On what evidence is this House called to act? On a letter from the Secretary of War to a committee, stating that actual hostilities have commenced, unaccompanied by any evidence . . . to enable the House to judge if the right to remove the Creeks by force is justifiable."³

Despite such dissenting voices, by 1838 nearly 18,000 Creek Indians were relocated west of the Mississippi. In the custody of the U.S. military and agents of the Alabama Emigrating Company, bands of Creek Indians were gathered at Fort Mitchell, Alabama, marched to the Gulf of Mexico, sent by boat to New Orleans, and then up the Mississippi and Arkansas Rivers. Upon reaching Fort Gibson, which lay on the border of modern-day Arkansas and Oklahoma, they were dispersed into the Creek allotment of the Indian Territories. It is evident from the correspondence addressed to William that he made this journey at least once in the summer of 1836, and, having returned to Fort Mitchell by the following spring, departed again for the Arkansas Territory in the fall of 1837.

The Indian removals were a matter of heated debate. Indeed, a wide range of opinions on the subject is found in the following excerpts. It is especially critical to understand a "middle-ground" which allowed white Americans to salve their collective conscience and, at the same time, obey the mandates of expansionism. This justification for the removal lay in the belief that the forward march of white civilization was inevitable, and that it was the moral duty of the superior white man to remove the child-like Indian from its path.⁴

As we read about the actions of William Beattie, we would do well to consider this idea that removing the Indians was critical to their survival. The manuscript collection makes it clear that William was a speculator in Indian land and in the employ of an emigrating company which, in the words of one recent historian, "received a fixed amount for the job and was therefore motivated to do as little for their charges as possible."⁵ While this pursuit of gain at the expense of an entire people seems reprehensible to our sensibilities, William possibly saw his endeavors in a different light. The documents portray William as a representative appointed by the Creeks, faithfully recording their grievances and assisting in their attempted emigration to a more desirable location in Texas; even, at one point, referring to the "goodness of my cause." The complexities of the situation defy a simple understanding of William's relationship to the Creek Indians. In any event, this Vermonter suffered the fate of many of the migrating Creeks: he died en route to the Indian Territories around December 1, 1837.

W. J. BEATTIE IN ALABAMA TO JACOB COVERT IN NEW YORK,
JUNE 25, 1830

Sir,

Having now got settled I take the liberty of addressing a few lines to inform you where I am. I arrived safely in Mobile and disposed of my goods to a good advantage. After spending the winter in Mobile I went to New Orleans from there on to East & West Florida and have now settled on the Chattahoochee River among the Creek Indians on the Alabama side about 500 miles from Mobile. Am extremely well pleased with the country & opening there is for new beginners or Knights of the Stick⁶ although there is every privation & hardship to (?) imaginable. No society at all—tea, bread, or vegetables I have not seen for months. Merchandise average profit 150%. I expect to remain in this country for some time and hope to hear often from you . . .

W. J. Beattie

JAMES BEATTIE IN RYEGATE, VERMONT, TO W. J. BEATTIE
IN ALABAMA, FEBRUARY 16, 1831

Dear son,

. . . with respect to your own business I would be glad if you would write me more fully, if the Gentleman you are in company with stays along with you or if you [are] doing business there alone or what is the probable amount of your profits per month. I would be glad to know when you expect to return to Vermont as we are anxious to see you. The indian question as it is called is causing a good deal of excitement in the north. The general opinion is that government is violating the treaties made with the Indians. If that is so government is doing wrong. I wish you would write me a few lines on the subject as you have an opportunity of knowing the truth of it . . .

James Beattie

TO THE CHIEFS & HEAD MEN OF THE DIFFERENT TOWNS OF THE
CREEK & SEMINOLA NATION [IN W. J. BEATTIE'S HANDWRITING]

Brothers,

We the undersigned Chiefs & head men of the Chushatta & Alabama tribes in the Province of Texas in behalf of ourselves & subjects in each respective tribe do sympathize with their brethren in their oppression by the Federal Government of the United States and do recommend to their brethren to leave the United States and do recommend them to emigrate to the Province of Texas and do assure them that we have found the climate & soil well adapted for our use & that our country abounds in all kinds of game. We have given your delegation a full detail of this country. We entreat you in brotherly love and affection to come & join here whereby we may become powerful & happy as we once wont to before we left you. Our government has been good to us & punctual in performing with its engagements.

Done in the Council at
Chushatta Village this
February, 1833

THE CHIEFS AND HEADMEN OF CREEK NATIONS TO HON. LEWIS CASS,
SECTY. OF WAR [IN W. J. BEATTIE'S HANDWRITING]

Sir,

We the undersigned Chiefs and head men of the Creek Nations of Indians do hereby make known to their Father the President & to the Secty. War Dept. their wish to emigrate west of the Mississippi River but we have many and strong objections to emigrating to that portion of the country

which you have assigned to us in the west. The inclemency of the winter season is so severe that we who are now in the decline of life could never endure its piercing cold. The scarcity and unwholesomeness of the water is also another formidable objection to that country. We know these facts from the sad affects which our brethren have experienced since their arrival in the west. For our happiness and future prosperity we purpose to join our brethren and many of our relatives of the Apalachicola Tribes and to emigrate with them to the country whose climate may be congenial to our accustomed habits. To affect this we propose that the government of the United States pay to us the amt. of money that it would have in the event of our emigrating to the Arkansas, to emigrate and support us one year after our arrival per Treaty of 24th March 1832⁷ . . . our objects are health happiness and prosperity neither of [which] we can enjoy here since the Laws of the States have been extended over us and our own became extinct. Advantage is taken of our ignorance of the Laws and we find ourselves daily impoverishing and our objections to the Arkansas are too formidable and too strong to overcome . . . we have appointed Mr. William Beattie who will receive all the communications you may see fit to make us on the subject.

done in Council at Siokola this
17th day of April 1833

W. J. BEATTIE IN GEORGIA TO MARGARET BEATTIE
IN RYEGATE, VERMONT, APRIL 29, 1833

Dear Mother,

. . . am happy to inform you that I am enjoying excellent health, never enjoyed better. My former letters will have informed you of my business and my prospects which are very flattering but slow. Am in the employment of emigrating Indians to the Province of Texas which is good pay and shure but slow. I have been [on] one trip which I informed you of soon after my return. I now expect to make another perhaps in 3 months. Am meeting with much formidable opposition but trust that the goodness of my cause & my unremitting exertions will enable me to surmount all these difficulties. The want of ready cash capital prevents me making an *immense fortune* but . . . I must keep on striking . . .

W. J. Beattie

J. McNAB IN VERMONT TO W. J. BEATTIE IN POLECAT SPRINGS, ALABAMA,
JULY 2, 1834

Dear Sir,

. . . You say your "interest requires that you should remain for some

time" in that part of the country. From anything you have written, I am still unable to divine what your business, in its various forms, really is. I should like to know what your speculation business really is; & if it is of such a character that you do not feel willing your parents & friends should be informed of, I assure you it would be carefully kept from them, were you to inform me and enjoin secrecy. You express anxiety to see me, hoping you are able to put me in possession of valuable information, *how to make fortunes*; that is exactly what I am very desirous of becoming acquainted with. What do you mean when you say "if Andrew Jackson does his duty, you shall have a competency"? . . . I am fully confident that General Jackson will do his duty. I admire his independence of mind. There are few men like him in the world [. . .] & I sincerely wish he were eligible for re-election . . .

J. McNab

EDWARD MCBRYDE IN ALABAMA TO W.J. BEATTIE IN COLUMBUS,
GEORGIA, AUGUST 11, 1834

Friend Beattie,

I returned from Tuckabatchee⁸ yesterday evening in company with old Lewis and he departed immediately for Soundes. The agent has done nothing yet. He has told the chiefs that where the oldest setter⁹ has failed to get his improvement if he will now come forward and make complaint he shall have it. Also where any of the Indians have sold land and the money has been taken back by the purchaser that if he will come forward and make complaint he shall have the land back. I do not vouch for this but Hopoethlo Yoholo¹⁰ gave it out in the square yesterday as coming from the agent. I will write again when the council is over.

Yours, Edward Aug. McBryde

JANE BEATTIE IN RYEGATE, VERMONT, TO W. J. BEATTIE IN
FT. MITCHELL, ALABAMA, JULY 15, 1835

Dear Brother

. . . you wished me to use my influence to persuade father to remove to the South. I think this will not be hard to do but you will have to remove some obstacles which appear to be in the way. In the first place he wants you to write & be very precise in giving a full description of the place you want him to move to, whether there will be any chance to get the children educated or not & what chance there will be of hearing the gospel preached if any. He also wants to know if he owns a farm there if he can hire men to till it or be obliged to keep *slaves* for he says it is a settled point with him that he will keep no slaves . . . father wishes

you to come home as soon as you can without injuring your business. he does not want you to come now if you will lose by it . . . for the rest of our minds about going south we are all willing & I almost said ready except Mother. She is afraid that the Indians will rise & kill her if she goes there; there was an account in the last North Star of their having murdered & robbed several innocent travelers on the highway leading from Columbus Geo. to Montgomery but I am in hopes that the disturbance will be quelled by the time we go there . . .

Jane Beattie

J. McNAB IN VERMONT, TO W. J. BEATTIE IN LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS,
JULY 14, 1836

Dear Sir,

. . . The people in this quarter highly regret the miserable condition of many of those at the South, in consequence of the Indian War, and general devastation. Many of those who were rolling in wealth and basking in the sunshine of happiness & real enjoyment, and now in a state of total destitution; and beside, many valuable members of society are now no more!

You seem to think according to the tenor of your short hint on that subject that the war is pretty much over and I find by the accounts in the newspapers that that belief is pretty general. Had a more efficient force than has been employed, superintended by able & discrete officers, been properly managed and disposed of in defense of the Southern people and their valuable property, the war had not continued thus long & destructive. Had old General Jackson had the command, he would have blown the Indians to hell ere this time. The very *name* of General Jackson would have terror struck them, if they had supposed him in the field . . .

J. McNab

POST-MASTER FORT GIBSON, ARKANSAS, TO JAMES BEATTIE IN
RYEGATE, VERMONT, MARCH 29, 1838

Dear Sir,

Yours of the 21st of February came to hand making inquire respecting Mr. Wm. J. Beatty. I am sorry to say that he died at the mouth of the Arkansas River the last of November or 1st of December on his way to this place with a party of emigrating Indians. He died of fever. John Campbell of Montgomery Ala. can give you all the information desired. He was engaged in the same business.

Yours, E. W. Nowlund

MANUSCRIPT

The Beattie Family Papers consist of land deeds, correspondence, and various legal documents from the years 1814 to 1884. The collection primarily pertains to the activities of James Beattie of Ryegate, Vermont, and his sons, David, James, Thomas, and William, the latter of whom was involved with the emigration of the Creek Indians from Alabama between 1830 and 1837. The papers were given to the Vermont Historical Society in two parts, the first in 1985 and the second in 1988, by Mrs. James H. Woods of Sun City, Florida (ms. acc. 85.33). They were inherited by Mrs. Woods from her mother, May Gillespie Beattie Lackie of St. Johnsbury, Vermont, in 1963. The collection occupies one box (.25 linear feet).

NOTES

¹ Namely, the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Seminoles, and Creeks. The Creek confederacy was composed of several smaller tribes, primarily united by their common tongue: Muskogean. Traditionally the Creeks were divided into two parts: the Upper Creek, surrounding the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers in Alabama, and the Lower Creeks, centered on the Chattahoochee River between Alabama and Georgia. For more information, see Fredrick Webb Hodge, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1971).

² For a discussion of Jackson's speech and the text of both his December 9, 1830, address and the Indian Removal Act, see Anthony F. C. Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 65-70, 121-128.

³ *Speech of Rep. Horace Everett, of Vermont: Delivered in the House of Representatives, in Committee of the Whole, on the Indian Annuity Bill, June 3rd, 1836* (Washington: National Intelligence Office, 1836), 3.

⁴ For a penetrating analysis of the psychology and rhetoric of the Indian removals, see Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1975).

⁵ Wallace, *The Long, Bitter Trail*, 88.

⁶ Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1984), defines "Knights of the . . ." as "forming various jocular (formerly often slang) phrases denoting one who is a member of a certain trade or profession." "Stick" is presumably a reference to a "walking-stick," i.e., an itinerant entrepreneur.

⁷ See *Speech of Horace Everett*, 2, for Article 12 of the March 24, 1832 treaty, which stipulated that the United States desired the Creeks to voluntarily emigrate west, and would pay for the journey and provide one year's subsistence afterwards.

⁸ Tuckabatchee was a prominent Upper Creek town roughly midway between Montgomery, Alabama, and Columbus, Georgia.

⁹ This is apparently a reference to someone who had "set up" or made an improvement on his property. When selling their lands, the Indians were supposed to be paid for any improvements they had previously made.

¹⁰ Opothle Yoholo was a resident of Tuckabatchee who emerged as the de facto leader of the Upper Creeks in the late 1820s. He is largely credited with coercing the Secretary of War Lewis Cass into an investigation of the fraud and abuse perpetrated on the Creeks in 1835. The Second Creek War aborted the investigation shortly thereafter. See Michael D. Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1982), 133-139, 183-184.

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