

The Cherokee Phoenix
Submission for the Price Award
Written for Communication History Winter Term '04

By Heather Crabtree

The *Cherokee Phoenix*

In 1828, the Cherokee Nation began publishing the first Native American newspaper called the *Cherokee Phoenix* in New Echota, Georgia. This time period was an uncertain time for the Cherokee Nation. The debate on the Indian problem and removal raged through congress and tensions between Georgia and the Cherokee Nation increased. Georgia increasingly sought Cherokee lands and tried to impose Georgia laws on tribal citizens who were protected by treaty. In addition, the debate increased tensions between Anglo-Americans and Native Americans. The Cherokee Nation was forced to defend itself against racist attitudes that sought to overrun their way of life. With all of these political and legal pressures, it brings into question what the role of the *Cherokee Phoenix* was? Specifically, was the role of the paper to act as a political voice, a tool to educate the Cherokee Nation, or was it a tool to promote the Cherokee Nation?

The role of the *Cherokee Phoenix* is significant to the present because modern day Native American publications are still defining their role. There is still a debate about whether tribal press is an entity of tribal government or if they are a free press. By examining the role of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, a person can understand the interaction between tribal government and tribal press. If the publication were primarily political, it would bring into question the accuracy of the publication and would raise questions about news accuracy. Understanding a paper's role in its community can tell the reader whether the source should be considered accurate. If the paper showed an overwhelming political tone, the paper would be viewed as one-sided and the present day reader may not put as much value in the articles as they would if they read a paper that supported both sides of an issue and published articles on a wide range of topics.

Current interpretations of the role of the *Cherokee Phoenix* can be found in *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1878*, by Murphy and Murphy. They discuss that “the *Phoenix* was at the center of Cherokee national life, portraying the standards of its civilization, carrying letters that discussed problems and politics, and reflecting the persistent problem of alcoholism among Cherokees.”¹ In addition, in the book *Cherokee Editor: the Writings of Elias Boudinot*, Theda Perdue presents samples of articles and letters written by Boudinot. In an article written in October of 1827, Boudinot discusses the goals of the *Cherokee Phoenix*. He believed the objectives of the *Phoenix* would be to present the laws and documents of the nation, address the customs and traditions of the nation, present important news, and to print articles that would promote “literature, civilization, and religion among the Cherokees.”² These two books were the only books I found that addressed specifically the roles of the *Cherokee Phoenix*.

Whether the *Phoenix* was a tool to promote the Cherokee is also significant to the present because many of the books written address how Native Americans were portrayed in the mainstream media. In John M. Coward's *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-1978*, Coward discusses how Native Americans were romanticized through heroic feats, demonized as hostiles or portrayed as ignorant people who need a “parent.” Words such as savage or barbarian were often used to create unfavorable images of Native Americans. Through my research, I did not find any books or articles that focused on Anglo-American representation in Native American press. However, I do believe that Anglo-American representation will indicate whether the role of the *Phoenix* was to promote the Cherokee.

¹ Murphy, James E and Sharon M. *Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978*. University of Oklahoma Press: 1999. PG 27.

² Perdue, Theda. *Cherokee Editor: the Writings of Elias Boudinot*. University of Georgia Press. 1983 pg 90.

The *Cherokee Phoenix* published between 1828 and 1834, but the basis for the Native American publication began in 1809 when Sequoyah (George Guess) developed symbols for Cherokee words and later changed the symbols to represent syllables of Cherokee words. Elias Boudinot was appointed editor by the Cherokee Council and served as editor until 1832 when he resigned because of disagreements with the Cherokee Council. Boudinot was an educated Christian man. He attended a missionary school as a child and later left Georgia in 1817 to study in a missionary school in Cornwall, Connecticut, where he met his wife, an Anglo-American woman.

The four page *Cherokee Phoenix* was printed weekly in English and Cherokee, although not every article in the paper was reprinted in Cherokee and vice-versa. After Boudinot's resignation, Elijah Hicks was appointed editor and toward the end of the paper's run, the paper began printing articles in Cherokee less frequently and publications became sporadic. Murphy and Murphy believe that Hicks lacked Boudinot's experience. Although Hicks did print articles relevant to Cherokee rights, he ultimately lacked Boudinot's "literary brilliance."³

For my original evidence, I reviewed the *Cherokee Phoenix* on microfilm. I limited my articles to articles published under Boudinot's editorship. The articles I chose, I chose because they represented a wide range of topics covered by the *Cherokee Phoenix*. The wide range of topics alone allowed me to answer what the role of the *Cherokee Phoenix* was. My analysis of the articles was primarily reading through them and considering what information was being expressed to the reader. I chose four editorials because I believed they would express the opinions of the Cherokee toward Anglo-

³ Murphy, James E and Sharon M. Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978. University of Illinois Press: 1940. PG 30.

Americans and I believe the language in these articles will help determine what the role of the *Phoenix* was.

The *Cherokee Phoenix* printed their constitution and laws throughout volume one and then sporadically throughout the other volumes. The publication of laws indicates that the *Cherokee Phoenix* wanted its readers to be aware of Cherokee laws. Much of the issues that the Cherokee faced during this time period dealt with legal issues. At the same time, the publication of Cherokee laws indicates a way of promoting Cherokee culture because they were informing people that a constitution and laws were part of their nation. These lines preceding the legal document state, “our readers at a distance will perhaps be gratified to see the first commencement of written laws among the Cherokees.”⁴ The tone of the quotation is putting the reader at ease because of the use of the word gratified. But, at the same time it is promoting Cherokee culture to their readers as educated and civilized, because they have published documents found in civilized societies.

“Cherokee Language: Answer to Professor Rafinesque’s Question” published in 1828 is an extensive article answering questions regarding the Sequoyah syllables. When the *Phoenix* was published, the written Cherokee language had only existed for twenty years. This article promotes knowledge about the written language. Every culture has idioms and means of expression. In addition, understanding the nuances of the Cherokee language was important in promoting education about the language. The two column article answers five questions regarding pronunciation and spelling. In one of the questions, Rafinesque is wondering about the difference between printed characters and written characters. The article answers why there are difference between the US

⁴ “Cherokee Laws.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. Vol11N4 pg 1.

government alphabet and the actual alphabet the Cherokees use.⁵ It indicates that the syllabus needed clarification for scholars who were studying the new written language and this article provides the needed clarification.

In a letter to Boudinot, the explanation of the Sequoyah syllabus continues. This article educates the reader on Cherokee verbs. The article is also a research article. “In a future communication I may give you a list of Cherokee tenses, as far as I have discovered them, with an attempt at naming them, which latter, however, is not an easy task.”⁶ This quotation indicates that the writer’s research is a work in progress. It also indicates a desire to educate because the author will update the reader on new information. The article also conveys information on the Cherokee language to readers who may not be studying the language grammatically like the author.

The article “Astronomy” presents the *Cherokee Phoenix* readers with a scientific perspective of the world and its relationship to the solar system. This article is a representation of the paper’s role because it seeks to educate the readers by printing scientific information. In the following quotation, the writer is preparing the reader for figures that might be merely ignored if not put into perspective. “The size and motions and distances of the heavenly bodies are such as to exceed the power of ordinary imagination, from things we see around us.”⁷ This quotation creates a sense of wonder in its reader and it sets the stage for something larger.

Another article I covered focuses on Indian removal and issues between the Cherokee nation and Georgia. The language of the article is intellectual. Boudinot had a

⁵ “Cherokee Language: Answer to Professor Rafinesque’s Question.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. Aug. 6, 1828. V1N23 pg2 column 1-4.

⁶ No title. *Cherokee Phoenix*. Dec. 23, 1829. V2N37

⁷ “Astronomy.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. Sept. 3, 1828 V1N27 pg 4.

style that not only supported but asserted the position of the Cherokee. He expressed his opinions, but often times used quotations from legal documents, letters and treaties to justify his statements. In many instances, the articles either counter points made in the mainstream press or address grievances. One example of his powerful language can be found in the article “Memorial of the Cherokee Legislature” published in 1830. Boudinot states that Georgia “unexpectedly assumed a doctrine, horrid in its aspect, and fatal in its consequences to us, and utterly at [variance] with the laws of Nations. . .”⁸ The article goes on to address the history of relations and treaties between the Cherokee Nation and Anglo-Americans. His language invokes a negative scene with the use of the words horrid and fatal makes people actually think about the situation. The language of this article is also empowering. In fact, the Cherokee further defend their rights by writing, “the answer must be plain,-they were not subjects, but a distinct nation, and in that light viewed by Washington and by all the people of the union at that period.”⁹ This quotation is used to defend why the Cherokees were allowed to enter into treaty with the United States, if they were “tenants of will.”¹⁰ It asserts their rights as people and justifies their position, giving the Cherokee power. Therefore the role of this piece was not only to inform the reader about the situation but to promote political thinking.

Additional articles showed similar findings. They conceded points that they knew were correct, and they fought points that they knew were justified. For example, one such point that they concede can be read in the following: “The pretext for Georgia to extend her jurisdiction over the Cherokees has always existed.”¹¹ The quotation acknowledges

⁸ “Memorial of the Cherokee Legislature.” *Cherokee Pheonix*. April 14, 1830. V2N52 pg 1.

⁹ “Memorial of the Cherokee Legislature.” *Cherokee Pheonix*. April 14, 1830. V2N52 pg 1

¹⁰ “Memorial of the Cherokee Legislature.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. April 14, 1830. V2N52 pg 1

¹¹ No title. *Cherokee Phoenix*. June 17, 1829 V3N2 pg. 2.

concessions to the Georgia government in a respectful manner and is acknowledging Georgia's power as a state. However, they do not bow to pressure either. The article continues, "The Cherokees have always had a government of their own. Nothing, however, was said when we were governed by savage laws. . ."¹² This quotation makes the point that Georgia only sought government of Cherokee lands once they had become "civilized." The tone indicates that if Georgia were to govern over Cherokee lands, their "savage" time period is when they should have begun governing. The article acts as a reminder of the Cherokee Nation's past and indicates an undesirable time for them because of the wording. The comparison between past and present indicates that the writer is trying to educate the reader that the Cherokee are no longer "savage" and shows that they have progressed. It also indicates that the paper's role was to build community because it is justifying Cherokee rights.

Another editorial written a few months later is harsher than the previous article. The following passage also uses Boudinot's intellectual writing to address grievances against the state of Georgia and the United States. "Have we not occasion to question [the presidents] fatherly professions, when he has been ordering the military against us, merely because a malicious white child of his has told a falsehood, but will not raise his hand to protect us from encroachments and insults under which we have been laboring for months?"¹³ The article seeks to educate the reader because Boudinot is pointing out contradictions. Boudinot is calling for the community to question whether the Cherokee Nation should trust the United States government, and he is giving valid reasons. Yet, at the same time, the article actually reduces to name calling. The phrase "malicious white

¹² No title. *Cherokee Phoenix*. June 17, 1829 V3N2 pg. 2

¹³ No title. *Cherokee Phoenix*. Sept. 9, 1829. V2N51 pg. 3

child” is promoting a negative image of Anglo-Americans and this negative image promotes an “us verse them” attitude.

In the article “Cherokee Nation vs. The State of Georgia” published in 1831, Boudinot is informing the readers about the Supreme Court case. However, Boudinot further creates an “us verses them” attitude in this article. “If the white man must oppress us-if he must have the lead, and throw us penniless upon the wild world, and if our cries and expostulations will avail nothing at the door of those who have promised to be our guardians and protectors, let it be so.”¹⁴ The tone of the article is powerful. Yet, at the same time, the words guardian and protector indicate sarcasm because Anglo-Americans could not be “guardians and protectors” if, at the same time, they are oppressing the Cherokee. It also indicates that the role of the paper is to promote the Cherokee Nation because it also promotes the “us verse them” attitude.

The evidence answers my research question because the articles indicate the role of the *Cherokee Phoenix*. The laws, the articles on language, the article on astronomy and the editorials all show an attempt at educating and promoting the Cherokee Nation. The paper is also primarily political because it is used as a forum to promote tribal rights. My conclusions are what I thought they would be. After reading the paper, I believe that the purpose of the paper was to educate and promote the Cherokee Nation. This belief is the same as other historians that have examined the paper’s role. Historians believe that the role of the *Cherokee Phoenix* was to educate the Cherokee Nation about the world around them, which is what I found. But, at the same time, the editorials and the papers political views promote the Cherokee Nation. In some instances the language of the articles even

¹⁴ “Cherokee Nation vs. the State of Georgia.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. April 16, 1831. V3N45 pg. 3.

creates an “us verse them” attitude, but the majority of the statements made in the articles are supported with documentation.

The *Cherokee Phoenix* can be considered a reliable source. The topics are primarily Cherokee related, but the role of the *Phoenix* was primarily to educate the readers and often time politics was the subject they needed to be informed on because politics affected their way of life. The tone of the articles, although sometimes harsh, is still supported with documentation and indicates that articles were as accurate as they could be for the time period.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Secondary Sources:

Coward, John M. The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-1890. University of Illinois Press: 1999.

Kilpatrick, Jack Fredrick and Anna Gritts. The New Echota Letters. Southern Methodist University Press: 1968.

*Please note that this book is a collection of letters and was used as a basis to compare a wider range of articles than the ones pulled from the *Cherokee Phoenix*. Several articles pulled from microfilm can also be found in this book

Murphy, James E and Sharon M. Let My People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978. University of Oklahoma Press: 1940.

*Focuses primarily on the history and role of the Native American press.

Perdue, Theda. Cherokee Editor: the Writings of Elias Boudinot. University of Georgia Press. 1996.

*Collection of works by Elias Boudinot. Introduction includes history that I used for part of the paper. Also, please note that several of the pieces that were pulled from microfilm as primary sources can also be found in this book.

Primary Sources:

“Cherokee Laws.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. V1N4 P1

Boudinot, Elias. “Cherokee Language: Answer to Professor Rafinesque’s Question.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. 8/ 6/1828. V1N23 P2 col.1-4.

No title. *Cherokee Phoenix*. 12/23/1829. V2N37

“Astronomy.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. 9/ 3/1828 V1N27 P4.

“Memorial of the Cherokee Legislature.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. 4/14/1830. V2N52 P1

No title. *Cherokee Phoenix*. 6/17/1829 V2N11 P2

No title. *Cherokee Phoenix*. 9/9/1829. V2N51 P3

“Cherokee Nation vs. the State of Georgia.” *Cherokee Phoenix*. 4/16/1831. V3N45 P3.