

Issue Brief: African Americans and Native Americans

Key Words/Terms:

African American, Native American, Cherokee Freedmen, race, citizenship

Description:

This issue brief explores the largely unknown connection between African Americans and Native Americans in the United States. It focuses on the case of the Cherokee Freedmen, descended from former freed slaves, who lost their citizenship to the Cherokee nation after a new law was passed in 2007.

Key Points:

- African Americans and Native Americans share a troubled past in the United States that united them in several different parts of history, including the Trail of Tears.
- The different hardships that these ethnoracial groups faced in the distant past still leads to issues and problems that both groups must deal with to the present day.
- There were groups of African American slaves who worked for the Cherokee Indians and they were forced to leave with them during the Trail of Tears. After the Civil War, 4,000 slaves were granted their freedom and made a part of the Cherokee tribe.

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- According to Cherokee Chief Chad Smith in 2006, since gaining entrance to their tribe after the Civil War, the Cherokee Freedmen had not done enough to keep their place in Cherokee nation.
- Some former Cherokee Freedmen have attempted to gain citizenship back in the tribe, but as of April 2013, the Cherokee courts have not changed the decision.

Brief:

African Americans and Native Americans are two ethnoracial groups that have gone through many hardships that date as far back as the days of the colonies. Both groups of people were driven forcibly from their homes, with the African Americans taken as slaves from Africa and forced to work for White European masters in the New World, and the Native Americans, who were forced to relocate time and time again as colonizers from Europe took over more and more land. While these unique struggles give both groups similar historical backgrounds, there is actually more that connects African Americans and Native Americans that many people may not know.

The inferior way that African Americans and Native Americans were treated during Colonial Times have had many long-lasting effects that can still be seen, even today. Through the mistreatment that both groups experienced they became connected in different ways. One way that they became connected goes back to the days of slavery, where sometimes African Americans had to work alongside with Native Americans. This eventually led to some African Americans and Native Americans intermarrying and through this, the two groups became forever linked.

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Today you can find many people in the United States that have some percentage of some kind of Native American blood in him or her, so to find someone who has both African American blood, as well as Native American blood, may not be so extraordinary. However, there is one group, the Cherokee Indians, who have recently confronted a part of their past that linked them to African Americans. During the days of slavery, there were groups of African American slaves that worked for the Cherokee Indians and they were forced to relocate with them to Oklahoma during the Trail of Tears. By 1861 there were over 4,000 black slaves living among the Cherokee Indians, and after the Civil War the Cherokee signed a treaty that gave those slaves, (then known as Freedmen) "all the rights of Native Cherokees." However, in 2006 Cherokee Chief Chad Smith called for the removal of the Freedmen as a part of Cherokee nation. He cited that they had been paid off after slavery was outlawed, and that since then, they had not done their part to uphold and build Cherokee nation. The next year, there was a vote and seventy-five percent of registered Cherokee voters elected to remove the Freedmen from their nation.

Since the decision to rescind the membership to their tribe from the decedents of the Cherokee Freedmen, there have been many attempts to reestablish the membership of those who were once a part of Cherokee nation. Unfortunately for the Freedmen, they have been unsuccessful thus far, as the Cherokee courts have ruled that they reserve the right to set the standards for citizenship to their tribe. This relationship between African Americans and Native Americans is unique because even though the two groups were connected through a common struggle, they now seem to be at odds, and it is also a shining example of how the distant past

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can still shape many people's lives to this day, even when there seems to have been so much progress made since the days of slavery and the Civil War.



Source: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com>



Source: <http://www.aaregistry.org>



Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

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