

Thomas, William Holland ^[1]

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Thomas, William Holland

by Gordon B. Mckinney, 1996

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William Holland Thomas. Image courtesy of Histories of the several regiments and battalions from North Carolina, in the great

war 1861-'65. ^[2]William Holland Thomas, white chief of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians ^[3], legislator, and Confederate ^[4] officer, was born in rural Haywood County ^[5] shortly after the death of his father, Richard Thomas. Raised by his mother, Temperance Calvert Thomas, he was forced to start working at age thirteen in a store owned by Congressman Felix Walker ^[6] in Cherokee territory. By 1823 Thomas was able to open his own store in Qualla Town. His knowledge of the Cherokee language enabled him to prosper, and by the late 1820s he owned three stores and large tracts of land in the western part of the state.

During this time Thomas became a good friend of Yonaguska ^[7], the principal chief of the Cherokee who chose to remain under white rule following the land cession and treaty of 1819. As a result of this friendship, the young white man was adopted into the Cherokee tribe and given the name Wil-Usdi (Little Will) because of his small size. He not only continued his businesses, but he also began to read law and act as the attorney for the North Carolina Cherokee. Thomas's first major action on their behalf was to draw up a simple plan of government that allowed them to coordinate their responses to government policies.

The relationship between the federal government and the Cherokee reached a critical stage after the signing of the Treaty of New Echota ^[8], which provided that all members of the Cherokee nation must move to the West. The North Carolina Cherokee maintained that they were exempted from the removal order and contracted with Thomas to represent them in Washington. The assignment lasted from 1836 to 1848, and Thomas often spent months at a time in Washington. Despite his commitment to the Cherokee cause, he openly speculated in lands made available for sale by the Cherokee removal. He also aided the U.S. Army ^[9] in its efforts to locate Cherokee from other states who hid in North Carolina to escape removal. These contradictory actions, ironically, served to strengthen his position with the Cherokee, local whites, and the federal government.



William Holland Thomas, North Carolina and the Civil War, NC

Museum of History. [10]The significance of Thomas's activities during this period cannot be underestimated. Immediately after removal he spent some of his own money to feed and clothe many Cherokee. He defended his support of the Indians' cause, asserting that "when entrusted with defending the rights of white or red man I hope I shall always be found faithful to my trust and act worthy of the confidence reposed in me without regard to consequences. The Indians are as much entitled to their rights as I am to mine." Recognizing Thomas's devotion to the tribe, the dying chief Yonaguska named Thomas the new leader of the North Carolina Cherokee in April 1839. This job encouraged Thomas to continue his efforts to secure for his people a proportionate share of the moneys promised the Cherokee by the New Echota agreement. He finally succeeded in July 1848, when the U.S. government recognized the Eastern Band of the Cherokee [11] and allowed most of their claims to treaty awards. By 1840 Thomas had also purchased in his name—the state of North Carolina did not allow the Cherokee to sign contracts—50,000 acres that would form the major portion of the future Qualla Boundary [12] home of the Eastern Cherokee.

His assistance to the Cherokee and his large landholdings made Thomas an influential figure in western North Carolina [13]. He entered politics and served continuously in the North Carolina state senate from 1849 to 1861. A Democrat [14], Thomas was an active member of the Committee on Internal Improvements and served as chairman for four terms. He consistently sponsored or supported legislation to improve the transportation system of the western portion of the state including such projects as plank roads and the Western North Carolina Railroad [15]. These same years were a time of change in his personal life. He increasingly neglected his business interests and became "land poor" and deeply in debt; in 1857, at age fifty-two, he married Sarah Jane Burney Love, the daughter of a wealthy Haywood County [15] man. Their three children—William H., Jr. (b. 1858), James R. (b. 1860), and Sarah L. (b. 1862)—soon gave him even greater personal responsibilities.

The Civil War [16] added new challenges to Thomas's life. He was an ardent Southern patriot and voted for secession at the state convention in May 1861. After returning home, he persuaded the Cherokee to support the Confederacy and organized a home guard group. In April 1862 he joined the Confederate army and was named captain of a company that included many Cherokee. That September the company took part in a skirmish at Baptist Gap in eastern Tennessee, which ended with some Cherokee scalping wounded Union soldiers. Thomas was soon promoted to colonel and placed in command of the Sixty-ninth North Carolina Regiment with several companies of Cherokee in the unit. This force, known as Thomas's Legion, served as the major line of defense between the Federal presence in eastern Tennessee and Confederate North Carolina. Thomas was one of the last Confederates to surrender, along with General James G. Martin, in Waynesville on 10 May 1865.

His career after the war was one of increasing personal and financial difficulties. The demands of the conflict led to a physical and emotional collapse. In March 1867 Thomas was declared insane and confined to the state asylum in Raleigh [17]. His businesses failed and creditors began to dismantle his empire; for example, the sheriff of Cherokee County [18] sold off more than 115,000 acres of Thomas's land in 1869 alone. Even the Cherokee had to go to court to secure control of their land from his creditors. Thomas still experienced periods of mental stability and related many of the Cherokee myths to researcher James Mooney. He died in the state mental hospital in Morganton and was buried in the public cemetery in Waynesville. Thomas was the one individual most responsible for the creation of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee and a consistent champion of the economic development of the mountain region of North Carolina.

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Additional Resources:

William Holland Thomas, Western Carolina University: <http://www.wcu.edu/1772.asp> ^[19]

William Holland Thomas, Digital Heritage: <http://digitalheritage.org/2010/08/william-holland-thomas/> ^[20]

"William H. Thomas." N.C. Highway Historical Marker Q-46, N.C. Office of Archives & History. <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=Markers&k=Markers&sv=Q-46> ^[21].

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William Holland Thomas, North Carolina and the Civil War, NC Museum of History: http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/exhibits/civilwar/explore_section4m.html# ^[10] (accessed January 4, 2013).

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Authors:

[McKinney, Gordon B.](#) ^[29]

Origin - location:

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[Haywood County](#) ^[31]

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