

# American Indians and the Civil War

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Did you know that Native Americans were involved in the Civil War? For North Carolina's American Indians, as for many other Southerners, the Civil War was a time of bravery, starvation, hiding, and uncertainty. The situation was different for each tribe. Some tribes fought for the Confederacy, and others stuck with the Union. But no matter which side they took, the Indian communities paid a price as America fought its Civil War.

The Cherokee in western North Carolina responded early to the Southern cause and formed a defense force called the Junaluska Zouaves. Many Cherokee ultimately believed, however, that this support of the Confederacy would destroy Cherokee claims to land and citizenship with the government in Washington.

William Holland Thomas, a white man adopted by the Cherokee, later formed another fighting unit and pushed for more Confederate support for enlisting the Cherokee as soldiers. Thomas took charge of this new unit of Cherokee and white soldiers who enlisted into service in April 1862, to be stationed in Knoxville, Tennessee. The unit, called Thomas's Legion, eventually numbered 2,800 men, including about 400 Cherokee. The Indian soldiers in Thomas's Legion did battle in the rough country of the Appalachian Mountains, often raiding Union supplies and fighting guerrilla troops known as bushwhackers. The soldiers fought with courage but were often thought of as "savages" by the Northern enemies.

Back at their home in Quallatown, the Cherokee people were suffering from hunger. In 1864 William Holland Thomas said that the Cherokee people were "now in a starving condition." Some Cherokee were surviving on weeds and the bark of trees.

In May 1865 Thomas's Legion fought the last engagement of the Civil War in North Carolina, exchanging shots with Union soldiers near Waynesville. As Cherokee soldiers made their way back to their homes, an epidemic of smallpox broke out in Quallatown. Despite the efforts of Thomas in getting treatment for the sick, more than one hundred Cherokee died from this disease in 1865 and 1866.

In eastern North Carolina, American Indians also suffered because of the war. Lumbee Indians in 1968 still referred to the period of the Civil War as "the starving times." While Cherokee men were fighting in the war, Lumbee men were "laying out" (hiding) in the swamps of Robeson County, leaving women to try to raise all of their food themselves.

The Confederacy had tried to force Lumbee and other eastern North Carolina Indians into labor in constructing the earthen Fort Fisher near Wilmington. Many eastern Indians had wanted to

join the war early on, and some did fight, but they refused to be forced into labor. According to Lumbee woman Pert Lowry Ransom, many Lumbee opposed slavery anyway, and many would not fight against the North. Instead, they decided to “lay out in the woods to keep from going to war.”

As the Civil War continued, many people in the Lumbee community increasingly supported the North. Along with Indian men, escaped Union prisoners from the Confederate prison in Florence, South Carolina, hid out in the swamps, and in some Indian homes. Indians were also accused of hiding guns and harboring Confederate deserters. Eventually, Lumbee men resorted to raiding some local white-owned farms for food to supplement what little the women could grow and harvest while the men were in hiding. When General William Tecumseh Sherman’s Union army entered North Carolina in March 1865, the Lumbee helped guide his men through the southeastern part of the state, helping to end the war in Robeson County.

Across North Carolina, American Indians still tell stories about what happened to their tribal communities during the Civil War. Many stories describe the death and suffering that the war brought.

One story told by Freeman Owle, however, tells about the power of the distant past and how it remained strong during the war. The town of Franklin, in western North Carolina, is located on the site of the old Cherokee village of Nikwasi. During a war between the Cherokee and the Creek in 1813 and 1814, Nikwasi was spared from Creek destruction. A mound in Nikwasi opened up suddenly as the Creek attacked the village, and thousands of little soldiers (called Nunnehi) came out to defeat the Creek in battle. During the Civil War, Northern troops descended upon the town of Franklin, ready to burn it to the ground. The Union army sent scouts in to check the town. The scouts came back saying that the town was heavily guarded. The soldiers went around Franklin, heading south and sparing the town. Some Cherokee say that the little people, the Nunnehi, protected Franklin just as they had Nikwasi long ago.

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