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## **“We’re Taking the Genius of Sequoyah into This Century”**

### **The Cherokee Syllabary, Peoplehood, and Perseverance**

*Ellen Cushman*

We have met and see one another friends and brothers. I am extremely glad to see you friends and brothers, and I am glad for what you have seen. Make every effort to complete it, for all can see what is going on, it is clear to every one. There is no doubt of its success—do not forget it—that which you will hear of me my brothers and friends. What is coming is wonderful when I think of it.

It has only been fourteen years since we who are called Cherokees have learned to read. I am thankful that the people have slowly understood how much labor it has cost me.

*Sequoyah*

**S**itting in the library archive at the Thomas Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, I puzzled over this letter. This document was originally included with the John Ross papers, before being moved to the John Howard Payne papers, then finally to the Sequoyah file in the Gilcrease collection. Apparently, the Gilcrease librarians puzzled over

it as well. Because it reads, "It has only been fourteen years since we who are called Cherokees have learned to read," the document may have been written between 1832 and 1835. Signed by Sequoyah, the letter suggests that he was grateful that others were beginning to recognize his efforts in developing the syllabary: "People have slowly understood how much labor it has cost *me*" (emphasis added).

Sequoyah—who developed the Cherokee writing system; who "seems to have disdained the acquirement of the English language"; who, according to contemporaries and relations, had little knowledge of English; and who most historians agree had minimal if any facility with English—Sequoyah wrote this letter, in English?<sup>1</sup>

Although he apparently had no knowledge of letters, that Sequoyah invented a writing system added to the initial mystique surrounding his accomplishment. Even decades after its creation, the public celebrated the invention with amazement that an Indian, without an understanding of English literacy, could create a writing system that would bring the Cherokees out of their savage ways into civilization: Sequoyah was celebrated as a Cherokee Cadmus and Moses.<sup>2</sup> It was as if only Western peoples were capable of such magic. Indeed, even by Sequoyah's account offered to John Howard Payne, a few Cherokees close to him thought he was practicing witchcraft when he spent so many years bent on inventing this system.<sup>3</sup>

The problem is that while historians and the public marveled at this feat, they overlooked the possibility that Sequoyah might have known more English and had more facility with letters than they may have wanted to believe. He might have eschewed the alphabetic trappings of Western thought to create a writing system uniquely Cherokee. Outsiders could only conceive of this writing system in their terms, terms that related it to their writing system. Samuel Worcester saw fit to rearrange the original order of the characters, alphabetizing them and labeling the system a Cherokee alphabet.<sup>4</sup> The standardized chart included the title "Cherokee Alphabet" and even today appears in bookstores and museums misnamed this way (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> The Cherokee syllabary has always been interpreted through an alphabetic bias, a bias that not only obscures the instrumental workings of this writing system but also forces its creation and maintenance into Western ideologies of noble, civilized Cherokees who are brothers and sisters because they use a writing system.

The real genius of Sequoyah rests in how well this writing system works to codify the language so that every single use of it helps the tribe's language survive and is a political act that traces its legacy to Sequoyah. If we admit the possibility that he could have had some English literacy, or at least some understanding of letter–sound correspondence, then his development of the Cherokee syllabary and his steadfast refusal to speak English might be more fully understood as

Cherokee Alphabet.					
<b>D</b> <sub>a</sub>	<b>R</b> <sub>e</sub>	<b>T</b> <sub>i</sub>	<b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>o</sub>	<b>Ꭱ</b> <sub>u</sub>	<b>i</b> <sub>v</sub>
<b>S</b> <sub>ga</sub> <b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>ka</sub>	<b>E</b> <sub>ge</sub>	<b>Y</b> <sub>gi</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>go</sub>	<b>J</b> <sub>gu</sub>	<b>E</b> <sub>gv</sub>
<b>V</b> <sub>ha</sub>	<b>P</b> <sub>he</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>hi</sub>	<b>F</b> <sub>ho</sub>	<b>Γ</b> <sub>hu</sub>	<b>G</b> <sub>hv</sub>
<b>W</b> <sub>ta</sub>	<b>Ꭲ</b> <sub>e</sub>	<b>L</b> <sub>ti</sub>	<b>G</b> <sub>to</sub>	<b>M</b> <sub>tu</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>lv</sub>
<b>S</b> <sub>ma</sub>	<b>O</b> <sub>me</sub>	<b>H</b> <sub>mi</sub>	<b>Ꭳ</b> <sub>mo</sub>	<b>Y</b> <sub>mu</sub>	
<b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>na</sub> <b>Ꭲ</b> <sub>na</sub> <b>G</b> <sub>nah</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>ne</sub>	<b>h</b> <sub>ni</sub>	<b>Z</b> <sub>no</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>nu</sub>	<b>O</b> <sub>nv</sub>
<b>E</b> <sub>qua</sub>	<b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>que</sub>	<b>P</b> <sub>qui</sub>	<b>V</b> <sub>quo</sub>	<b>Ꭱ</b> <sub>qu</sub>	<b>E</b> <sub>quv</sub>
<b>U</b> <sub>sa</sub> <b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>s</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>se</sub>	<b>B</b> <sub>si</sub>	<b>Ꭲ</b> <sub>so</sub>	<b>Ꭳ</b> <sub>su</sub>	<b>R</b> <sub>sv</sub>
<b>L</b> <sub>da</sub> <b>W</b> <sub>tu</sub>	<b>S</b> <sub>de</sub> <b>T</b> <sub>te</sub>	<b>J</b> <sub>di</sub> <b>T</b> <sub>ti</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>do</sub>	<b>S</b> <sub>du</sub>	<b>G</b> <sub>dv</sub>
<b>S</b> <sub>lla</sub> <b>L</b> <sub>lla</sub>	<b>L</b> <sub>lle</sub>	<b>C</b> <sub>ti</sub>	<b>Ꭳ</b> <sub>to</sub>	<b>P</b> <sub>tu</sub>	<b>P</b> <sub>tlv</sub>
<b>G</b> <sub>tta</sub>	<b>V</b> <sub>tse</sub>	<b>K</b> <sub>tvi</sub>	<b>K</b> <sub>tso</sub>	<b>J</b> <sub>tsu</sub>	<b>C</b> <sub>tsv</sub>
<b>G</b> <sub>wa</sub>	<b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>we</sub>	<b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>wi</sub>	<b>Ꭱ</b> <sub>wo</sub>	<b>S</b> <sub>wu</sub>	<b>G</b> <sub>wv</sub>
<b>Ꭰ</b> <sub>ya</sub>	<b>B</b> <sub>ye</sub>	<b>A</b> <sub>yi</sub>	<b>h</b> <sub>yo</sub>	<b>G</b> <sub>yu</sub>	<b>B</b> <sub>yv</sub>
<b>Sounds represented by Vowels</b> <i>a, as a in father, or short as a in rick</i> <i>o, as or in law, or short as o in cut.</i> <i>e, as e in hate, or short as e in eth</i> <i>u, as ee in feet, or short as u in pull.</i> <i>i, as i in pig, or short as i in pit</i> <i>v, as u in but, nasabrook.</i>					
<b>Consonant Sounds</b> <i>g nearly as in English, but approaching to k. d nearly as in English but approaching to t. h k m n g s t v y, as in English. Syllables beginning with g, except S have sometimes the power of k. A.S.O. are sometimes sounded to, to, ex. and. Syllables written with tl except G sometimes vuy to dl.</i>					

political acts of perseverance. At the very least, this letter begs a few questions: What does Sequoyah's selection of language for this letter suggest? What relationship to English literacy might Sequoyah have had when he created the syllabary, and why? And in what ways does continued use of Sequoyan trace to his legacy of Cherokee empowerment? To start, we must understand the Cherokee syllabary as a writing system in its own right and view it through an Indigenous lens.

### PEOPLEHOOD AND PERSEVERANCE

An important facet of American Indian epistemologies, ceremonies, histories, and connections to place, languages play a crucial role in the perseverance of Native peoples. Tom Holm, J. Diane Pearson, and Ben

Chavis describe the peoplehood matrix as including four equally important, interconnected components: language, sacred histories, ceremonies and religions, and connection to land.<sup>6</sup> Part of this matrix's utility rests not only in its overall applicability to American Indian studies as a discipline but also in its usefulness as a theoretical framework from which to view any one of the four mutually sustaining aspects of the matrix. In a richly detailed analysis of a fraught research project on the Cherokee language, Daniel Cobb applies this understanding of peoplehood to the case of the Carnegie Project's work within the Cherokee Nation in the early 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Billy Stratton and Frances Washburn apply the peoplehood matrix to Native American literature and note that this matrix is useful because it emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between each of the four pillars of peoplehood, thereby better illustrating the connections between literature and Native communities, memories, and ceremonies.<sup>8</sup>

Peoplehood and perseverance are sustained through Native languages in every body of work, casual conversation, or legal document that uses a tribal language. Though language should not be seen as the most important part of the peoplehood matrix, its usefulness cannot be overstated. Susan Miller writes,

The sine qua non of Indigeness is Indigenous language. Each language encodes ancient memories as well as current meanings. Its parts of speech reflect a people's unique way of categorizing phenomena. Along their etymological routes, its words have picked up freights of unstated knowledge. . . . A language is a complex package encoding a unique worldview that no other language can really represent. When a language dies, therefore, a people's worldview dies with it. Most disturbingly, that people's relation to the sacred is encoded in the language, so a human connection to the sacred also dies, leaving the cosmos in a worsening predicament. North American Indian languages, like Indigenous languages generally, are becoming extinct at an alarming rate.<sup>9</sup>

The very workings of Native languages represent all intellectual, social, and historical activities of meaning making. They encode worldviews through each utterance, story, and document. Any act of speaking, reading, or writing in a Native language contributes in small or great measure to a tribe's continued existence. These acts of linguistic perseverance can and should be seen as addressing the real threat of language erosion and extinction that so many tribal languages face.

The term *perseverance* distinguishes ongoing acts of maintaining peoplehood and is distinct from cultural or linguistic preservation. Per-

severance acknowledges and accommodates change, while preservation withdraws an object from its context to prevent its change. Cultural perseverance, then, becomes a place where Native cultures and languages, for example, enact part of their sovereignty: a process that allows us to name who we are, what practices count, what structures govern, and what technologies allow for adaptation. *Cultural preservation* does not work well to describe the ongoing struggle to remain, because it is an absurdity for many Cherokees. "You can't pickle our ways!" one quipped. "Cultural preservation?" another commented, "Sounds like you're putting it on a shelf in a jar with formaldehyde." Preserving culture makes many Cherokees uneasy because it does nothing to characterize the growth of the community through generational learning and exchange. Worse yet, it objectifies cultural artifacts, taking these out of their contexts, relationships, and reasons for use, rendering them meaningless. If Cherokees preserve the language, it is no longer a living language, one practiced in everyday acts of enacting peoplehood.

Rather than preserving culture, Cherokees sometimes speak of persevering. Wilma Mankiller, the former principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, asserts that generations before us have done what they could in their time, "and it is now up to [this generation] to make sure our life ways are continued. If we have persevered, and if we are tenacious enough to have survived everything that has happened to us to date, surely 100 years or even 500 years from now, the future generations will persevere and will also have that same sort of tenacity, strong spirit, and commitment to retaining a strong sense of who they are as tribal people."<sup>10</sup> Perseverance has been a hallmark of Cherokee spirit and an indicator of the ways in which the tribe maintains its cultural identity through a notion of peoplehood. Cultural perseverance best characterizes the integrity of the language and writing system while accounting for continued traditional practice and innovation with new tools across generations.

Sequoyah, at some level, seems to have known the importance of linguistic perseverance for the Cherokee people. He also knew how important a writing system might be, both as a symbolic marker of intellectual and social prowess and as a functional codification of knowledge and worldview. So why might he have chosen English for the letter that opens this essay?

The archival route of this document suggests that it was included as part of John Ross's papers originally procured by the museum.<sup>11</sup> In 1832 Ross wrote to Sequoyah, who was then living in the Arkansas Territory. Chief Ross had given up hope that Sequoyah would come to New Echota, the capital of the Cherokee Nation, to claim the medal that the Legislative Council had awarded him in 1824 for developing the syllabary. Ross's letter describes the extent to which the creation of the syllabary helped the tribe develop a literary canon, how young

and old alike easily learned it, and how it served as a model to all nations that might begin to create their own writing systems.<sup>12</sup> Sequoyah is believed to have completed the syllabary by 1818 or 1819, so it was roughly "fourteen years since . . . Cherokees have learned to read" when Ross wrote to Sequoyah in 1832.<sup>13</sup> Sequoyah's gratitude for the medal and his observation that "the people have slowly understood how much labor it has cost" may have been in response to Ross's listing of all the ways the syllabary helped Cherokees. Finally, this letter was originally filed as part of the John Ross papers held by the Thomas Gilcrease Museum, indicating that it was in Ross's possession even if not addressed directly to him.

If Sequoyah wrote this letter to Ross, the choice of English would have been a remarkable sign of solidarity. Never known for his fluency in Cherokee, Chief Ross served from 1828 to 1860 and was known for his abilities with English.<sup>14</sup> Ross and Sequoyah, though not close, did share a common love for the Cherokee people and did work together to unify the tribe after the Trail of Tears. Sequoyah never revealed his ability with English to outsiders but seems to have chosen to use English in this letter. Perhaps out of courtesy, or out of acceptance that his chief spoke the language of outsiders, this letter acknowledges that English language and literacy have some place in the tribe. His letter could be understood as a good-faith gesture toward the chief, creating a shared secret: between them, it was safe to use English; although Sequoyah knew the language and chose not to use it as a rule, he would bend that rule for John Ross. Sequoyah would continue showing only the Cherokee face and language to outsiders, teaching this writing system to Cherokees who wanted to learn it, and seeking the Cherokees in Texas and Mexico to teach them the syllabary and unite the tribes. At the same time, he may have offered Ross a knowing nod with this letter. Sequoyah's choice to shun the Roman alphabet in his original invention of the writing system and his own everyday use of it with outsiders indicate his efforts to sustain the Cherokee language to the exclusion of English. Sequoyah was not simply ignorant of English, literacy, and the Roman alphabet: he may have been intentionally ignoring their importance and influence.

### **SEQUOYAH'S CONTACT WITH ENGLISH LITERACY**

Though historians and firsthand accounts differ in their descriptions of the limited extent to which Sequoyah had contact with English literacy and language, this evidence suggests he had more contact with and understanding of the Roman alphabet than previously acknowledged. Sequoyah's mother raised him in the Overhill town near Tuskegee, just outside of Fort Loudoun, where the young man traded furs and dairy

products as he got older.<sup>15</sup> He was deeply immersed in Cherokee culture with his mother, in working on their farm, in inventing a makeshift refrigerator for their milk, and in repurposing coins and silver into gorgets and arm cuffs that Cherokees wore well. His mother's uncle had been a chief in Echota, a leadership role Sequoyah would model later in his life. Sequoyah spent a great deal of time with his cousins, especially George Lowrey. Wahnenuhi, Lowrey's granddaughter, details the cousins' first encounter with a book written in English during a chance meeting with a group of white hunters.<sup>16</sup>

Sequoyah's father was an English-speaking white man who had apparently been captured by the Cherokee and remained with them for six years.<sup>17</sup> Once freed, his father moved to Virginia, remarried, and moved to Kentucky, where Sequoyah visited him in later years and was received warmly as family.<sup>18</sup> During his visits to his father, he may have used and certainly heard English, the language of his father's home.

Payne's 1835 interview with Sequoyah, which Lowrey transcribed in Cherokee and then translated into English, reveals another interesting example of Sequoyah's contact with English literacy. Sequoyah's silver work was well regarded and sought out by prominent Cherokees, and he wanted to begin signing his work, particularly the larger pieces. "One day he called on Mr. Charles R. Hicks, to write his name for him on paper in English; and upon his silver ornaments he would engrave the copy; especially upon the gorgets & arm bands that they might be known as his work. With a piece of pointed brimstone he imitated the writing of Mr. Hicks on the silver and then cut it in with a sharp instrument."<sup>19</sup> As Sequoyah "imitated" each letter of his name, it is possible that he began to recognize letter-sound correspondence, in principle at least, if not precisely which letters stood for which sounds of his own name. Imitating the letters of his name must have worked on the visual level as well, as he copied the shapes and designs of the letters. In these ways, he was becoming acquainted with the workings of the alphabet and might have been developing a rudimentary understanding of English literacy. He also had ample opportunity to witness the economic and political usefulness of English literacy in negotiations with whites.

From a young age, Sequoyah's interactions with whites were frequent and not always pleasant. Because they had joined forces with the British during the Revolutionary War, the Cherokees in the Overhill towns where Sequoyah was raised faced the ill feelings of colonists in the newly formed states.<sup>20</sup> Sequoyah grew up in a time of increasing land cessions to whites, deeper encroachment of settlers and missionaries into Cherokee territory, and a rapidly shifting economy.<sup>21</sup> In 1816 Sequoyah was among several Cherokees who signed a treaty with a group of whites, led by then-Major Andrew Jackson, ceding lands in Tennessee for which the Cherokees were to be reimbursed; this was perhaps Sequoyah's first encounter with the future President Jackson



who went on to orchestrate the Cherokee removal. Having learned to sign his name in English from Chief Hicks, Sequoyah signed his name to this treaty as George Guess, his English name. During these years, Sequoyah certainly had access to and had seen firsthand the importance of English literacy and had understood the need to be able to sign his name in English. He was witnessing an era of increasing social change due in part to the influence of outsiders and their writing technologies. Moreover, he was inventing a writing system that, as he later observed, "is an equal to the method of reading" whites knew.<sup>22</sup>

He seems to have understood the potential use of English literacy, though he revealed little if any knowledge of the language; he also understood something of the instrumental workings and shapes of letters. Furthermore, he had achieved some prominence in the tribe as a principal person allowed to treat on behalf of the rest of the people. If Sequoyah wrote this letter, as the evidence suggests, then he may have been literate in English. He certainly had good control of letter-sound correspondence. Perhaps he had a scribe in the family who wrote in English for him, such as his nephew who attended missionary school or his cousin George Lowrey, who was bilingual and translated for him during the Payne interview.<sup>23</sup> Even if a family member or friend who was fluent in English wrote these, then at the very least, it seems Sequoyah had deeper exposure to English than previously believed. This stands to reason, because by all accounts of his development of the script, he had at least seen and held documents that were written in English: letters between whites, his nephew's spelling book, his sister-in-law's Bible, and scraps of paper along the road.

Between 1810 and 1820, Sequoyah lived in Wills Valley, located between the Cherokees who had chosen to emigrate further west to what is now Arkansas and the Cherokees who remained in Tennessee and Georgia. During this period, he had set himself to earnestly pursuing the development of the Cherokee writing system. As he immersed himself in the process of inventing this writing system, he did so in isolation from whites and fellow Cherokees.

Sequoyah's understanding of and appreciation for the Cherokee language is everywhere present in the development and instrumental workings of the writing system. "Sequoyah at first sought to make a character that would represent a sentence. Then he tried using symbols for every word. He produced thousands of them, but he soon realized that that method was much too cumbersome."<sup>24</sup> Sequoyah gave up on this effort when he realized that the process would not be completely useful or transferable to Cherokees, so he tried a pictographic system in which, for example, an image of a horse would represent the animal itself. Finally, he seems to have settled upon representing sound units with characters, understanding at some level that there were a finite number of sounds in the Cherokee language.

He created a full chart of the syllabary in an arrangement and manuscript style that bore no relation whatsoever to the Roman alphabet.<sup>25</sup> Though it is complex to write in longhand, a shorthand of this system was already in use before Worcester arrived on the scene. This shorthand became a model for the design of the type set that the Cherokee Nation commissioned in 1827. Most important, the writing system can represent more than merely sound units: in some words, particularly verb phrases, the writing can indicate entire levels of semantic, syntactic, and grammatical information with each character.<sup>26</sup> In other words, each sound unit represented by this script can potentially encode several levels of linguistic meaning. When used, then, the writing system provides markers of and keys to Cherokee worldview as something more than a syllabary that approaches the instrumentality of a morphographic system. Morphographic writing systems work by representing meaning with each glyph, similar to the ways in which Chinese works with its hundreds of thousands of characters but combined with the economy of a syllabary.

Even simple sentences and words written in Cherokee can reveal how place and history are linked directly to the language, codified in Sequoyan. "I live in Tahlequah" can be written **WPT IrᏊW** /taliqua tsinela/:

- WP** the word for two (also pronounced /dali/)
- T** perhaps the root for enough or sufficient (also pronounced /quu/)
- Ir** I
- ᏊW** live presently

Though not all agree on this translation of the name of the Cherokee Nation's present capital, **WPT** /taliqua/ (roughly, *two is enough*) does recall the history of the tribe as having two former capitals, Echota and New Echota. Such a place name may mark the tribe's resolution to make Tahlequah the permanent capital of the Cherokee Nation. Two lost capital cities is enough. It could also represent the place where the unification of the Eastern and Western Cherokees took place after the Trail of Tears, a place believed to be at the confluence of two creeks.

The verb phrase above includes an entire sentence in one word, so that each character can potentially represent semantic, grammatical, and phonetic information at once. The information potential is activated by proximity to other characters and words. In the above example, **Ir** /tsi/ carries the first person singular information that "I" am living in Tahlequah. The character **Ir** /tsi/ has additional latent meanings, however, that can be activated when it occurs in different noun phrases. Because **Ir** /tsi/ is also the root for the word offspring, child, or

egg, the noun phrase *DcᏊᏁ* /aquetsi/ translates literally as *D s/be, Ꮚ my, Ꮑ child*. Said another way, the potential meaning of a character surfaces when placed alongside other characters inside the noun or verb phrase and with other words in the sentence.

Sequoyan, in its original manuscript form, had no relationship whatsoever to English or to the Roman alphabet. Only when it moved from script to print did it take on an order and apparent relation to the alphabet.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, though, when viewed through an alphabetic lens, it appears to Cherokee language users and scholars alike as a set of discrete “letters” that only represent sounds. In this way, levels of meaning and interactions between the characters are missed. Understanding the syllabary through the orthographic rules of the alphabet has obscured the instrumental logics implicit in the system. When it is seen as a writing system in its own right, as exclusive of the alphabet, every act of reading and writing functions to persevere in the language. Because the syllabary works more like a morphographic system, and because it can potentially represent linguistic information, its cultural and symbolic value remain strongly rooted in Cherokee peoplehood.<sup>28</sup>

### **“WE’RE TAKING THE GENIUS OF SEQUOYAH INTO THIS CENTURY”**

Though evidence suggests that Sequoyah was literate in English, he rejected the influence of the alphabet and the English language as he developed the Cherokee writing system. When seen as a writing system in its own right—one that is read, written, and codifies the Cherokee language—Sequoyan reveals linguistic logics that continue today to contribute to Cherokee peoplehood. In an interview on September 4, 2009, Dr. Neil Morton, the former director of education services for the Cherokee Nation, describes the ways that the Cherokee Nation’s immersion school is “taking the genius of Sequoyah into this century” in efforts to maintain Cherokee language learning. He credits the 1991 Cherokee Nation Language and Cultural Preservation Act with the development of numerous educational initiatives currently undertaken by the Nation, many of these relying on the genius of Sequoyan in multiple forms.<sup>29</sup> To develop the slate of initiatives and programs that Education Services now runs, they first needed to better judge how many people speak the Cherokee language in Oklahoma today. Morton explained that determining the number of speakers was not altogether easy, and what the Nation learned about the number of speakers and learners is alarming:

We did a survey in 2002 within the jurisdictional area of the Cherokee Nation. The survey found that, in other words, they may have been there, but we didn’t find them,

found that no one under the age of 40 was fully conversant in the language. We found that about 50 out of 300 spoke the language in the homes. And the most damaging thing that we found is that most children of fluent speakers did not speak [Cherokee].<sup>30</sup>

Morton refers to this survey as a first step in a multiphase plan for developing a robust language program. Though the Cherokee speakers who were surveyed seemed reluctant to admit their fluency with the language, it may be accurate that no one under the age of forty was fully conversant in the language. This same survey “showed nearly 64 percent of Cherokee citizens do not speak or understand the language. About 5 percent understand the language but cannot speak it, 17 percent understand and have some speaking ability, 3 percent are conversational, 10 percent are highly fluent, and only 1 percent have mastery of the language.”<sup>31</sup> Even more disturbing is that so few children raised in homes where Cherokee is the primary language spoken are retaining their language once they enter English-speaking schools. Note, though, that 95 percent of respondents agreed that insuring the vitality of the language is important to Cherokee identity and heritage.<sup>32</sup> This figure suggests that the language is valued as part of the identity and heritage, that language loss is an important issue to address in order to maintain Cherokee peoplehood, and that those Cherokees who still speak, read, and write the language are valued and valuable assets to the people. Honoring the high value of Sequoyan and the Cherokee language, the Cherokee Nation has developed several educational fronts in the battle against language erosion, many of them relying on Sequoyah’s ingenuity and evoking his apparent preference for Cherokee only.

The “gradual, methodical process” of addressing the alarming attrition rates of speakers that Morton refers to has involved the development of a host of educational programs run by and for the Cherokee Nation, with funding for these programs provided primarily by the Department of the Interior and the Cherokee Nation. Education Services is a well-funded, clearly mandated branch of the Cherokee Nation, charged with the important task of educating citizens through the promotion of language, history, and culture. Educational services provided include, but are not limited to, the Cultural Resource Center, which does outreach to schools and online language classes; K-16 initiatives, including scholarships for higher education, the Sequoyah Schools, and early childhood and Head Start programs; the translations department, which also certifies language instructors; and the copartner (Johnson O’Malley), Learn and Serve, and curriculum and instruction programs that develop collaborative efforts to bolster Cherokee language, history, and culture education during the school year, in the summer, and in after-school programs.

Within its scope, Education Services hosts educational programs run by and for the Cherokee Nation. With an operating budget of over \$43 million and 329 employees, the programs run by groups within Cherokee Nation Education Services have touched every level of educational advancement for citizens inside Oklahoma and around the country. These programs support 20,198 Johnson O'Malley students, 842 Head Start children, 87 students in the Cherokee immersion schools, 389 Sequoyah High School students, and 3,600 online language program participants.<sup>33</sup> This coordinated effort addresses several problems in Cherokees' overall education and schooling received in Oklahoma: the need for more curricular materials to accurately and fully address the history of Oklahoma, the need for access to language speakers and opportunities to learn, practice, and immerse in the Cherokee language, and the need for careful and accurate cultural representations of Cherokee life and traditions. Central to these educational efforts has been an emphasis on learning and using the Cherokee syllabary. Because of the syllabary's cultural and linguistic relevance, the immersion school privileges it to the exclusion of the Roman alphabet when possible.

In many of their educational initiatives, teachers on the Cherokee Nation Education Services team must necessarily rely on the Roman alphabet and the English language. Because the Roman alphabet works solely on a letter–sound correspondence, most learners whose first writing system is the alphabet approach the syllabary as though it too works solely on a character–sound basis.<sup>34</sup> The problem, of course, is that adults and youths who have learned English as their first language have a difficult time seeing the instrumental logics the syllabary imparts. The syllabary, with more than three times as many characters as the alphabet, appears to be difficult, cumbersome, and needlessly complex to Cherokee language learners. Students in online language classes offered by the Cherokee Nation will link sound to character eventually with practice but will not necessarily demonstrate understanding that each character and syllable is imbued with meaning. Cherokee 1 introduces students to the sounds of the syllabary chart and to one-syllable words included therein, such as **Ꭰ** /ni/ *look!*, **Ꭲ** /na/ *that*, and **Ꭳ** /tla/ *no*. Some use of the syllabary is included toward the end, but always with English transliterations and translations. In Cherokee 2, the syllabary is present in almost all lessons after the first weeks of reviewing words and phrases heard in Cherokee 1. Students are quizzed in Sequoyan, but only the transliterations of the characters are tested, not the phrases' meanings. Cherokee 2 helps build students' abilities to memorize the characters' relation to sounds, though students tend to see it as having only this function. In Cherokee 3, students begin to show a growing awareness of the ways in which the syllabary works to encode meaning. They comment that the literal translations of the phrases offered by the teacher, Ed Fields, help them see what each part

and character means. They have mentioned in chats during class that, once they know the syllabary, it does not help to use the alphabet to transliterate but just makes it harder. Students begin to see the ways in which the characters can potentially stand for meaning rather than simply sound. They begin to appreciate its instrumentality as distinct from the alphabet and begin to understand the alphabet's failings to do the Cherokee language justice. This alphabetic bias limits the ways in which the Cherokee syllabary can be understood as potentially representing several levels of meaning at once.<sup>35</sup>

Because the standardized arrangement shown in Figure 1 re-ordered and transliterated the characters, it reduced their apparent instrumentality to alphabetic order and simple letter–sound correspondence. In this arrangement, every character is placed alongside English phonetic transliterations, creating yet another layer of instrumental obfuscation when used and analyzed. The standardized arrangement suggests that this writing system is primarily useful for English speakers looking to transliterate the Cherokee language into easy English phonetics. One might be tempted to believe that this standardized version, keyed as it is to alphabetic designs and orthographies, would make learning and using this writing system that much easier for speakers whose first language is English. Such is not the case.

Although alphabetic literacies work quite differently than Sequoyan, it is clear that much political, legal, and historical work written in English, Spanish, and French has had a lasting impact on Cherokees.<sup>36</sup> As Chris Teuton finds, for instance, Robert Conley's fictional series *Real People*, which aims to educate Cherokees through historically based characters, has had a lasting influence on Cherokees' understanding of themselves and the tribe in part because it is accessible and enjoyable.<sup>37</sup> Literature produced in English with the Roman alphabet certainly has had an important place, as Daniel Heath Justice argues, in speaking "to the living realities of struggle and possibility among Indigenous peoples."<sup>38</sup> In other words, though it might be possible to maintain something of Cherokee peoplehood in English with the Roman alphabet, too much is lost when Cherokees' knowledge work fails to include Sequoyan and when everyday language use relies solely on English. For scholars, the Cherokee Nation, and indeed the vast majority of Cherokees who now know only English, the process of learning the Cherokee language is hampered by the alphabetic bias, the de facto need for English to the exclusion of Cherokee in most settings, and the lack of access to native speakers.

My hope is to show that even the smallest acts of reading and writing with the syllabary and speaking Cherokee contribute to a longstanding tradition of language perseverance, a tradition of activism that traces from Sequoyah's own political maneuverings. That the educational programs developed by the Cherokee Nation prefer to use

Sequoyan and Cherokee to the exclusion of the alphabet and English whenever possible makes good sense pedagogically, politically, and historically. This essay traces this tradition of activism through Sequoyah's development of the syllabary to present-day efforts on the part of the Education Services team. When we understand this tradition as part of a larger peoplehood matrix, the types of perseverance possible through the development and use of a writing system become apparent. Sequoyah's legacy of exclusivity and unification within the tribe, with his judicious use of English, provides a model of activist effort for scholars and educators as we persevere with our peoples.

## N O T E S

The author wishes to thank the reviewers of this essay for their helpful suggestions and the conference attendees and panelists at the 2010 Arizona State University American Indian Studies Association conference for their helpful suggestions and support.

- 1 W. A. Phillips, "Sequoyah," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 41 (1870): 542–48. Those who interviewed Sequoyah always did so with an interpreter present and found that "he did not speak one word of the English language," as John Stuart remarks in *A Sketch of the Cherokee and Choctaw Indians* (Little Rock, Ark.: Woodruff and Pew, 1837), 21. Cherokees who represented the tribe to outsiders in English describe Sequoyah as knowing at least some words in English. Chief Charles Hicks, a contemporary of Sequoyah, describes him as a "native cherokee with out any education what ever and scarcely understands the English language" in his letter to Thomas McKenney dated January 14, 1825, Bureau of Indian Affairs, RG75, M-234, roll 71, frames 553–58, Letters Received by Office of Indian Affairs, 1824–81, National Archives. Wahnenuahi recalls that "Sequoyah did not speak the English language, and understood only a few words, of which he could make but little use" in her history of the Cherokee tribe translated in Anna Gritts Kilpatrick and Jack Kilpatrick, "Chronicles of Wolfstown: Social

Documents of the North Carolina Cherokees, 1850–1862," Bureau of American Ethnology, bulletin 196, no. 75 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1966), 198. James Mooney claims that Sequoyah never learned English: "Having nearly reached middle age before the first mission was established in the Nation, he never attended school and in all his life never learned to speak, read or write the English language." Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of American Ethnology, 1900), 109. See also Grant Foreman, *Sequoyah* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1938); Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934); Stan Hoig, *Sequoyah: The Cherokee Genius* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1995); and Althea Bass, "Talking Stones: John Howard Payne's Story of Sequoyah," *The Colophon: A Book Collectors' Quarterly*, pt. 9 (1932): n.p.

- 2 George Foster, *Se-Quo-Yah: The American Cadmus and Modern Moses* (Philadelphia: Office of Indian Rights Association, 1885).
- 3 Bass, "Talking Stones."
- 4 Historians continue to use this standardized arrangement and describe the writing system as an alphabet. See Mooney, *Myths of*



- the Cherokees*; and Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes*.
- 5 Margaret Bender describes the ubiquity of this standardized "Cherokee alphabet" in *Signs of Cherokee Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
  - 6 Tom Holm, J. Diane Pearson, and Ben Chavis, "Peoplehood: A Model for the Extension of Sovereignty in American Indian Studies," *Wicazo Sa Review* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 7–24. See also Kenneth Fink, "Riding Behind with a Pillow Strapped On" in *A Good Cherokee, a Good Anthropologist: Papers in Honor of Robert K. Thomas*, ed. Steve Pavlik (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 119–27 for a description of Robert Thomas's original conception of peoplehood developed in collaboration with Tom Holm.
  - 7 Daniel Cobb, "Devils in Disguise: The Carnegie Project, the Cherokee Nation, and the 1960s," *American Indian Quarterly* 31 (2007): 465–90.
  - 8 Billy Stratton and Frances Washburn, "The Peoplehood Matrix: A New Theory for American Indian Literature," *Wicazo Sa Review* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 51–72.
  - 9 Susan A. Miller, "Native Historians Write Back: The Indigenous Paradigm in American Indian Historiography," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 29.
  - 10 Wilma Mankiller, "To Persevere as Tribal People," *Native Americas* 19, nos. 3 & 4 (2002): 55.
  - 11 At the bottom of this handwritten artifact, a penciled note from a librarian reads, "The original and copies of this letter moved from Ross to Payne and finally to Sequoyah file."
  - 12 John Ross, "Letter to Sequoyah. Jan. 12, 1832," in *The Papers of Chief John Ross*, vol. 1, 1807–1839, ed. Gary Moulton (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 234–35.
  - 13 Foreman, *Sequoyah*; Hoig, *Sequoyah*.
  - 14 For an indication of Ross's abilities with English, see *The Papers of Chief John Ross*, ed. Moulton.
  - 15 Hoig, *Sequoyah*, 5.
  - 16 Wahnenauhi, "Historical Sketches of the Cherokees: Together with Some of Their Customs, Traditions, and Superstitions," in *The Wahnenaubi Manuscript*, ed. Jack Kilpatrick, Bureau of American Ethnology, bulletin 196, no. 77 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1966).
  - 17 Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*.
  - 18 Payne's 1835 interview of Sequoyah tells a different story of his father and mother, but the endings are typically the same: when Sequoyah was young, his father left, and his mother and her family raised him in Will's Town on the Tennessee River, within what is today Alabama. See Bass, "Talking Stones."
  - 19 *Ibid.*, 11–12.
  - 20 Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*, 109–12.
  - 21 William McLoughlin, "Cherokee Anti-Mission Sentiment, 1824–1828" *Ethnohistory* 21 (1974): 361–70; McLoughlin, "Thomas Jefferson and the Beginning of Cherokee Nationalism, 1806 to 1809," *William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975): 547–80; and McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789–1839* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).
  - 22 Quoted in a second manuscript found in the Sequoyah folder at the Thomas Gilcrease Museum. See Ellen Cushman's forthcoming *The Cherokee Syllabary: Writing*



*Peoplehood and Perseverance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011).

- 23 Bass, "Talking Stones"; Willard Walker, "Notes on Native Writing Systems and the Design of Native Literacy Programs," *Anthropological Linguistics* 11 (1969): 148–66.
- 24 Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, *Lectures on American Literature, with Remarks on Some Passages of American History* (New York: Elam Bliss, 1829), 26–27.
- 25 Ellen Cushman, "The Cherokee Syllabary from Script to Print," *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 4 (2010): 625–49; Cushman, *The Cherokee Syllabary*.
- 26 Ellen Cushman, "The Cherokee Writing System," *Written Communication* 28, no. 2 (forthcoming).
- 27 Cushman, "The Cherokee Syllabary from Script to Print" and *The Cherokee Syllabary*.
- 28 Writing systems scholar Peter Daniels suggests that the Cherokee syllabary should be understood as possibly representing morphemic units of the language. Daniels compares the world's writing systems to reveal their origins and offers a fresh perspective on three important and functionally similar writing systems: Mayan, Chinese, and Sumerian. He finds that "there were three known independent ancient origins of writing . . . all of which served societies that had developed some degree of urbanism, and that the three languages involved were similar in basic structure: most of the morphemes are just a single syllable" (36). Morphemes are the smallest meaningful part of a language. If each syllable in a language carries with it meaning, then syllabic-based writing systems in those languages might

also be carrying linguistic information with each character. See Daniels, "Grammatology," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*, ed. David Olson and Nancy Torrance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 25–45. Findings from Margaret Bender's ethnographic research provide further evidence for Daniels's claim of a relationship between Cherokee characters and morphemes. Upon watching the foremost authority working in the Eastern Cherokee Language Project sound out a word, she writes, "This implies that the choice of spelling is a meaningful one that provides semantic (and possibly even grammatical) information. Spelling in the syllabary is clearly not seen as merely an abstract and arbitrary means of representing the sounds of spoken language" (129). When Cherokee speakers are writing and come across a word in which syllables have been elided in everyday speech, they try "to find a morphological or semantic justification for the otherwise arbitrary choice of syllabary characters in consonant clusters" (124). In her interviews and observations, she finds that "as far from being arbitrary as was possible, the syllabary was treated as though it had a direct, tangible connection to meaning" (122). See Bender, *Signs of Cherokee Culture*, 122–29.

- 29 W. Neil Morton, taped personal interview in Tahlequah, Okla. (September 4, 2009). The Cherokee Nation recognized the growing problem of language erosion, and in 1991 Chief Wilma Mankiller signed legislation to address the problem. Under the Cherokee Nation Language and Cultural Preservation Act (Tahlequah, Okla., LA-10-91, July 13, 1991), the political arm of the Nation was tasked to maintain Cherokee as a living language by

- making efforts to "involve tribal members to the greatest extent possible in instruction in Cherokee language," to establish "a permanent Cherokee Language Program within the Tribal Education Department," to "encourage the use of Cherokee language in both written and oral form to the fullest extent possible in public and business settings," and to "encourage creation and expansion of the number, kind, and amount of written materials in the Cherokee language" (n.p.).
- 30 Morton, interview.
- 31 Will Chavez, "Long-Range Language Preservation Plan in Progress," *Cherokee Phoenix*, June 5, 2003, <http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/6/Article.aspx>.
- 32 Gregg Simmons, "Programs Promote Language Revitalization," *Cherokee Phoenix*, February 10, 2006, <http://www.cherokeephoenix.org/1793/Article.aspx>.
- 33 Cherokee Nation, *Cherokee Nation Education Services* (Tahlequah, Okla.: Cherokee Nation, 2007), 2.
- 34 Evidence for this claim is drawn from five years of participant observation in online Cherokee language classes offered by the Cherokee Nation in an ongoing ethnohistorical study of Cherokee language and identity.
- 35 Cushman, "The Cherokee Writing System."
- 36 For discussion of the impact of heritage language loss on the production of literature, see Stratton and Washurn, "The Peoplehood Matrix," 56–58. For discussion of the ways in which Indigenous languages influence historical writing, see Miller, "Native Historians Write Back," 29–30. See also Bender, *Signs of Cherokee Culture*.
- 37 Chris Teuton, "Interpreting Our World: Authority and the Written Word in Robert J. Conley's *Real People Series*," *Modern Fiction Series* 53 (2007): 544–68.
- 38 Daniel Heath Justice, "Conjuring Marks: Furthering Indigenous Empowerment through Literature," *American Indian Quarterly* 28, nos. 1 & 2 (2004): 3–11.