Episode Three: Trail of Tears
Transcript

Slate: The dramatic sequences in this film are based closely on the historical record, both written and oral. While there are gaps, we have filled in with words and actions consistent with that record.

Slate: Washington, D.C., 1830

Man: Hello gentlemen, I'm quite concerned.

Narrator: He was called Kah-nung-d-cla-geh, "the one who goes on the mountaintop," or simply, "The Ridge." In the long struggle between Indians and Americans, few native leaders clung to the hope of peaceful coexistence longer. Few others invested more in the professed protections of the American legal system. Few set more stock in the promises of the American government and its constitution. By 1830, the Ridge had already struck a series of hard bargains with the United States. In return for the safety and security of the Cherokee people—and the right to remain on the land of their forefathers—the Ridge had taken pains to shed the life he had been raised to.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): I am one of the native sons of these wild woods.

Narrator: He had been born in 1771, into a Cherokee Nation that stretched through the Southern Appalachians, and had come of age in the landscape on which the Cherokee story had been written. The wings of the Great Buzzard had carved the mountains and the valleys; Uktena, the horned serpent, had made his frightful marks on the tall rocks; the Creator had set the first man and woman in this very place.

Theda Perdue, historian: Christians had been cast out of their own Garden of Eden, but the Cherokees lived in their Eden. It's the land that they believed their ancestors had always inhabited.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): We obtained these lands from the living God above. I would willingly die to preserve them.

Narrator: In the Ridge's youth, the Cherokee Nation had been under constant threat. As a young warrior, it was his duty to keep a wary eye on any encroachment by their near neighbors—the Shawnees, the Creeks, Choctaws and Chickasaws—and then a new force in the Southeastern mountains: the Americans. The Cherokees picked the wrong side in the American Revolution and paid dearly. The Ridge watched American riflemen burn out his own town, one of 50 they destroyed in Cherokee territory. He lashed out; took his first American scalp at age 17, and fought the United States past the point of hope.

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Russell G. Townsend, historic preservationist: For a generation of Cherokees that destruction was all they knew. They had seen their world kind of evaporate around them.

Narrator: The Cherokee Nation was still on its knees in 1805. Its population had dwindled to 12,000, and it had lost more than half its land. Even after the Cherokees and other tribes had signed peace treaties with the United States, The Ridge knew the safety of his people was not a given thing; he understood that the central conflict still pertained: the United States meant to have what was left of the Cherokee homeland. Ridge meant to save it. But he knew that this battle with the United States required a nimble and artful new approach. Preserving the Cherokee Nation meant walking for a time down the new path America was offering.

John Gambold, reverend (Robert Hatch): Please accept this, Brother Ridge, as a small gift.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): Thank you. Thank you John. After we eat lets enjoy this together.

Theda Perdue, historian: The United States at the end of the American Revolution developed a policy called civilization. It helped fund missionary organizations to go into the Indian nations, particularly in the south, and teach Indians how to be Anglo Americans: how to grow wheat instead of corn; how to eat meals at regular times instead of when they were hungry; how to dress in European clothing; how to speak the English language; how to pray in church at designated times; how to live the kind of life that Anglo Americans believed was a civilized life.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: The promises of the United States Government were that if the Cherokees, the Creeks, the Choctaws, the Seminoles, the Chickasaws could somehow assimilate ways of living that were more like their white neighbors that they could be the political and social equal of their white neighbors. Literally Thomas Jefferson once assured the Indian leaders in a speech that he believed they could become the equal of white people.

Narrator: "You will unite yourselves with us," President Jefferson said, "join our great councils and form one people with us. And we shall all be Americans. You will mix with us by marriage. Your blood will run within our veins and will spread with us over this great continent."

Daniel Ross (Jackson Walker, in Cherokee): Bear. Good Afternoon.

Bear (Anthony Currne Lett, in Cherokee): I need a part for my gun.

Daniel Ross (Jackson Walker): John! Flintlock!

Narrator: John Ross, the future Cherokee chief, grew up at the crossroads of an emerging world where white settlers and Indians were just beginning a strange new dance of accommodation.

Bear (Anthony Currne Lett, in Cherokee): Thank you!

Narrator: John's mother Mollie, a member of the Bird clan, had married a Scotsman, Daniel Ross. Ross was among the growing number of white men who took Cherokee wives, and gained access to land and trade in the bargain.

Daniel Ross (Jackson Walker): John.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: There would have been many different classes of Cherokee making their way in and out of the store, from the full-blood traditional people to the wealthier mixed-blood families that were just beginning to establish themselves.

Narrator: The Ross's spoke English at home; John had English-speaking tutors. But John Ross was a Cherokee because of his mother's blood—an accepted member of the Bird clan. He grew up surrounded by people whose lives ran to traditional Cherokee rhythms. He was proud to have a Cherokee name, "Koo-wees-koo-wee," or "mysterious little white bird."

Daniel Ross (Jackson Walker): John.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: There's a story that's told about the time when he was five. And his father had bought a new little suit for him to wear at the time of Green Corn Dance. And his mother dressed him up in his white man's suit. And the other children teased him so unmercifully that supposedly he came back home and insisted on being allowed to change into the everyday clothes of the other Cherokee children before he would go back out and join the festivities.

Narrator: Cherokee land—all of it—was owned in common by the tribe, but any Cherokee could work and improve as much land as personal energy and private resources allowed. And The Ridge and his wife, Susannah, were energetic and resourceful homesteaders; exemplars of "civilization." As the years went by, and The Ridge's farming wealth grew, U.S. agents would occasionally receive optimistic reports from the Ridge family. Major Ridge, as he was now called, knew what they wanted to hear: "I take pleasure to state that every head of his household has his house and farm. . . . The poorer class . . . very contentedly perform the duties of the kitchen. They sew, they weave, they spin, they cook our meals and act well."

Major Ridge's hope for the future was a group of educated young men who could build a strong new Cherokee Nation, reckon U.S. laws and government and outsmart federal negotiators who were after their land. His greatest hope was his own son. John Ridge was a frail boy; hampered by a disease that occasionally made it difficult to walk, but the Major recognized his son's strengths. When the U.S. War Department offered to pay tuition for John and his cousin, Elias Boudinot, at a missionary school in Connecticut, Major Ridge grabbed the chance.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): It will be hard for you, but you must conduct yourself well among the white people. When you finish school and return home you can help us.

Susannah Ridge (Carla-Rae Holland, in Cherokee): Little one, don't forget where you grew up. Learn a different way, but don't forget. Goodbye. We will see each other again.

Elias Boudinot (Will Finley): So I read your essay....

Narrator: John Ridge grew to manhood among white Christian educators, absorbing the lessons of the bible and the U.S. Constitution alike. Even 900 miles away from Cherokee Territory, he never betrayed a hint of pain at his separation from home and family.

Jace Weaver, writer: Even from his earliest school days, John Ridge is described by his teachers as being cold, a little bit aloof, as being haughty. They compare him to his cousin, Buck, who became Elias Boudinot, who was much friendlier, much more congenial, but not as good a student. John Ridge was brilliant.

Narrator: The faculty selected John Ridge, out of all the Indian students at Cornwall, to prepare an essay for President James Monroe. In it, he sang the praises of his Christian benefactors, and his own parents: "My father and mother are both ignorant of the English language, but it is astonishing to see them exert all their power to have their children educated, like the whites!"

For all his scholarly achievements, John Ridge's fragile health failed in the New England winters. He spent much of his time in his room, attended by the school steward's daughter, Sarah Bird Northrup, until a doctor alerted her mother that the two seemed to have fallen in love. When Sarah confessed, the Northrups sent her away to live with relatives, the entire affair kept secret. It took nearly two years, but John won over Sarah's parents. He regained his health, qualified as a lawyer, and promised to take care of their daughter.

Minister: Do you thus solemnly and sincerely engage and promise?

John Ridge (Wesley French): I will, with the help of God.

Minister: And you Miss Sarah Bird Northrup, with your right hand, take Mr. John Ridge by his right hand. In the presence of God and these witnesses, do you take, John Ridge, whom you now hold by the hand, to be your wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward . . . forsaking all others, keep only unto him . . . conducting yourself toward him in all respects, as a kind and tender, virtuous and faithful wife . . .

Protestor #1: This marriage is a sin in God's eyes!

Protestor #2: Shame on you!

Protestor #3: Shame!

John Ridge (Wesley French): Go! Go!

Jace Weaver, writer: The reaction of New England whites—enlightened, progressive New England whites—makes a mark on him. He had been told, 'get an education, take up western ways, you can be part of us.' He will never believe whites in exactly the same way again.

John Ridge (Wesley French): An Indian is almost considered accursed. The scum of the earth are considered sacred in comparison. If an Indian is educated yet he is an Indian, and the most stupid and illiterate white man will disdain and triumph over this worthy individual.

Narrator: While John Ridge was away in Connecticut, John Ross was a young man on the rise. A trader like his father, Ross cashed in selling food and provisions to the well-funded Christian missions sprouting around the Cherokee Nation. He married a Cherokee woman and made a home on 420 prime planting acres. But Ross was drawn more and more into the troubled state of Cherokee diplomacy. The Cherokee Nation's long alliance with United States was fraying. Washington was dragging its feet on payments owed under the terms of earlier treaties, and strong-arming the Cherokees to sell off more territory. The Cherokee Nation had formed a powerful new central government to push back, determined "never again to cede one more foot of land." And they needed able English-speaking men like John Ross to articulate the Cherokee position to the United States government.

Jace Weaver, writer: John Ross was not from a prominent Cherokee family the way John Ridge was. But Ridge takes John Ross kind of under his wing as a protégé. Here in John Ross he's got someone who's only

an eighth Cherokee, is very familiar with white society because of his father. Equally adept at negotiating both of those worlds.

Narrator: With strong leaders like Ross and the Ridges, the Cherokees could hold the United States government to its word for a while, but the situation on the ground was changing nonetheless. As dreams of cotton wealth drove prospective planters deep into the interior south, other tribes were giving up huge swaths of neighboring lands. The 14,000 Cherokees found themselves surrounded on every side by American settlers; scores of whites began to scrabble onto Cherokee farmland. A small group of Cherokees had already taken America up on its offer of new land west of the Mississippi, in Arkansas Territory. But the Cherokee National Council, to a man, was still confident it had the strength to stand its ground. Major Ridge, for one, had much to defend: nearly 10 million acres owned in common by the tribe, and his own plantation. According to the U.S. Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Ridge's farm "was in a higher state of cultivation and his buildings better than those of any other person in that region, the whites not excepted." In 20 years, Ridge had cleared nearly 300 acres for cash crops: cotton, tobacco, wheat and indigo; he oversaw his own orchard, dairy and vineyard—and as many as 30 slaves.

John Ross, descendant: John Ross owned slaves and John Ridge, when he got married, Major Ridge gave him like 20 slaves. And so he was a slave owner also.

Jace Weaver, writer: About eight percent of Cherokees owned slaves. They were mainly the mixed-blood elite. But more and more that mixed-blood elite is adopting the lifestyle of the Southern planter culture.

John Ridge (Wesley French): We did so well with tobacco in the past that we're thinking of adding to that, or perhaps even some cattle.

Susannah Ridge (Carla-Rae Holland, in Cherokee): (line in Cherokee)

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): (line in Cherokee)

John Ridge (Wesley French): My father says the rains were heavy here and the cotton was planted late, but cotton prices are rising again.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): (line in Cherokee)

John Ridge (Wesley French): My father apologizes to you ma'am. He says the cost of your fine dresses is going up.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): Toast

Narrator: Not all Cherokees welcomed these new opportunities. "Civilization" was beginning to draw hard class distinctions that had never existed in traditional Cherokee society. The lives of most full-blood Cherokees were still marked by loss. What little remained of their old hunting grounds was played out. They depended almost entirely on subsistence farming. And they worried that their leaders were in thrall to the ways of the whites. But there were still elemental ties that bound all Cherokees, and change that benefited all, including a signal advance by a Cherokee named Sequoyah.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: Sequoyah was devoted to enabling the Cherokee people to have at their command an essential power that he saw white society have, that being the ability to write in the

Cherokee language. Ultimately he did something that no one has ever done and that was create a system of reading and writing in a language when he himself could not read or write in any other language.

Chad Smith, Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation: There was one character for every syllable. So with 86 syllables a Cherokee speaker could learn to write in several weeks. And it's actually much more efficient and effective than you could ever ask of English.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: Within a matter of a few years the Cherokee Nation was literate. The Cherokee Phoenix, the translation of the Bible into Cherokee. Family stories were written down. Medicine people wrote down all of their formulas for healing. It literally revolutionized Cherokee society.

Narrator: At the end of the 1820s, Major Ridge saw a new Cherokee Nation on the rise. Cherokee population grew every year. Its National Council was stronger than ever, and a new generation had come of age. John Ridge had taken a seat on the council. And one of the most impressive new young leaders was John Ross.

John Ross, descendant: John Ross he didn't look like a real full-blood Cherokee, but the full-bloods, the Cherokee people, trusted him. He was what they looked for in a leader, and he was in for the common people.

Narrator: Among the traditional full-blood Cherokees—who made up the overwhelming majority of the tribe—John Ross gained a reputation for integrity. While serving under the principal chief, Ross had become an eager student of the abiding Cherokee ways. It was Ross who authored a new constitution that all Cherokees could embrace. Ross's constitution created a democratically elected government mirrored on the United States. There was an executive, a legislative and a judicial branch. A strong National Council was vested with the power to protect all Cherokee land.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: This is the culmination. This is a culmination of a movement and is probably the greatest unity that the Cherokee people had ever seen.

Narrator: The new constitution drew bright and indisputable borders around Cherokee territory, and declared the Cherokee Nation's absolute sovereignty within those borders.

Jace Weaver, writer: Georgia reacts to the Cherokee passage of a constitution in 1827 very badly. They say, "If they set up a constitutional government we'll never be able to get rid of them."

Narrator: "The absolute title to the lands in controversy is in Georgia," read one resolution, "and she may rightfully possess herself of them when, and by what means, she pleases."

"These misguided men," a state legislator said of the Cherokees, "should be taught that there is no alternative between their removal beyond the limits of the state of Georgia and their extinction."

As the Georgia legislature began to kick back, other more ominous events were unfolding: the discovery of gold in Cherokee territory, which caused a stampede of white prospectors, and the first stirring of a populist political movement that sent tremors through Indian lands all over the East. This hard-edged new movement found voice in Andrew Jackson, whose ascent to the presidency in 1829 owed to the newly enfranchised Southern frontiersmen. In his first address to Congress, President Jackson announced his intention to do as his

voters pleased, which is to say, rid the East of the Indian tribes once and for all. He championed new legislation giving him power to offer the tribes land west of the Mississippi if they would go nicely.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: The Indian removal bill was Jackson's first priority once he was in office. It became the first major focus of his administration. It did reflect a fundamental shift in the way that America was beginning to define itself. Not very many people in Georgia and Tennessee, Alabama at that time were willing to even go so far as to say that Indian people were people.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: The thinking of the day becomes more racist that the Cherokees are inferior and cannot be like the whites. It's convenient rhetoric to say that Cherokees are inferior and we need to get them out of the way, out of harm's way, as Jackson would put it.

Narrator: Other tribes read the bleak signs, and reluctantly began to prepare for removal. But the Cherokees reached out for support among their friends and benefactors along the Eastern seaboard.

Jace Weaver, writer: The Cherokees were one of the "civilized tribes." They had made such strides. So they cut a sympathetic figure to northeasterners.

John Ridge (Wesley French): I ask you. Shall red men live, or shall they be swept from the earth? It is with you, and this public at large, the decision chiefly rests. Must they perish? Will you push them from you or will you save them?

Narrator: The Congressional debate over the Indian Removal bill was a sectional brawl that drew the entire country's attention. A campaign organized by "Benevolent Ladies" flooded Congress with pro-Indian letters and petitions. "Who can look an Indian in the face," one Senator thundered, "and say to him: for more than 40 years we have made to you the most solemn of promises; we now violate and trample upon them all, but offer you, in their stead, another guarantee." New England Senators voted 11-1 against Jackson's removal bill. But the unanimous bloc of Southerners assured its passage in the Senate. The vote was closer in the House — 102-97. But the legislation passed. And President Andrew Jackson's signature made Indian removal the law of the land.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: The State of Georgia basically said to its citizens this land is yours. They divided up with the land lottery and basically, uh, told their people to have at it.

Narrator: The While white settlers bought up lottery tickets—and a chance at Cherokee land—the Georgia legislature bent itself to obliterating the state within its state, passing new laws overriding Cherokee sovereignty. Meetings of the Cherokee legislature and courts were deemed illegal. All people residing on Cherokee land were now subject to Georgia law. Missionaries who had lived among the Cherokees for years were forced to sign oaths of allegiance to Georgia. Those who refused were jailed.

John Ross, descendant: And Jackson basically told Cherokees that he couldn't do anything about it. It was state rights. And you know they couldn't have any protection from the federal government. The only way they were gonna get protection was if they moved.

Narrator: Making a plan to battle Andrew Jackson and Georgia fell to the Cherokees newly-elected Principal Chief. Major Ridge had decided not to run for the office, asserting that the Cherokees would be best served by an English-speaking Chief. His own son was too young, so the Ridge backed John Ross. At 38, Ross himself was barely eligible, but he won election easily. And one of his first acts in office—rewriting the

Blood Law—sent a clear signal: any Cherokee who made a deal to sell land to the United States without the consent of the entire tribe faced dire consequences. "Citizens of this nation," the law read, "may kill him or them so offending, in any manner most convenient." Chief Ross then set out to shame Jackson and the supporters of Indian removal, and he was going to use the United States federal courts to do it.

John Ross (Freddy Douglas): ...at least what is left.

Narrator: Along with America's most esteemed advocate—former attorney general William Wirt—Ross and his closest advisers began to frame the Cherokees argument for self-determination in their own territory.

Cherokee Leader, (Andrew Hair, in Cherokee): Of course we are a separate people. Who does not know this?

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): We have made many treaties giving up our lands. Were we not a sovereign nation, to sign these treaties?

Narrator: The Cherokee Nation and their supporters filed more than a dozen separate suits in federal court; two made it all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. The question in both cases was the flash point of American politics in 1830: where did federal authority end and states rights begin? Did federal treaties with the Cherokee Nation supersede Georgia state law? Or could Georgia do as she pleased within her borders.

The Court dodged the question in the first case, but in the second, *Worcester v. Georgia*, it could not. Samuel Worcester, a missionary who lived in the Cherokee Nation, had been jailed by Georgia officials for refusing to take an oath of allegiance. Wirt argued that his arrest was unconstitutional, that Cherokee tribal laws could not be written over by the state of Georgia. The opinion of the Court, written by Chief Justice John Marshall, could not have been more clear: "The Cherokee nation is a distinct community," Marshall wrote, "occupying its own territory, with boundaries accurately described, in which the laws of Georgia can have no force, and which the citizens of Georgia have no right to enter but with the assent of the Cherokees themselves."

Chad Smith, Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation: What else could you ask for but a very clear and sympathetic order of the highest court in the land interpreting the supreme law of the land. The Cherokees just were ecstatic.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: They followed the law. They followed this policy of a government-to-government relationship, and the Supreme Court decision was a complete vindication.

Jace Weaver, writer: Now, finally, this was their victory. Now they'll have some protection.

Narrator: John Ridge was still in Washington when he got word that the state of Georgia was refusing to recognize the Supreme Court decision or the sovereignty of the Cherokee Nation.

Jace Weaver, writer: He goes to the White House and gets an audience with President Jackson. He asked him bluntly if he will force Georgia to comply with the Supreme Court's order and Jackson says, he will not.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: Andrew Jackson—the only president in the history of the United States to openly defy a Supreme Court order. He is said to have remarked that Chief Justice Marshall made his decision. Let him enforce it. And to the Georgians he said, "Light a fire under them. They'll move."

John Ridge (Wesley French): It's over. He wants us gone. Even those we call friends say we can't resist anymore.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): And you? Do you think we have no choice anymore?

Chad Smith, Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation: The political reality is setting in. The issues became more clear. You could stay and fight, or stay and resist, or leave. And it was a very painful decision. It was an emotional decision. It was the United States driving us intentionally into that choice.

Narrator: Once Jackson had openly sided with Georgia, every day brought fresh stories of Cherokees being whipped, run from their farms, and even killed by white Georgians; and the Cherokee Nation didn't have the strength to fight them off. When the United States renewed its offer of a cash settlement for Cherokee territory and a grant of land west of the Mississippi, the Ridges were ready to listen.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: At this point, the Ridges see the yielding of land as inevitable. What it's coming down to in their minds is a choice between preserving their land or preserving their sovereignty. So they believe it's more important to remain a sovereign nation and distance themselves from the threat that's, imminent.

John Ridge (Wesley French): I'm told it is much like here. We will come to think of it as home.

Cherokee Leader (John Ketcher, in Cherokee): If that land is rich, like ours here why is no one living there?

John Ridge (Wesley French): Well, it is far. Too far for others, but not for us.

John Ross (Freddy Douglas): They would have us leave our land, and take up way out the west, here.

Traditional Cherokee #1 (Aaron Hair, in Cherokee): What are you doing to stop this?

Traditional Cherokee #2 (Robert Girty, in Cherokee): You are the Chief! Who can say we have to leave?

Traditional Cherokee #3 (Andrew Hair, in Cherokee): You must stop those who betray us. This land is ours!

Traditional Cherokee #4 (Woodrow Ross, in Cherokee): It's true, what we're saying.

Narrator: John Ross was a man in the middle. He knew where the people stood, but the Ridges were Cherokee aristocracy, esteemed leaders in the Nation. The family had plenty of friends in the US government. And Ross was not happy that John Ridge was preparing to run against him for principal chief in the upcoming tribal elections. This sort of infighting, Ross believed, invited peril. He'd seen federal negotiators divide and conquer the leadership of every other nearby tribe. Unity, he knew, had been the Cherokees salvation; the tribe had to speak to the United States with one voice.

Russell G. Townsend, historic preservationist: I think he heard the traditional voice and felt compelled by it, felt sense a duty to it. Certainly he had 16,000 people telling him to stay. I think he wanted to do what those voices were telling him to do.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: The Ridges kept saying publicly, 'if we could if we could just talk to the to the Cherokee people then we can convince them that this is our only option.' And they felt like John Ross was being heavy handed in keeping them from speaking as openly as they liked to.

Narrator: "The duty of the minority to yield and unite is sanctioned by patriotism and virtue," Ross proclaimed. Then, citing a national emergency, he suspended the upcoming tribal elections.

Jace Weaver, writer: When John Ross cancels elections, now there's a real block to John Ridge ever assuming what he knows to be his rightful position. He sees John Ross as a dictator. And he grows to hate the man in a very visceral way.

Narrator: The United States and Georgia got the scent of blood, and dug deep at the rift that had opened between Chief Ross and the Ridges. Federal agents kept close contact with members of the Ridge faction, and let it be known among all Cherokees. Ross's allies fanned rumors that the Ridges were illegally negotiating away Cherokee land, and reminded the Ridge Party that the penalty for selling land without the consent of the tribe was death. By the time the tribal leaders gathered for an emergency session at the Red Clay Council Grounds in the summer of 1834, John Ross had taken aim at his old friend, Major Ridge.

John Ross (Freddy Douglas): My fellow countrymen. The matter before us is most urgent. If the United States shall withdraw their solemn pledges of protection, deprive us of the right of self-government, and wrest from us our land, then, in deep anguish of our misfortunes, we may justly say there is no place for us. No confidence left that the United States shall be more just and faithful towards us in the barren prairies of the West, than when we occupied the soil inherited from the Great Author of our existence.

Crowd: No treaty for land! No one can give away our lands!

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): My people, my people.

Crowd: No treaty for land!

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): We have no government. It is entirely suppressed.

Crowd: The betrayers should be gotten rid of!

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): Where are our laws?

Crowd: You are lying to us!

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): The seats of our judges are overturned.

Crowd: It is your fault this is happening!

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): When I look upon you all, I see you laugh at me. Harsh words are uttered by men who know better.

John Ridge (Wesley French): My father has with distinguished zeal and ability served his country. Is a man to be denounced for his opinions? If a man saw a cloud charged with rain and thunder, and urged the people to take care, is that man to be hated or respected?

Jace Weaver, writer: There's a lengthy discussion and its decided to impeach John Ridge, Major Ridge, from the National Council. Amidst all of this a member of the Ridge faction, John Walker, Jr., leaves early. And he is bushwhacked. His body is left out on the road as a signal.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: It's not just rhetoric anymore. People have to fear for their lives.

Narrator: There was no reconciling after Red Clay. John Ross insisted that if the Cherokees held tight, they could outlast the Jackson Administration: a new President would surely honor the Supreme Court decision. The Ridges believed that what was left of American tolerance for Indian people was evaporating fast. It was time for the Cherokee leaders to take the best cash offer from Washington, and get their people to safety west of the Mississippi.

In the last days of 1835, in defiance of Chief Ross and the National Council, a self-appointed group of Cherokee leaders met at the home of Elias Boudinot. In front of them was the newly negotiated Treaty of New Echota. In return for ceding all the tribal lands in the southeast, the Cherokee Nation would be paid five million dollars, providing funds to relocate west of the Mississippi and to build schools, churches and homes in their new land. The treaty party did not stand to benefit financially, but they knew that would be little comfort to their fellow citizens.

Jace Weaver, writer: None of them were under any illusions as to what they were doing. They knew it was contrary to the wishes of the majority of Cherokees. They knew that they had no authority to sign that treaty. They all knew that.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: To a large extent they had come to believe what they had been telling themselves from the time of the Worcester decision. 'We see. We're the ones who know. We're the ones who have to take action to protect these people who don't understand.' It must have been a very heavy load knowing that the vast majority of Cherokee people would see them as traitors and worthy of the death penalty.

Major Ridge (Wes Studi, in Cherokee): Here is where we were placed to watch over the land, here where I was born and raised. We have to let go of this land that we hold so dear. Here where we grew up, where we worked, and where we have our cherished memories. I would willingly lie down and die if I could stop the removal. There is only one thing I see we can do.

Narrator: Soon after the Treaty of New Echota was ratified in the United States Senate—by a margin of just one vote—Major Ridge and his son John left their homes and moved to the land west of the Mississippi to establish a new Cherokee Nation. The Ridges were going the way of other tribes around them—the Creeks, the Choctaws, and the Chickasaws. But less than 2,000 of the 18,000 Cherokee citizens joined the Ridges in their journey west.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: The people are told they had two years to remove themselves peacefully, with support from the federal government—supply 'em and make sure that they get their payment. And only a handful of people leave. They continue planting their fields and making improvements on their farms. That was their land. They weren't gonna leave.

Chad Smith, Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation: For the vast majority of the Cherokee people removal was not an option. It just was not. They couldn't comprehend removal. They couldn't comprehend that a handful of people signing a piece of paper would be enough to remove them from their homelands.

Jace Weaver, writer: John Ross is trying to hold the Nation together, to keep it in place. He's desperately seeking a way, any possible way, that the Cherokees can remain in the East.

John Ross (Freddy Douglas): I need your help. A paper will come soon. Please sign it. You can trust me to fight this.

Narrator: The Cherokee Chief knew he was working against time. Deadline for removal was May 1838, and 7,000 federal troops had ringed Cherokee Territory. White settlers began to close the circle, "like vultures," said one federal officer, "ready to strip" the Cherokees "of everything they have." Still John Ross had faith in the common decency of white Americans. He thought the Ridges' narrowly ratified treaty could be overturned, and he took one last shot authoring a bold statement from the Cherokee Nation—in the form of a written petition—to be laid before the United States Senate: "We acknowledge our own feebleness," the Cherokees said, "our only fortress is the justice of our cause. Our only appeal on earth is to your tribunal."

The petition arrived at Ross's hotel in Washington just weeks before the removal deadline; it had been signed by 15,665 people: virtually every Cherokee in the East.

Chad Smith, Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation: There were some sheets that were blue; some were white; some were almost orange; some were long; some were wide. And they sewed those all together in a scroll. And if you laid those out that'd be over 160 feet long. And John Ross had prepared for one of the Cherokees friends in the Senate to place that upon the table in the Senate—that protest—so they would reconsider the execution of that treaty. And before that Senator could present it a Congressman from Kentucky and one from Maine had a duel. Then one killed the other. And Congress adjourned.

Narrator: While a frustrated John Ross waited out the Congressional recess that followed the killing, he wrote home to his sister-in-law: "as soon as they bury their illustrious brother, Congress can get back to the business of dealing with us savages." Congress, however, did not circle back to Chief Ross's petition; it was simply pushed aside. The Cherokee people's near-unanimous plea never received the consideration of the United States Senate. On the morning of May 26, 1838 — three days after the removal deadline—federal troops and state militia began what they called the "assembly" of the Cherokee people.

Thomas N. Belt, Cherokee Language Instructor: Everything that wasn't actually on the person, now belonged to the state. And they were forced out into yards and onto the roads with whatever they had on their back.

Militia Man: C'mon Reverend. Get 'em movin!

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: There were staging areas around the Cherokee Nation with wooden stockades, and the people were herded into what were literally cattle pens.

Narrator: A few weeks after the roundup began, the first detachments of Cherokees were shipped west under military guard. Word quickly got back to the stockades: drought and summer disease had made the trip a

march of death. Chief Ross was frantic to avoid further loss. He convinced U.S. military officials to let him take over the organization and supply of removal, and to let his people sit tight until fall - after the season of disease had passed. A few hundred Cherokees who agreed to renounce tribal citizenship were allowed to remain on their farms in North Carolina. The rest, more than 12,000 captive Cherokees, waited in the fetid stockades.

"Prisoners," one missionary remembered, "were obliged to lie at night on the naked ground in the open air exposed to wind and rain, and in this way many are hastening to a premature grave. Half the infants and all the aged have died directly, and one fourth of the remainder." Through June, July, August and September they waited until, at the beginning of October, the Cherokee Nation was finally pushed west.

It was early December before the final group began the 850-mile trip. By then, the long line of Cherokee travelers stretched from Illinois into Kentucky—unbroken in places for three miles. John Ross had seen that the detachments were well supplied for the three- to four- month trek, but winter storms made the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers impassable, stranding thousands for a full month.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: No one could have predicted that one of the hardest winters in memory would strike that year. When they reached the Mississippi River, the river was frozen. There were three different detachments trapped between the Mississippi and another river frozen behind them, and there they sat for weeks in deep, deep snow and ice.

Carey Tilley, Cherokee Heritage Center: As long as they were moving maybe it wasn't so bad. But when you actually had to wait for the ice and sit there and maybe you're sleeping on snow but you're probably sleeping on melted mud and you're sick, your baby's sick, your grandmother's sick, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Narrator: The harsh weather so slowed progress that supplies of dried corn and salt pork began to run short; when white settlers along the road recognized the Cherokees' need, a few offered help. Others took the opportunity to cash in on the woe, charging wildly inflated prices for grain. Cherokee men were soon too depleted to hunt wild game. A New Englander passing through western Kentucky noted the sad procession: "2,000 people ... sick and feeble, many near death. One woman was carrying her youngest child, who was dying in her arms ... multitudes go on foot - even aged females were traveling with heavy burdens attached to their back - on sometimes frozen ground ...with no covering for the feet except what nature had given them. The Indians buried 14 or 15 at every stopping place."

Jace Weaver, writer: Because of the civilization project a great many of those coming on the Trail were Christians, and a lot of times on the Trail they would sing Christian hymns.

Russell G. Townsend, historic preservationist: The United States gained a lot of land and, and farms and taverns and ferries and things like that. But a loss for the American government is the blemish, the stain it places upon our national honor. What we did in the 1830s to the southeastern Indians, it's, it's ethnic cleansing.
Thomas N. Belt, Cherokee Language Instructor: Someone had to answer for those lives. A life taken in that way must be balanced out.

Russell G. Townsend, historic preservationist: It was law. Their lives were forfeit.

Susannah Ridge (Carla-Rae Holland): Skah-tle-loh-skee! No!

Sarah Ridge (Emily Podleski): Please stop! John! No! No...

Jace Weaver, writer: They stabbed him repeatedly.

John Ross, descendant: The same morning, four men came to Elias Boudinot and asked for medicine. And as he turned to greet the people he was stabbed. And another used a hatchet to the head. Major Ridge was shot five times and he was killed. Three murders in the same day. Three outstanding people. The Cherokee people, we lost them, brilliant minds that day. And I think it was a loss for the whole Nation.

Narrator: There was no easy balm for the wounds caused by removal; angry talk, bitter accusation and violent reprisal flared among the Cherokees for the next 30 years. It fell to John Ross, who retained the office of principal chief, to heal his Nation, to realize the dream he and Ridges had always shared: the continuation of a strong and sovereign Cherokee Nation. By 1860—after a quarter century at remove from the United States—Ross had managed to restore the heart of his Nation; its government had been re-constituted; its businesses flourished; it had the finest system of public education in all America, for men and women. Cherokee population had nearly doubled to 21,000. Ancient tribal traditions like the Green Corn Dance and the clan system were still honored.

John Ross was in his 70s, had been chief nearly 40 years, when, after the Civil War, the United States began to force its way, once again, into Cherokee territory, demanding the tribe cede part of its western lands. In the summer of 1866, while he was in Washington negotiating anew with the U.S., John Ross fell ill. As he neared death, Ross knew the Cherokee Nation faced big challenges in the coming years—and new kinds of encroachments—but the Chief took comfort in the fact that the Cherokees had re-established themselves as a strong and sovereign nation, deeply connected to the land on which they lived, and prepared to fight for it.

Jace Weaver, writer: In this one respect they're lucky in that where they came to looks kind of like where they left. They look at the hills and they say, "Those look like the hills in old Cherokee country. They must have been carved out by the same buzzard that carved out the Smokies." And they look at the scratches in the rock and they say, "Those look just like the scratches in the rock made by the Uktena back in Georgia. They must have been made by the Uktena here, too."

Part-Cherokee writer, Scott Momaday, talks about stories in the blood, or memory in the blood. The stories are told generation after generation so that in many ways they are carried in our blood. And although I don't know what it was like to make that march, my ancestors did come on the trail. I've heard the stories.

Gayle Ross, descendant of Chief John Ross: In listening to the stories of your ancestors you're, you're taught who you are and what, what your ancestors sacrificed so that you could be Cherokee.