



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on August 30, 2011

Cherokee Nation Revokes Citizenship Rights of Black Slave Descendants

The Freedman had enjoyed Cherokee citizenship status ever since it was granted through a treaty with the U.S. government after the War Between the States. Previous to this, the Cherokees, along with tribes such as the Choctaw and Creeks, kept thousands of African slaves (additionally, some Indians allied themselves with the Confederacy during the war).

While these facts aren't generally found in school textbooks, they should surprise no one. Slavery was once ubiquitous throughout the world, and North America's indigenous people were no exception. For their embrace of the institution predated the white settlers' arrival; moreover, this event presented new slaveholding opportunities: Some Indians made slaves of [Europeans](#) as well as Africans.



What does surprise some, however, are the actions of today's Cherokees. With a long and intimate history with the tribe — African slaves found themselves walking the Trail of Tears with their Indian masters — many feel that the Freedmen are an inextricable part of Cherokee culture. As tribal council member Taylor Keen [said](#), "This is a sad chapter in Cherokee history.... This is not my Cherokee Nation. My Cherokee Nation is one that honors all parts of her past."

As for her present, however, only action by the U.S. government can once again make the Freedmen part of it. And while the Cherokees are technically a sovereign nation, such a move would not be unprecedented. Reported *Time* [magazine](#) in 2007, "Several years ago, the Seminoles tried to kick their Freedmen out of their tribe. So, the federal government declared the Seminoles in violation of their treaty and refused to recognize the tribe's sovereignty. As a result the Freedmen were reincorporated in the Seminole nation in 2003."

A similar tactic was attempted unsuccessfully with the Cherokee in 2007. Former Congresswoman Diane Watson (D-Calif.) had introduced legislation that, as *Time* magazine reported in the aforementioned piece, "would block the estimated \$300 million in federal funds that the Cherokee receive annually and nullify their gaming rights unless the tribe reinstates equal membership to the Freedmen."

Of course, such action raises questions about the violation of freedom-of-association rights — and, in particular, about the violation of those of sovereign Indian nations. As *Time* asks in its opening line, "Should Washington have a say in who is considered a full-fledged member of a Native American tribe?" The answer, however, may be academic. Having retired, Rep. Watson is out of office — and the



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Freedmen just may be out of luck.

Graphic: Cherokee Nation flag



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