

Principal Chiefs of the Cherokee

Principal Chief is today the title of the chief executives of the Cherokee Nation, of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, the three federally recognized tribes of Cherokee. In the eighteenth century, when the people were organized by clans and towns, they would appoint a leader for negotiations with the Europeans. They called him *Uku*, or First Beloved Man.

The title of "Principal Chief" was created in 1794 when the Cherokee began to formalize a centralized political structure, forming the original Cherokee Nation. The Cherokee Nation–East adopted a written constitution in 1827, creating a government with three branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. The Principal Chief was elected by the National Council, which was the legislature of the Nation. The Cherokee Nation–West adopted a similar constitution in 1833. The reunited nation adopted one constitution in 1839. In 1868, the Eastern Band created a separate and distinct constitution and formalized the position of Principal Chief. The position had existed in the east since the time of *Yonaguska*.

In 1906, the US government dismantled the Cherokee Nation's governmental structure under the Dawes Act (except for allowing the tribe to retain limited authority to deal with remaining land issues, which lasted until June 1914).^[1] Following passage of the federal Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936, the Keetoowah Nighthawk Society organized in 1939 as the United Keetoowah Band. The Bureau of Indian Affairs approved their constitution in 1940.

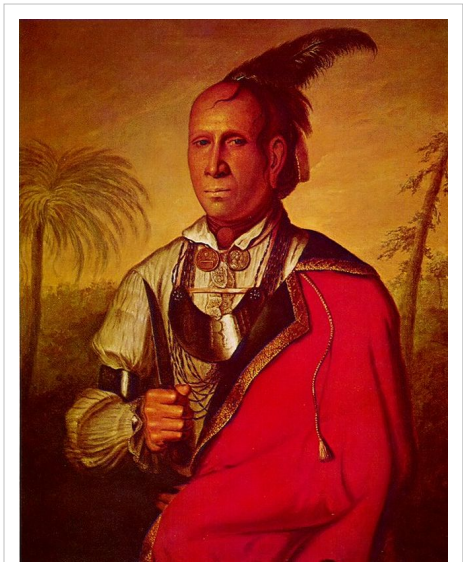
The president began appointing a Principal Chief for the non-UKB Cherokee in 1941. In 1975, these Cherokee drafted their constitution as the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, which was ratified on June 26, 1976.^[2] In 1999, they approved several changes to the constitution, including the removal of the qualifying phrase "of Oklahoma" from their name, leaving it simply "Cherokee Nation".

Early leaders

Before 1794, the Cherokee had no standing national government. Their structure was based on clans and towns, which had chiefs. The clans had functions within each town and the tribe. The towns appointed some leaders to represent the nation to British, sometimes French, and later American authorities. The Cherokee first used the title *Uku*, "First Beloved Man,"^[3] which the English adapted as "Chief." His function was as the focal point for negotiations with Europeans.

- Charitey Hagey of Tugaloo (1716–1721)
- Wrosetasatow of Keowee (1721–1729)
- Long Warrior of Tanasi (1729–1730)
- Moytoy of Great Tellico (1730–1741)
- Amouskositte of Great Tellico (1741–1753)
- Kanagatucko (Stalking Turkey) of Chota (1753–1760)
- Standing Turkey of Chota (1760–1761)
- Attakullakulla of Tanasi (1761–1775)
- Oconostota of Chota (1775–1781)

- Savanukah of Chota (1781–1783)
- Corntassel of Chota (1783–1788)
- Little Turkey (1788–1794)
 - opposed by Hanging Maw (1788–1794)



Portrait of Standing Turkey, by Francis Parsons, 1762, at the Smithsonian Institution

Chickamauga/Lower Cherokee (1777–1809)

In 1777, Dragging Canoe and a large body of Cherokee seceded from the tribes which had signed treaties of peace with the Americans during the American Revolution. They migrated first to the Chickamauga (now Chattanooga, Tennessee) region, then to the "Five Lower Towns" area —further west and southwest of there—in order to continue fighting (see Chickamauga Wars). In time, their numbers became a majority of the nation, due to both sympathy with their cause and the destruction of the homes of the other Cherokee who later joined them. The separation ended at a reunification council with the Cherokee Nation in 1809.

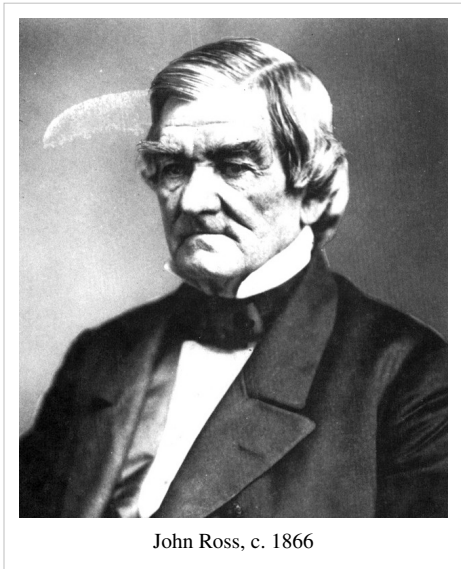
Chiefs:

- Dragging Canoe (1777–1792)
- John Watts (1792–1802)
- Doublehead (1802–1807)
- The Glass, or *Ta'gwadihi* (1807–1809)

Cherokee Nation East (1794–1839)

Little Turkey was elected First Beloved Man of the Cherokee (the council seat of which was shifted south to Ustanali near what is now Calhoun, Georgia) in the aftermath of the assassination by frontiersmen of Cornassel (also called Cornsilk) and several other leaders. Hanging Maw of Coyatee, listed above, claimed the title as his right by tradition, as he was the headman of the Upper Towns. Many Cherokee and the US government recognized him as Principal Chief. Little Turkey was finally recognized as "Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation" by all the towns after the end of the Chickamauga Wars when the Cherokee established their first nominal national government.

- Little Turkey (1794–1801)
- Black Fox (1801–1811)
- Pathkiller (1811–1827)
 - Big Tiger (1824–1828); principal chief of the faction of those in the Nation following Whitepath's teachings inspired by the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake.
- Charles R. Hicks (1827), *de facto* head of government from 1813
- William Hicks (1827–1828)
- John Ross (1828–1839)
 - William Hicks (1833–1835), elected principal chief of the faction supporting emigration to the west.



John Ross, c. 1866

Cherokee Nation West (1810–1839)

Originally along the St. Francis and White Rivers in what was first Spanish Louisiana and later Arkansas Territory, the Western Cherokee eventually migrated to Indian Territory after the Treaty of Washington in 1828. They named their capital there Tahlontiskee. John Jolly died while the Latecomers were arriving and John Looney succeeded automatically. Looney was deposed by the council and replaced with Brown with a view toward putting the Cherokee Nation West in a better position vis-a-vis the Ross party. After the murders of Major Ridge, John Ridge, and Elias Boudinot (Treaty party members who supported the Old Settlers) in June 1839, the council had a change of heart about resisting Ross' autocratic demands and deposed Brown, replacing him with Looney. A sizable faction of the Old Settlers refused to recognize Looney and elected Rogers in his stead, but their efforts to maintain autonomy

petered out the next year.

- The Bowl (1810–1813)
- Degadoga (1813–1817)
- Tahlonteeskee (1817–1819)
- John Jolly (1819–1838)
- John Looney (1838–1839)
- John Brown (1839)
- John Looney (1839)
- John Rogers (1839–1840)

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (1824–present)

- Yonaguska (1824–1839)
- William Holland Thomas (1838–1869)
- Salonitah, or Flying Squirrel (1870–1875)
- Lloyd R. Welch (1875–1880)
- Nimrod Jarrett Smith (1880–1891)
- Stillwell Saunooke (1891–1895)
- Andy Standing Deer (1895–1899)
- Jesse Reed (1899–1903)
- Bird Saloloneeta, or Young Squirrel (1903–1907)
- John Goins Welch (1907–1911)
- Joseph A. Saunooke (1911–1915)
- David Blythe (1915–1919)
- Joseph A. Saunooke (1919–1923)
- Sampson Owl (1923–1927)
- John A. Tahquette (1927–1931)
- Jarret Blythe (1931–1947)
- Henry Bradley (1947–1951)
- Jarret Blythe (1955–1959)

- Osley Bird Saunooke (1951–1955)
- Jarret Blythe (1955–1959)
- Olsey Bird Saunooke (1959–1963)
- Jarret Blythe (1963–1967)
- Walter Jackson (1967–1971)
- Noah Powell (1971–1973)
- John A. Crowe (1973–1983)
- Robert S. Youngdeer (1983–1987)
- Jonathan L. Taylor (1987–1995)
- Gerard Parker (1995)
- Joyce Dugan (1995–1999)
- Leon Jones (1999–2003)
- Michell Hicks (2003–present)



Nimrod Jarret Smith (1837–1893). Smith was 5th Principal Chief of the Eastern Band and a Confederate Civil War veteran of the Thomas Legion of Cherokee Indians and Highlanders.

Cherokee Nation in Indian Territory (1839–1907)

After removal to the Indian Territory, on the Trail of Tears, a new constitution was put into place, unifying the former Eastern Cherokee with the Western Cherokee, which allowed for direct election of the Principal Chief. Though a holdout minority of the Old Settlers elected John Rogers as their principal chief, his government never gained any further support and soon faded away. The Ross faction also abandoned the established capital of Tahlantiskee and built Tahlequah instead. During the Civil War, the Nation voted to support the Confederacy, and Ross acquiesced for a time. In 1862, however, he and many of his supporters fled to Washington, upon which Stand Watie was elected Principal Chief by a majority of the Nation. The remaining Ross group never supported Watie's election, though, and lived apart under their own officials.



Lewis Downing

- John Ross (1839–1862)
 - Thomas Pegg, acting principal chief of the Union Cherokee (1862–1863)
 - Smith Christie, acting principal chief of the Union Cherokee (1863)
 - Lewis Downing, acting principal chief of the Union Cherokee (1864–1866)
- Stand Watie, (1862–1866)
- John Ross (1866)
- William P. Ross (1866–1867)
- Lewis Downing (1867–1872)
- William P. Ross (1872–1875)
- Charles Thompson (1875–1879)
- Dennis Bushyhead (1879–1887)
- Joel B. Mayes (1887–1891)
- C. J. Harris (1891–1895)
- Samuel Houston Mayes (1895–1899)
- Thomas Buffington (1899–1903)
- William Rogers (1903–1905); deposed by the council
- Frank J. Boudinot (1905–1906); also president of the Keetoowah Nighthawk Society
- William Rogers (1906–1914); reinstated by the federal government

United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians (1939–present)

- John Hitcher (1939–1946)
- Jim Pickup (1946–1954)
- Jeff Tindle (1954–1960)
- Jim Pickup (1960–1967)
- William Glory (1967–1979)
- James L. Gordon (1979–1983)
- John Hair (1983–1991)
- John Ross (1991–1995)
- Jim Henson (1996–2000)

- Dallas Proctor 2000 – 2004
- George Wickliffe 2005 – present

Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma/Cherokee Nation (1941–Present)

In preparation for Oklahoma statehood, the original Cherokee Nation's governmental authority was dismantled by the United States in 1906, except for limited authority to deal with land issues until 1914,^[4] and the office of Principal Chief was appointed by the US federal government. In 1971 an election was held. Principal Chief and incumbent, W.W. Keeler, who had been appointed by President Harry Truman in 1949, was elected. The constitution of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma was drafted in 1975 and ratified on 26 June 1976.^[2] A new constitution was ratified in 2003 with the name of the tribe changed to simply "Cherokee Nation".^[5]



Chad "Corntassel" Smith, Former Principal Chief (1999–2011)

Appointed

- J.B. Milam (1941–1949)
- W.W. Keeler (1949–1971)

Elected

- W.W. Keeler (1971–1975)
- Ross Swimmer (1975–1985)
- Wilma Mankiller (1985–1995)
- Joe Byrd (1995–1999)
- Chad "Corntassel" Smith (1999–2011)
- S. Joe Crittenden (acting, 2011)
- Bill John Baker (2011—present)^[6]

Notes

[1] Conley, p. 198

[2] "Constitution of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma." (<http://thorpe.ou.edu/constitution/chokeee/index.html>) *University of Oklahoma Law Center*. (retrieved 16 Jan 2010)

[3] Hoig, pp. 36, 37, 80

[4] Conley, p. 198

[5] The 1999 Constitution Cherokee Nation. (<http://www.cherokee.org/TribalGovernment/Executive/CCC/ccc1999Changes.pdf>) *Cherokee Nation*. Retrieved 21 September 2009.

[6] Jouzapavicius, Justin. "Cherokee Nation: Challenger wins chief election." (<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5iwhUrWnBO3f-sNT7UkWEXAKKEEBA?docId=43441e1bca6f42d8bcb4ef97e4b62b8f>) *Associated Press*. 11 Oct 2011 (retrieved 12 Oct 2011)

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