

# William Holland Thomas

---

**William Holland Thomas** (February 5, 1805 – May 10, 1893) was Principal Chief of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (the only white man ever to be a chief of the Cherokee<sup>[1]</sup>) and was elected as North Carolina state senator, serving from 1848-1860. As a youth, he worked at the trading post at Qualla Town, where he learned the Cherokee language and befriended some of the people. He was adopted into the tribe by the chief Yonaguska and learned much of the Cherokee ways.

After becoming an attorney, Thomas represented the tribe in negotiations with the federal government related to Indian Removal, preserving the right for some Cherokee to stay in North Carolina after the 1830s. With his own and Cherokee funds, he bought land to be used by the Cherokee, much of which is now Qualla Boundary, the territory of the federally recognized Eastern Band of Cherokee. Thomas served as a colonel in the Confederate States Army, leading Thomas' Legion of Cherokee Indians and Highlanders during the American Civil War.

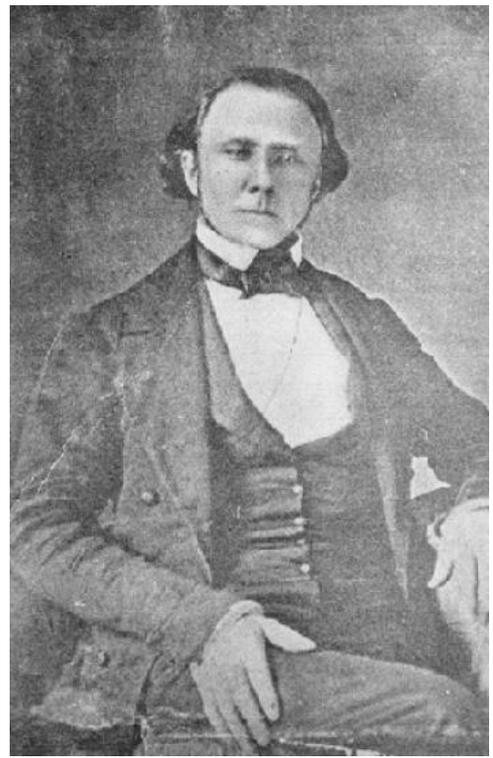
## Adopted by Cherokee

Thomas was born to Richard Thomas and his wife Temperance (Calvert) Thomas in a log house on Raccoon Creek, two miles (3 km) east of Mount Prospect, later called Waynesville, North Carolina. (He was related to the Calvert family, the founders of the colony of Maryland, through his mother, the grandniece of Lord Baltimore, and to President Zachary Taylor on his father's side.) Thomas' father drowned shortly before his son's birth.

As a youth, Thomas worked for the US Congressman Felix Walker as a clerk at a trading post in Qualla Town, a center of the Cherokee. Thomas signed a three-year contract in return for \$100, board, and clothing. He quickly became friends with the Cherokee and learned their language. He was adopted into the tribe by Chief Yonaguska, who gave him the Cherokee name *Will-usdi* (Little Will).

In about 1820 Felix Walker was forced to close his stores; since he was unable to pay Thomas what he owed him, he gave the youth a set of law books. At the time there were no bar exams, and anyone who read law (generally with an established firm) was allowed to practice. Thomas became well-versed in frontier law. In 1831 Yonaguska asked him to become the Cherokees' legal representative.

Thomas opened his own trading post for the Qualla Town Cherokee, and later opened several other trading posts in Western North Carolina.



William Holland Thomas.

## Marriage and family

Thomas married Sarah Love and they had three surviving children together.

## Negotiating for the Cherokee

In 1835 as some Cherokee were negotiating the Treaty of New Echota with the federal government to arrange for exchange of lands in Indian Removal, the Eastern Band asked Thomas to represent them. His adopted father and other Cherokee had received land reservations of 640 acres (**unknown operator: u'strong'** km<sup>2</sup>) by an earlier treaty and no longer resided in what was considered the Cherokee Nation. Although technically the New Echota treaty should not apply to them, the Qualla Cherokee were apprehensive. Seeking assurances, the "reservation" Cherokee and some others asked Thomas to represent them in Washington, D.C.

Thomas negotiated for numerous Cherokee to remain in North Carolina, including his adopted father Yonaguska. They became the core ancestors of the present-day Eastern Band, a federally recognized tribe. In 1839, just before he died, Yonaguska persuaded the Cherokee to accept his adopted son as their chief. During the 1840s and 1850s, Thomas worked to gain recognition of the Cherokee as citizens of North Carolina. He used Cherokee money, as well as his own, to purchase land for them in his name. At the time, Cherokee were prohibited from owning land outside the Indian Territory. His purchases became the basis of much of the Qualla Boundary, and he named the various sections: Paint Town, Bird Town, Yellow Hill, Big Cove and Wolf Town.

In 1848, Thomas was elected as a state senator; he was re-elected every two years through 1860.

## Civil War

When the Civil War broke out and Thomas realized that neutrality was impossible, he agreed to organize the Cherokee to support the Confederacy. The 400 warriors he recruited formed two Cherokee companies; together with six companies of white men, many of whom were ethnic Scots-Irish, they comprised the famous Thomas' Legion of Cherokee Indians and Highlanders. It operated as an independent command directly under the Confederate Army's Department of East Tennessee. The Legion operated primarily in East Tennessee and Western North Carolina, except for a short period when they were deployed to the Shenandoah Valley.

Thomas' Legion was North Carolina's sole legion; it was never defeated by Union troops. By May 1865, the main Confederate armies had surrendered and Union soldiers controlled Waynesville and the rest of Western North Carolina.

On May 6, 1865, Thomas' Legion fired "The Last Shot" of the Civil War east of the Mississippi River in an action at White Sulphur Springs, North Carolina. After his legion captured Waynesville, they voluntarily ceased hostilities upon learning of General Robert E. Lee's surrender and the end of the war.

Colonel Thomas and his Legion controlled the mountains surrounding Waynesville. During the night of May 5, 1865, they built hundreds of campfires to make the Union garrison think that thousands of Cherokee and Confederates were about to attack them. The Cherokee punctuated the nights with "chilling warwhoops" and "hideous yells," according to a Union report, firing occasional shots to improve the effect. The next morning Thomas and about 20 Cherokee entered Waynesville under a flag of truce to demand the surrender of the garrison. The Union troops did so. On May 9, 1865, however, a Union officer told Thomas that General Robert E. Lee had surrendered his army one month earlier, and the colonel agreed to lay down his arms. The Civil War was over, and the last shots in North Carolina were those fired in Waynesville.

## Postbellum years

After the war, Thomas went home to his family and those Cherokee who still looked to him as chief. In 1866, he received a pardon from President Andrew Johnson, after which he hoped to reenter politics and business.

Thomas's mental condition began to deteriorate. According to the historians John Ehle (*The Trail of Tears*), Matthew D. Parker, and Vernon H. Crow (*Storm in the Mountains: Thomas' Confederate Legion of Cherokee Indians and Mountaineers*), Thomas may have been suffering from what was later known as Alzheimer's disease. He fell hopelessly into debt. Compounding his worries was caring for his beloved Cherokee, who suffered a devastating smallpox epidemic after the war.

In March 1867, Thomas was declared insane and committed to a state institution in Raleigh. From then until the end of his life in 1893, he lived in and out of mental hospitals. In 1887 Thomas assisted the ethnologist James Mooney of the Smithsonian Institution by telling him of Cherokee ways. Mooney was doing research and field studies on the Cherokee in western North Carolina.

## Death and legacy

Thomas died in the state mental hospital in Morganton, North Carolina; he was buried on a hilltop in Waynesville.

- He is remembered today as a figure in the outdoor drama *Unto These Hills*.
- The Museum of the Cherokee Indian displays the battle flag of Thomas's Legion as part of the Cherokee heritage.

## Fictional accounts

Will Cooper, the main character in Charles Frazier's 2006 novel *Thirteen Moons*, is based in part on William Holland Thomas. In the Author's Note, Frazier states that Will Cooper is not William Holland Thomas, "although they do share some DNA."

## References

[1] "Will Thomas" (<http://www.cherokee-nc.com/index.php?page=65>). Eastern Band of the Cherokee Nation ([cherokee-nc.com](http://www.cherokee-nc.com)). . Retrieved February 10, 2011.

- Crow, Vernon. *Storm in the Mountains: Thomas' Confederate Legion of Cherokee Indians and Mountaineers*. (Cherokee: Cherokee Pubns., 1982).
- Ehle, John. *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation*. (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1997).
- Mooney, James. *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee*. (Nashville: Charles and Randy Elder-Booksellers, 1982).

## External links

- Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (<http://nc-cherokee.com/>), official website
- Official History for Thomas' Legion of Indians and Highlanders (<http://www.thomaslegion.net>)

# Article Sources and Contributors

**William Holland Thomas** *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?oldid=494498137> *Contributors:* Adam sk, Asarelah, BD2412, Bedford, Birddave1, Canglesea, Clarityfiend, D6, Funnyfarmofdoom, Gatechjon, Gazpacho, GenQuest, Hlj, Hmains, Jfruh, Josima11, Kevin Myers, Kumioko (renamed), Lightmouse, Monegasque, Natty4bumpo, Npeters22, PGPirate, Parkwells, Pnoble805, R'n'B, R5drum, Rjwilmsi, Scott Mingus, Sogospelman, Stormbay, Thomas legion, Uyvsvdi, 17 anonymous edits

# Image Sources, Licenses and Contributors

**Image:WilliamHollandThomas.jpg** *Source:* <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:WilliamHollandThomas.jpg> *License:* Public Domain *Contributors:* Contemporary photograph

# License

---

Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported  
[//creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

---