

## **Historic Origins of the Mount Tabor Indian Community of Rusk County, Texas**

Patrick Pynes  
Northern Arizona University

### **Act One: The Assassination of Major Ridge**

On June 21, 1839, Major Ridge, leader of the Cherokee Treaty Party, stopped to spend the night in the home of his friend, Ambrose Harnage. A white man, Harnage and his Cherokee family lived in a community called Illinois Township, Arkansas. Nancy Sanders, Harnage's Cherokee wife, died in Illinois Township in 1834, not long after the family moved there from the Cherokee Nation in the east. Illinois Township was located right on the border between Arkansas and the new Cherokee Nation in the west. Ride one mile west, and you were in Going Snake District.

Among the families living in Illinois Township in 1839 were some of my own blood relations: Nancy Gentry, her husband James Little, and their extended family. Nancy Gentry was the sister of my fifth maternal grandfather, William Gentry. Today, several families who descend from the Gentrys tell stories about their ancestors' Cherokee roots. On June 21, 1839, Nancy Gentry's family was living nine doors down from Ambrose Harnage.

Peering deep into the well of time, sometimes hearing faint voices, I wonder what Major Ridge and his friend discussed the next morning at breakfast, as Harnage's distinguished guest prepared to resume his journey. Perhaps they told stories about Andrew Sanders, Harnage's brother-in-law. Sanders had accompanied The Ridge during their successful assassination mission at Hiwassee on August 9, 1807, when, together with two other men, they killed Double-head, the infamous Cherokee leader and businessman accused of selling Cherokee lands and taking bribes from federal agents.

As Cherokees know, history has a way of repeating itself. On June 22, 1839, a few miles south of Illinois Township, Major Ridge was shot dead from his horse. As he crossed a creek just inside the Arkansas border, several Cherokees ambushed him. One of the Cherokees accused of killing Major Ridge was Doublehead's son, Bird Tail Doublehead. Bird Tail Doublehead and his companions had just survived the horrors of the Trail of Tears. Major Ridge, however, had avoided the Trail. As one of 36 Cherokees who signed the Treaty of New Echota in late 1835, Major Ridge and family moved west in 1837, one year before the Trail.

By assassinating Major Ridge, Bird Tail Doublehead and his companions simultaneously enforced and/or violated three laws of the Cherokee Nation. Although Major

Ridge died in Arkansas, his assassins acted within a distinctly Cherokee universe. During the years between the Trail of Tears and the Civil War, this complex Cherokee world existed as an intercultural *borderlands*. These borderlands encompassed three interrelated sovereignties: the Cherokee Nation, Arkansas, and Texas.

One of the Cherokee laws enforced by Major Ridge's assassins was the ancient Blood Law, which said that if one Cherokee died at the hands of another Cherokee, then a relative of the deceased must take the life of the perpetrator, or of one of his relatives. Once the second death occurred, balance and order were restored. The killing stopped.

According to the Blood Law, Major Ridge or one of his clan relations should have paid for Doublehead's death. But most Cherokees believed that Doublehead had it coming, and no one enforced the Blood Law against his assassins. Doublehead's demise disturbed the federal officials who had helped to corrupt him, and these men also abhorred the Blood Law. They pressured the Cherokee Nation into abolishing the Blood Law. The Nation passed this written law in 1810.

In 1829, the Cherokee Nation wrote another law meant to stop further losses of its lands. This law made it a capital offense for any Cherokee citizen to sign away the Nation's lands without permission of the tribal government. It was this written law that Bird Tail Doublehead and his companions enacted against Major Ridge. However, their enforcement of the 1829 law is only the official version of the story.

The deeper impetus for the assassination of Major Ridge was the Blood Law. By killing Major Ridge, his assassins acted in accordance with the traditions of their Cherokee ancestors, as part of the ancient system of clan justice. In a situation of extreme duress, the older spoken law trumped the "civilized" law that Cherokee nationalists had recently published. Deer Clan's Ridge finally paid for the death of Paint Clan's Doublehead. Of course, Bird Tail Doublehead and his Ross Party companions also took revenge on Major Ridge for the Treaty of New Echota and the Trail of Tears. In their view, Ridge and the other Cherokees who had signed the illegal treaty were responsible for the Trail. Although Major Ridge's executioners broke one law in order to affirm the legitimacy of two others, including the Blood Law, balance and order were not restored to the Cherokee Nation.

### **Act Two: The Trial of Stand Watie**

The assassinations of Major Ridge, his son John Ridge, and nephew Buck Watie touched off a low-level civil war in the Cherokee Nation. Several years of violence followed, leaving hundreds dead on both sides. Factional violence between the Ross and Treaty Parties sometimes spilled into Arkansas. Prominent whites living in border communities sympathized with the Treaty Party and supported its members. Some historians believe that their meddling in the Cherokee Nation's affairs exacerbated the conflict.

On May 14, 1842, Major Ridge's nephew Stand Watie and two companions made their way south along the Arkansas border. Because his signature was also on the Treaty of New Echota, Watie was targeted for death on June 22, 1839. However, he received an early warning and evaded his assassins. Although there were rumors that local Ross Party men planned to kill him, Watie decided to stop at David England's grocery store, located three miles south of Maysville, Arkansas. As he prepared to leave England's store, three Ross Party Cherokees confronted him. Two were half-brothers of Bird Tail Doublehead. Their names were James C. Foreman and Isaac Springston. Foreman had been the leader of the hit squad that killed Major Ridge.

The third Ross Party member was Alexander Drumgoole, Jr. Drumgoole was the maternal uncle of Foreman, Springston, and Bird Tail Doublehead. The fact that Drumgoole was the uncle of these three half-brothers is more than genealogical trivia. In Cherokee tradition before British invasion, all Cherokees belonged to one of seven matrilineal clans. Identity and descent were reckoned *only* through the mother's clan. Consequently, because he *did* belong to the same clan as his nieces and nephews, the mother's brother, or maternal uncle, was *like a father* to his sister's children. In this matriarchal sense, Drumgoole was the father of Foreman, Springston, and Bird Doublehead.

According to one account, Drumgoole was singing songs in Cherokee when Watie walked into England's store. Minutes later, a fight broke out between Foreman and Watie. As the fight began, Drumgoole handed his nephew a thick overseer's whip. Foreman attacked Watie with it, as his uncle hovered behind Watie's back. When the fight spilled outdoors, Foreman attacked Watie with a board, but Watie fought back with a knife, stabbing Foreman. When the wounded Foreman said, "you haven't done it yet," Watie shot him with a pistol. Foreman ran a short distance and fell over dead.

The Cherokee Nation attempted to extradite Watie from Arkansas and put him on trial for the murder of Foreman. However, Watie immediately turned himself in to Arkansas authorities, arguing that because Foreman had died in Arkansas, he should be tried in a state, rather than a tribal court. The trial of Watie for the murder of Foreman took place in Benton County, Arkansas, during May 1843. A team of five white lawyers from Arkansas defended Watie. Only one Prosecuting Attorney represented the interests of the late James C. Foreman.

One of Watie's most distinguished lawyers was David Walker, a leading citizen from the nearby village of Fayetteville, population 300. Walker had very close ties to the Treaty Party. He was a close friend, supporter, and benefactor of Sophia Sawyer, a former missionary to the Cherokees who had worked as a teacher for the Ridge family before and after Removal. Following John Ridge's assassination, Sawyer moved to Fayetteville with his widow and children. She opened the Fayetteville Female Seminary, a school that catered to the daughters of wealthy slave-holding Cherokees. As the school's reputation grew, whites also attended the seminary. Walker donated land in downtown Fayetteville for Sawyer's "Indian School." Her successful seminary became a model for the Cherokee Nation's own Female Seminary, which opened in 1851.

In 1850, Angeline Little, daughter of Nancy Gentry, and niece of my fifth maternal grandfather William Gentry, was one of Sawyer's students in the Fayetteville Female Seminary. For several generations, Angeline's descendants passed along an oral tradition that said she had attended a school for Cherokee girls. Last year, two other Gentry descendants and I verified this oral tradition. We went googling for Angeline and Miss Sawyer on the Internet, and found them enumerated in the same household on the 1850 U.S. census.

According to this census, one of Angeline's classmates was sixteen-year-old Susan Wheeler. Susan's maternal uncle was Stand Watie. Her parents were Nancy Watie and John Foster Wheeler, the printer for the Cherokee Nation's newspaper, the *Cherokee Phoenix*. Wheeler and Watie were married by the Reverend Samuel Worcester, another missionary to the Cherokees. His surname became part of *Worcester vs. Georgia*, the famous Supreme Court decision of 1832. This historic legal decision, which should have prevented the Treaty of New Echota and the Trail of Tears, is a cornerstone of federal Indian law, affirming the sovereign relationship between the federal government and indigenous nations.

Along with the other four lawyers, Walker argued that Watie had killed Foreman in self-defense. The judge and jury agreed, and Walker's client was acquitted. For the next twenty-five years, until the end of the Civil War, Stand Watie was the undisputed leader of the Treaty Party Cherokees.

### **Act Three: The Mt. Tabor Indian Community of Rusk County, Texas**

Besides Wheeler and Little, several other students who attended Sawyer's school circa 1850 had Cherokee roots. Three were the Bell sisters, whose father was John Adair Bell, another prominent mixedblood Cherokee who had signed the Treaty of New Echota. Boyhood friends John Adair Bell and Stand Watie had attended the Springplace Moravian Mission School together, in the Cherokee Nation. Like many other Cherokees, Bell married several times. The Bell sisters were daughters of John Adair Bell's first wife, Jennie Martin. Martin's father was Judge John Martin, first Chief Justice of the Cherokee Nation's Supreme Court.

Not long after Watie's acquittal for the murder of Foreman, the violence between the Treaty Party and Ross Party intensified. The spark for this renewed violence was the killing of James Starr, Sr., another signer of the Treaty of New Echota. The period that followed came to be known as the Starr War. In a letter he wrote to Watie, a Cherokee described the Starr War: "Murders in the country have been so frequent...[that] the people care as little about hearing these things as they would hear of the death of a common dog. The question may be asked—Who began the troubles in the Cherokee Nation? The answer is obvious. We know it well."

John Adair Bell, believing that Ross Party men would eventually succeed in killing him, decided to move away from Arkansas and the Cherokee Nation. Around

1845, Bell moved south across the Red River into east Texas, taking refuge in Rusk County, near present-day Kilgore. Other Treaty Party families followed.

The mixedblood, slave-holding Cherokee, Choctaw, and Chickasaw families who clustered around John Adair Bell were surnamed Starr, Harnage, Bell, Harlan, Buffington, Adair, Duncan, Watie, Mayfield, Thompson, and Bean. All were interrelated by blood or marriage. In time, the place in East Texas where they settled together came to be known as the Mount Tabor Indian Community. In a letter he wrote to Watie in 1854, Bell referred to the exile community growing up around him as such: "I call my place Mt. Taber," he wrote.

Why Bell chose to settle specifically in Rusk County is not entirely clear, but his attraction to the area must have been connected to the fact that other Cherokees had recently occupied this region. Between 1820 and 1840, a band of immigrant Texas Cherokees led by Duwali, or The Bowl, claimed and occupied a large chunk of East Texas.

Like the Treaty Party families, the Cherokees who settled in this part of east Texas had originally been refugees themselves. They arrived in the Arkansas country during the 1790s, settling in the St. Francis River valley. Gradually they moved further west into north-central Arkansas. After the Treaty of 1817, The Bowl and his people decided to move down into east Texas. They refused to live within the boundaries of the Arkansas Cherokee Reservation, or within the boundaries of the United States. During the 1820s and 1830s, the Texas Cherokees negotiated with Spain, the Republic of Mexico, and the Republic of Texas to secure legal title to the lands they settled in east Texas.

Their efforts were never entirely successful. Sam Houston, himself an adopted citizen of the Cherokee Nation, helped the Texas Cherokees in these efforts, first as a federal agent, then as President of the Republic of Texas. In 1836, Houston signed a treaty with the Texas Cherokees, establishing reservation boundaries for them. However, the Republic of Texas never ratified the treaty.

The second President of the Republic of Texas, Mirabeau Lamar, ordered the Texas militia to expel Duwali's Cherokees from the young Republic, ostensibly because they were plotting with dissident Mexicans to return Anglo Texas to Mexico. On July 16, 1839, near the Neches River in present Van Zandt County, three weeks after Bird Tail Doublehead, James C. Foreman, and several other Cherokees assassinated Major Ridge, a Texas militia man strode up to the wounded Chief Duwali on the battlefield, shooting him in the head. The Bowl's Cherokees were defeated and expelled from Texas. A few survivors fled north into Indian Territory or south into Mexico.

In an ironic historical twist, John Adair Bell and his relatives escaped from the intra-tribal violence raging along the Arkansas border by taking refuge within this recently created Cherokee vacuum in east Texas. Obviously these mixedblood Cherokee families did not pose a military threat to Texas, or they would not have been allowed to

settle there. Knowing this history, I have come to believe that the powerful, lingering presence of the Texas Cherokees was the magnet that drew the Treaty Party families to Rusk County. The Bowl and his people weren't in east Texas for very long, but they must have dug in deep.

The 1850s were relatively prosperous years for John Adair Bell and the Mt. Tabor Indian Community. No doubt the many black slaves who worked at Mt. Tabor contributed a great deal to the community's prosperity. Bell and his Cherokee relatives established thriving farms and small plantations in the piney woods. Babies were born; elders died; young people tied the knot. The interwoven, extended families of Mt. Tabor cultivated close relationships with one another, and with their Cherokee relatives still living in the Cherokee Nation and in northwest Arkansas.

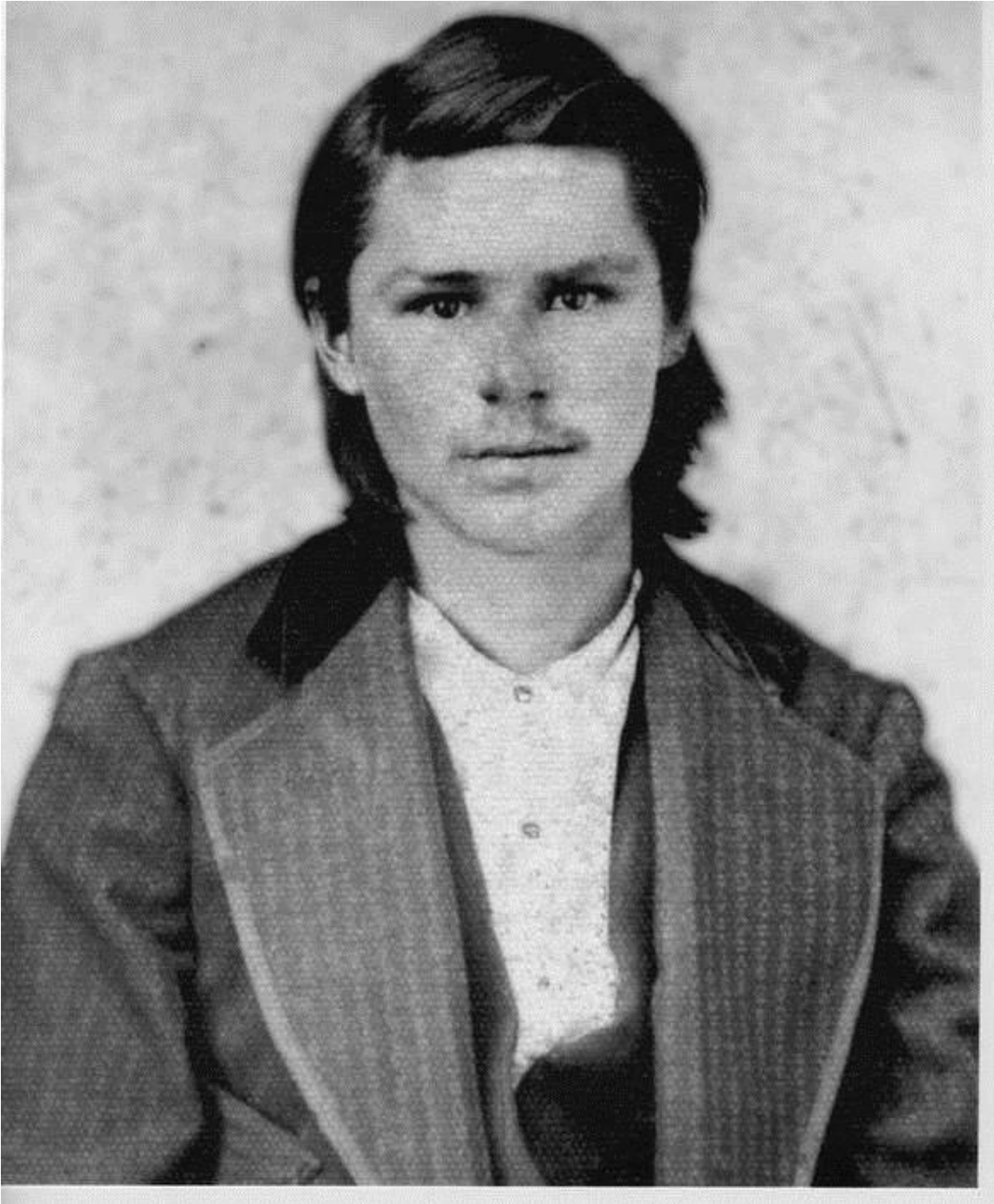
In 1860, John Adair Bell died in the community he had founded, and was buried in its cemetery. As the Civil War loomed, Mt. Tabor's role as a refuge for exiled Cherokees expanded even more. The Pins, or Ross Party Cherokees, allied themselves with the Union. Stand Watie's Treaty Party Cherokees allied themselves with the Confederacy. Watie organized a Confederate regiment, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cherokee Mounted Volunteers. A civil war within the larger Civil War erupted in the Cherokee Nation.

Between 1861 and 1865, many Confederate Cherokees, including Watie's wife Sarah Caroline Bell and their children, moved south to Mt. Tabor, where they spent all or part of the Civil War. Sarah Caroline Bell was John Adair Bell's sister. She and Watie had been married in Benton County, Arkansas, in September 1843, four months after Watie's acquittal for the murder of James C. Foreman.

During the Civil War, at least three of my Gentry relatives served with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cherokee Mounted Volunteers. One was Angeline Little's brother Samuel Rector Little, who served as a private in Company H. Another was James Heffington, Little's first cousin. Their mothers were sisters. Heffington spent the war as a Sergeant in Company G, 2<sup>nd</sup> Cherokee Mounted Volunteers. According to Cherokee historian Emmet Starr, James Heffington's younger brother Samuel Gentry Heffington served as a private in Frye's Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Cherokee Mounted Volunteers. Stand Watie's son Saladin also served in Frye's Battalion.

Samuel Gentry Heffington, nephew of my fifth maternal grandfather William Gentry, was connected to the Treaty Party Cherokees of the Mt. Tabor Indian Community through his first marriage. In Sequoyah District, Cherokee Nation, three years after the end of the Civil War, Samuel Gentry Heffington married Sarah Caroline Harnage, who had lived at Mt. Tabor during the 1850s and 60s.

Harnage was a granddaughter of Ambrose Harnage; her mother was Ruth Starr. Sarah Caroline Harnage's first husband was John Martin Bell, Sr., nephew of John Adair Bell and Sarah Caroline Watie. Harnage and Bell were married at Mt. Tabor in 1858.



John Martin Bell, Jr. (1859-1941) at age 21. A Cherokee and a native Texan, he grew up at Mt. Tabor. His paternal great-grandfather was "Judge" John Martin, first Chief Justice of the Cherokee Nation's Supreme Court. His maternal great-grandfather was Ambrose Harnage, close friend of Major Ridge. His stepfather was Samuel Gentry Heffington. Photograph courtesy of Watie Bell.





Alice Isabelle Talley, daughter of Martha Ann Gentry, and a close relative of the Gentrys who are mentioned in my essay. This photograph (tintype) was taken about 1889.



Their son John Martin Bell, Jr. was born there a year later. However, John Martin Bell, Sr. died in 1861, and was buried in the Mt. Tabor community cemetery. Samuel Gentry Heffington became John Martin Bell Jr.'s stepfather.

Sarah Caroline Harnage and Samuel Gentry Heffington eventually divorced, but they had one child, Ella Isabelle Heffington. She married George Evarts Foreman, a very close relative of James C. Foreman. The great-great-great grandfather of George Evarts Foreman was Doublehead. Samuel Gentry Heffington married a second time to Mary Pauline Bean. Her great-great grandfather was Doublehead.

#### **Act Four: The Mount Tabor Indian Community Today**

The Mt. Tabor Indian Community thrived in east Texas between the Starr War and the end of the Civil War. Following the war's end, the community disbanded, and most of its members returned to the Cherokee Nation.

Today, the community is all but forgotten, especially in Texas, whose history has been particularly hard on indigenous peoples, including the Cherokees. In late 2007, the only remaining traces of Mt. Tabor are its community cemetery, which the oil industry all but destroyed, and the ruins of a 150-year-old house. This home was the residence of George Harlan Starr and his wife Nancy Bell, sister of John Adair Bell and Sarah Caroline Bell.

Among Cherokees and Cherokee descendants, however, the story of Mt. Tabor is still very much alive. Paul Ridenour, whose wife Dottie is a direct descendant of Major Ridge, maintains an excellent website about Mt. Tabor. Paul has done much to make sure that the community and its history are remembered. Today, Mt. Tabor's community cemetery is located on private land that a Cherokee family owns and protects. This family and many other Cherokees and non-Cherokees are working hard to make sure that the history of the Mt. Tabor Indian Community continues to be told.

Doublehead, Drumgoole, Ross, and Ridge; Watie, Harnage, Gentry, Bell, and Houston; Foreman, Sawyer, Little, Springston, and Duwali; as well as the slaves of the Ross Party and Treaty Party Cherokees, including the descendants of the Cherokee freedmen: you are not forgotten. We remember each and every one of you, and we honor your lives, holding you close to us in memory.