

51 The Preacher and the Trail of Tears

By David Cochran

Usually, the Tales of Blawenburg blog focuses on the history of Blawenburg. The focus of this tale is the Rev. John Schermerhorn, who preached at Blawenburg Church periodically in its first few years. His story is unsettling, because he was a moving force for the removal of Indians from their ancestral homes during the Trail of Tears in the late 1830s. When I learned of this tale, I felt that others should know it. I hope that it will make you pause and think about what happened then, and its import, even in our times.

On April 22, 1832, the Reformed Dutch Church at Blawenburg, as it was called at that time, held an afternoon worship service and invited Rev. John F. Schermerhorn to preach. Rev. Schermerhorn was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary as well as the General Agent of the Dutch Reformed Church's Mission Board. He had preached at Blawenburg previously, and he also preached in churches each Sunday for 10 months each year to raise money for mission programs. Well-credentialed and well-known, it was a special occasion for the church members and the new pastor, Rev. Henry Heermance, to have him preach.



*Rev. John Freeman Schermerhorn
1785-1851*

According to notes recorded in her Blawenburg Church journal, on that April afternoon, Elizabeth Van Zandt said that Rev. Schermerhorn challenged the rich not to trust in their riches, but to trust in God and to do good works with the wealth they had accrued. Presumably, giving money to missions was the underlying theme of his message.

1832
In the afternoon of the same day
a sermon was preached by Rev^d —
John F. Schermerhorn from 1 Timothy
6 Chapter 17 & 18 Verses. Charge them
that are rich in this world, that they
be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain
riches, but in the living God, who giveth
us richly all things to enjoy; ¹⁸ that they
do good, that they be rich in good works,
ready to distribute, willing to communicat^{te}
¹⁹ Laying up in store for themselves a
good foundation against the time to come,
that they may lay hold on eternal life.

A record of Rev. John F. Schermerhorn's sermon at Blawenburg Church
on April 22, 1832

The Dutch Reformed Church was a Protestant denomination that was established during the Reformation, and it was the religion that Dutch settlers brought with them when they settled in America. The denomination was in the midst of turbulent disagreements over points of orthodoxy in the 1820s and 30s, and Rev. Schermerhorn was in the thick of it as General Agent of the General Synod. In June 1832, he was offered the opportunity to serve as General Agent again, but he declined the offer. There were some who thought it was because of the turbulence, but others knew that he had ambitious plans. He had been very active in politics, especially in the campaigns of President Andrew Jackson in 1828 and 1832.

Indian Removal

High on Andrew Jackson's agenda was the removal of all Indians from lands east of the Mississippi River. The plan was to relocate thousands of Indians to a new territory so settlers could expand into the land Indians held for thousands of years. But Indian removal was a very controversial topic throughout the nation, especially in the Christian

community. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions led the Christian opposition to the removal. They sponsored most of the mission stations in Indian territories. Jackson was well aware of this group's opposition and sought support from another mission group, the Mission Society of the Dutch Reformed Church led by Rev. Schermerhorn. The Mission Society funded a program to support Indian removal under the name of *Indian Board for the Emigration, Preservation, and Improvement of the Aborigines of America*. The Mission Society was the only church organization to formally support the removal effort.

Jackson knew who his allies were and offered one of his ardent supporters, Rev. Schermerhorn, the position of Indian Commissioner in his administration. This was a very important position at that time because of the expansion of settlements into Indian territories.

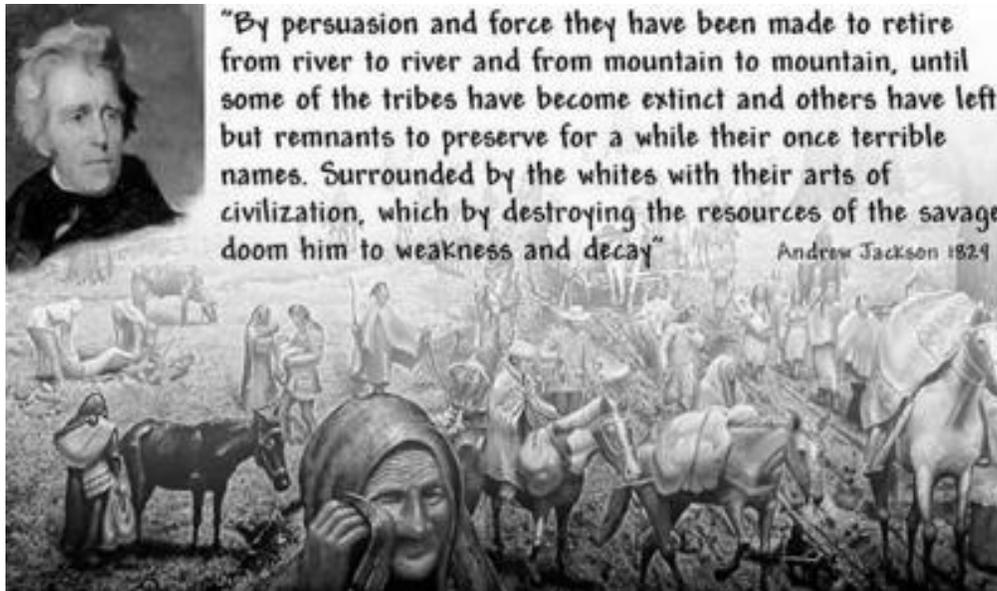
In 1835, Commissioner Schermerhorn concluded a treaty that would remove all the members of the Cherokee Nation who lived in Southern Appalachia to new lands across the Mississippi River. The Cherokee were not the only Indians who were displaced, however. Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole, as well as the Fox, Kickapoo, Lenape, Miami, Omaha, Ottawa, Potawatomie, Sauk, Shawnee, and Wyandot were among the displaced tribes who had lived in the area for over 14,000 years.

In 1836, President Jackson signed into law Senate Bill S. 102, also known as the Indian Removal Act. The land the Indians occupied was their ancestral home encompassing parts of what are today the states of Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Their new homeland was in a territory that became Oklahoma. By leaving their homelands, the Indians would lose 25 million acres of land.

At the root of this displacement was economic gain for the expanding white settlers. They were running out of room for cotton plantations and other agricultural lands. Georgia was seen as the leader of the removal movement.

Although Schermerhorn had a clause in the treaty that said they needed Indian approval to proceed with the removal, the negotiators for the Indians were vigorously opposed to the treaty. Most of the Indians refused to move to the new territory, so the government took the Indian territory by force. James W. Van Hoven in his work, *Salvation and Indian Removal*, reported that the objections by the Indians were met with violence. He stated, "Consequently, from 1838 to 1840, approximately four thousand Cherokees, nearly one fourth of that nation's citizens, died as they were marched westward across the Trail of Tears to their new homes beyond the Arkansas Territory."

The displaced Indians were forced to walk from their homes to the new territory, a journey of 2,200 miles. The Philadelphia Tribune reported that along the way they had to endure unbelievable hardships – "shootings, beatings, starvation, dysentery, whooping cough, cholera in the summer, pneumonia in the winter, and exposure to extreme weather conditions." Some estimates put the displacement of all tribes at 100,000 with 30 percent of them dying enroute to the new territory.



This quote from President Andrew Jackson reveals his feelings toward the Indians.

Schermerhorn was a *persona non grata* among the missionaries who had been working in the Indian territories. When the Indians refused cooperation, Schermerhorn brought out the Georgia Guard to keep control. His many attempts to engage support from the Indians led to further condemnation from members of Congress, religious communities, and citizens around the young country.

Following the Trail of Tears, Schermerhorn was sent to New York to negotiate the removal of the six Indian Nations that lived there. He was much less successful with this treaty, and there were ongoing protests about the original treaty that was enacted. To address the protests, the new president, Martin Van Buren, removed Schermerhorn from his position as Indian Commissioner. This did not sit well with Schermerhorn, and he stayed in Washington to protest his dismissal for a year. He then headed to the Netherlands for another year. Upon his return, he was assigned to start a new Dutch Reformed church in Indiana. He died there on March 16, 1851.

It is ironic that Schermerhorn had as his goal to protect the Indians from “degradation and extermination” and to offer them a peaceful life in a new homeland. He felt that he did that through his treaties with 20 Indian Nations. He said, “... it cannot be denied, I have done more than any other person in the service of the government, for the time I have been engaged in this business of Indian removal.”

Many have heard the story of the Trail of Tears, but few are aware that one of the architects of this displacement was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. As a member of this denomination, I was shocked to learn of the church’s involvement in the plight of these Indian tribes. It’s hard for me to reconcile what is preached in Sunday sermons about loving your neighbor with the genocidal actions of this church leader. It gives me comfort, however, to know that the position of the church today is just the opposite of what happened in the 1830s. While it is unlikely that an Indian Holocaust,

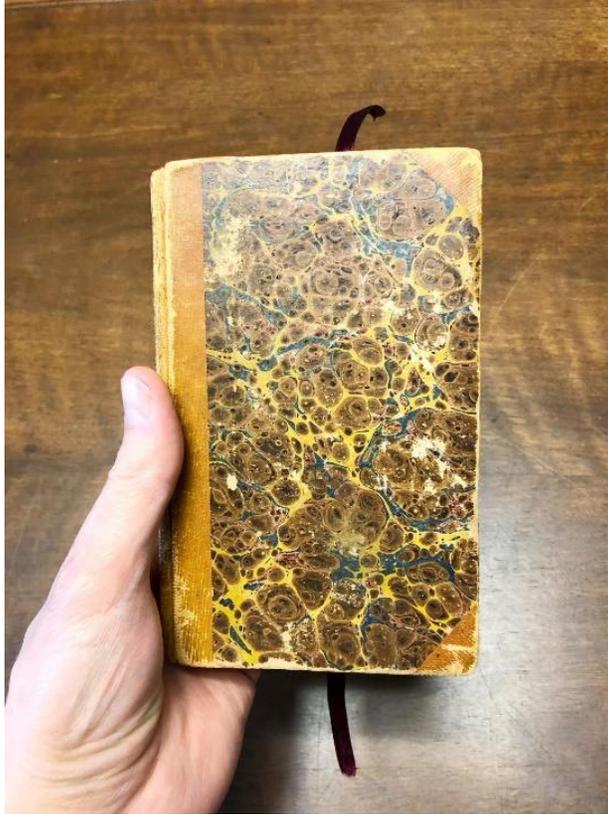
as this removal has been called, will happen again, we should all be aware of the vestiges of racism that remain in our society today and do what we can to eliminate it.

The Trail of Tears is still in the news and the court system today. In October 2020, the Supreme Court ruled on whether Native Americans can be tried by the state when the crime occurred within their territory, which the court called Indian Country. The court ruled 5-4 in favor of the of the Creek Nation, reversing a lower court ruling that said that the Creek Nation was subject to Oklahoma state law. The Creek Nation is made up of several tribes including the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole. Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch cited the treaties from the 1830s that forced the Creek Nation and other Indians to march on the Trail of Tears to their new homeland. These treaties promised them security in their own territory. This ruling means that the Creek Nation has control of its own judicial system for crimes within its territory.

Note: We have referred to the Native Americans as Indians in this article. We did so because that is what they were called in the documents of the time when the Trail of Tears occurred.

Interesting Facts

1. It wasn't just Indians who walked on the Trail of Tears. Many escaped slaves found refuge with the Indian tribes. President Jackson disliked the black slaves as much as he did the Indians, believing both groups were subhuman. He had 150 slaves on his 1,000-acre plantation in Nashville, Tennessee.
 2. The original church denomination in this blog was known as the Reformed Dutch Church and the specific churches added their location to their name. Thus, the church in Blawenburg was called the Reformed Dutch Church at Blawenburg. Over time the location was used first in the name, so this church became known as the Blawenburg Reformed Dutch Church. The denomination became more diverse over time to include members of other ancestral groups. The name became Blawenburg Reformed Church, and the denomination became the Reformed Church of America (RCA). Today many churches in the denomination drop the word Reformed and it is common to just refer to a church as Blawenburg Church or Harlingen Church. Other Reformed churches use entirely different names such as Pinelands Reformed Church.
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Elizabeth Van Zandt's Church Journal

Thanks to Rev. Jeff Knol of Blawenburg Church for bringing the story of Rev. Shermerhorn to my attention.

Thanks also to Bill and Jane Van Zandt for sharing Elizabeth Van Zandt's church journal with Blawenburg Church.

Sources

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Photos

Elizabeth Van Zandt's journal – Rev. Jeff Knol

Jackson quote graphic - Philadelphia Tribune, 5/27/2017

Rev. Shermerhorn - findagrave.com

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