

# History Topic of the Month

## The story of Nanyehi: a powerful Indigenous Cherokee woman

The story of Nanyehi is one of resistance; she faced many enemies and resisted them all differently. Nanyehi, or Nancy Ward, was a Beloved Woman of the Cherokee and one of the most powerful Indigenous women in North America in the late 1700s. Because of her determined attempts to stop the Cherokee from losing their way of life, she remains a symbol of military, political and cultural resistance today.

### Who was Nanyehi?

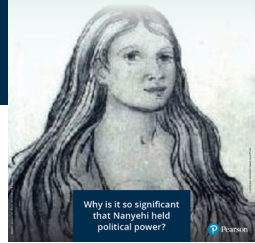
Nanyehi was born around the year 1738 near the Cherokee capital of Chota, in modern-day Tennessee. It would have been a beautiful place to grow up, on the banks of a river which flowed out of the Appalachian mountains and down through the valley. The Cherokee were split into seven different clans that were matrilineal, which meant that you belonged to, or lived with, your mother or your wife's clan. Nanyehi and her family lived with the Wolf Clan, because that was the clan her mother belonged to. While her husband, Kingfisher, and the other young men went out to hunt and bring back supplies, Nanyehi would have been hard at work turning raw materials into something they could use or sell to other clans, tribes, or even the white settlers.

The Cherokee were one of many tribes that were indigenous to North America. When the first white settlers arrived in the 16th Century, they were living in the East and South East of what we now call America.



Contributor: © Historic Images / Alamy Stock Photo

An artist's impression of Nanyehi, or Nancy Ward.



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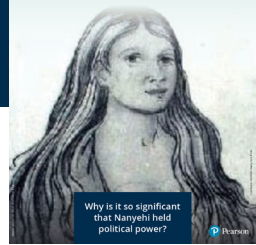
#### Resisting the Muscogee Creek

In 1755, the Wolf Clan went to war with the Muscogee Creek tribe in a dispute over territory. During the Battle of Taliwa, eyewitnesses claimed Nanyehi hid behind a log and sharpened Kingfisher's bullets with her teeth so that they could pierce whatever part of the body they hit. Tragically, Kingfisher was killed as he charged into battle. Nanyehi leapt over the log, shouldered her husband's rifle, and ran into battle. Her bravery inspired her clan's warriors so much that the tide of the battle turned and they eventually won the war. It was unusual for women to fight and in recognition of Nanyehi's impact on their victory, she was awarded the title *ghigau* or Beloved Woman. The term "beloved" was bestowed on any Cherokee man or woman who had made a special contribution to the tribe and it was an honour to receive it.



Contributor: © The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

Detail of Henry Timberlake's 1765 'Draught of the Cherokee Country,' showing the location and layout of the Cherokee town of Chota. The Chota site is now submerged under Tellico Lake in Monroe County, in the US state of Tennessee.



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#### Resisting the politicians

Nanyehi's new position made her a member of the General Council and gave her a say in the running of the tribe (she was the only female voting member!). She was also leader of the Women's Council of Clan Representatives, which meant that she was an ambassador for her people and negotiated with other Indigenous leaders and – crucially – the invading governments. At first, this was Britain and France, then, after independence in 1776, America itself. All three of these countries wanted to expand their power on the continent which involved taking more land. In Nanyehi's time, they tried to buy Indigenous land to get control over it, which some Indigenous people agreed to because it gave them more money and avoided conflict. However, most resisted because the Indigenous people did not believe that land could be owned by any one man. The tribes had a deep, spiritual connection to the land they lived on: they believed that it helped them communicate with ancestors whose spirits had gone back to the land once they died.

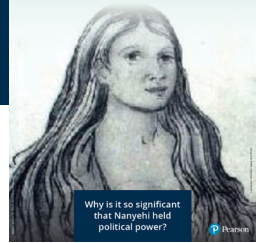
#### Resisting the French and the British

After Kingfisher died, Nanyehi married an Irish trader called Bryant Ward and became known as Nancy Ward. However, the marriage of traders to Indigenous women was often about politics, not love. Nancy could act as an interpreter and ambassador to sell more of Bryant's goods to the Cherokee and Bryant could do the same to sell Cherokee goods to white communities. Therefore, it is not too surprising that Bryant soon left Nancy and their daughter to return to his first wife.

The Europeans stayed on one piece of land, where they lived and worked. The Indigenous were nomadic, which meant they followed their food source and carried their homes and belongings with them. When land was sold or owned, it meant that their ability to move around was restricted.

In the 1750s and 1760s, the French and British were fighting over who controlled the land in America. The Cherokee initially formed an alliance with the British because they offered a better trading deal; this alliance allowed British soldiers to enter Cherokee territory and build forts with which to fight the French. However, those forts attracted more settlers who tried to buy or sometimes even seize Cherokee land. There was also tension and violence between the Cherokee warriors and the British soldiers because, ultimately, the British saw the Cherokee as inferior and only temporary allies. Neither Nancy nor the wider Cherokee tribe wanted to see their ancestral home being taken over by another group of people, particularly because these people lived in a dramatically different way.





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Unlike other members of the tribe, Nancy did not pick up weapons again. However, she did try to protect her tribe through politics and negotiations. As a Beloved Woman, she had the authority to spare captives if she thought it was necessary. Sometimes she did not intervene and supported the warriors of her tribe (such as with the execution of a British boy called Tom Moore) but sometimes she did; after a battle at Fort Watauga, she saved the life of Lydia Bean, a white woman, who she nursed back to health. This was in an attempt to stop the violence escalating.



Contributor: © Anne Rippy / Alamy Stock Photo

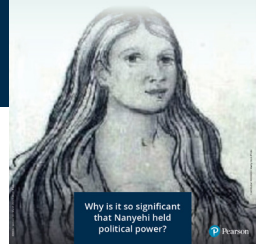
Sequoyah statue at Cherokee Indian Museum. Sequoyah was another Cherokee who helped his tribe collaborate with the Americans by creating an effective system of reading and writing to communicate but by using the Cherokee language and not American-English.

#### Resistance through diplomacy

Some factions of the Cherokee did not agree with Nancy's methods of resistance. She took after her uncle, Atakullakulla, the first Cherokee Beloved Man. He, like Nancy, was a diplomat and looked for peace in war. However, his son and Nancy's cousin, Dragging Canoe, was a warrior. Dragging Canoe did not believe that the encroachment of white settlers on their tribal land could be stopped by anything other than force. He launched several attacks against the white soldiers but Nancy was afraid that this would provoke the soldiers into destroying the Cherokee more quickly. On several occasions, Nancy saved the soldiers by warning them of attacks and continued being an ambassador between the hostile groups. She believed that resistance through diplomacy and compromise would be more effective in protecting the Cherokee people in the long-term.

#### Resisting the destruction of Cherokee life

White culture and Cherokee culture were virtually incompatible. After American Independence in 1776, their government wanted 'westernisation', which meant that they wanted the Indigenous people to stop travelling around and farm one piece of land like the Americans did. Nancy did not want her culture to disappear but she had also seen, first hand, the power of the American military and the destructive impact that violence could have. She decided that the best way to resist the total destruction of her people was by blending their way of life with the invaders, so that the people themselves would survive.



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Once Lydia Bean recovered, she taught Nancy a loom-weaving technique, which allowed Cherokee women to sell cloth for more money. She also taught Nancy how to care for cows and use their milk to make dairy products like cheese, for the first time in the Cherokee's history. This would help the tribe survive in times when they were not able to hunt or find food – essential, given that the increasing number of settlers on their land was driving large animals, their main food source, away. It is said that Nancy wrote to the President, asking for ploughs and farming materials and that he sent them to her.

#### Resisting the loss of her land

Although Nancy wanted their way of life to adapt, she did not want to lose control over it. Nancy consistently urged her people to stop selling land so that it remained legally Cherokee and not American. In 1781 she was part of a peace treaty between the tribe and the Americans. Whilst this may have been normal for Nancy, it was extraordinary that a woman had such a role in politics. Even though women had status in the Cherokee community, many Americans thought that women's role was in the home and definitely not in government. As the Indigenous interacted more and more with the Americans, this attitude began to pass over to the Cherokee. Regardless, in 1785 Nancy was involved in the Treaty of Hopewell, setting out a boundary between American land and Indigenous hunting land. Unfortunately, this did not stop more and more American settlers buying land and reducing the ability of the Indigenous to control or move around their own territories.

It is widely acknowledged that whilst all these land sales were legal, a great number of Indigenous people were pressured into selling because of the history of violence between the Indigenous and Americans, or tricked into selling because they didn't properly understand the American language and laws.

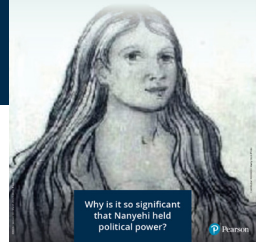


Contributor: © Jim Zuckerman / Alamy Stock Photo

Trail of Tears statue, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

#### Resisting removal

Nancy remained a voice for resistance through coexistence until her death around 1822, when she was in her eighties. In 1817, the Cherokee council met to discuss moving westward, away from the invaders. She begged her people to stay on their land because she had had a vision (although this cannot be verified). She saw "a great line of our people marching on foot. Mothers with babies ... fathers with small children ... the 'Unaka' [white soldiers] behind them. They left a trail of corpses ...".



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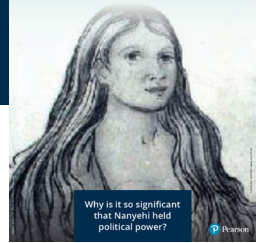
Maybe it was written after the event, maybe it was a prophecy. Whichever it was, the American government did decide to remove the Cherokee between 1830 and 1850 in a series of brutal removals. The Cherokee and four other tribes – men, women and children – were made to march thousands of miles to what is now the state of Oklahoma, where they were further battered by land loss and white settlement.

The removals became known as the 'Trail of Tears' because approximately one in five of those that made the journey died from malnutrition, starvation and the cold. Unfortunately, these removals took place over a number of years which meant that the American Government understood exactly the conditions that the Indigenous were suffering from.

### Why was Nancy Ward more complex than simply a resistance fighter?

Nancy Ward was a complex character. She was a resistance fighter who dedicated her life to protecting the land that her ancestors had lived on by collaborating and coexisting with the invaders. Many Indigenous people would have been appalled by that but Nancy believed that diplomacy was the most effective method of resistance, if the aim was to ensure the survival of her people. She did participate in violence and she was an owner of African American slaves, but she also saved lives and intervened on behalf of both her own people and the white settlers. Further, Nancy's attempts to westernise the Indigenous economy by introducing dairy farming was an essential feature of her people's survival in the later part of the 1800s and even if their use of the land had changed, Nancy resisted the sale of it to protect the Cherokee's ability to govern themselves and decide their own actions.

Ultimately, though, the American government wanted to own the land itself and have complete authority over it. This continued to cause tension and violence between Indigenous groups and the Americans until the end of the 1800s, when the Indigenous way of life became permanently altered. However, resistance has always been at the core of the Cherokee Nation. Today, they are the largest tribe in America and have thriving Indigenous communities still fighting to regain their independence and homelands.



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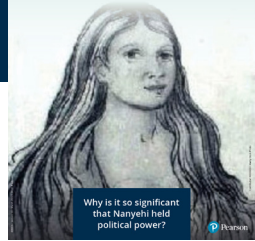
#### Discussion points

- What does it mean to resist?
- What are the different ways that Nanyehi resisted across her life?
- Why is it significant that Nanyehi took a western name, Nancy Ward? What does that tell us about the destruction of Cherokee culture?
- Why is it so significant that Nanyehi held political power? How does the power of Indigenous women compare to the political power of women in other cultures in the 18th century?
- What does it tell us that Dragging Canoe and Nanyehi had such different tactics, even though they both just wanted to protect their tribe?
- Nanyehi tried to do as the American government asked and westernise, as much as she felt was appropriate. Why did they still remove the Cherokee from their ancestral land?
- What can you find out about the Cherokee Nation in the USA today?

#### About the author

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[@RidleyHistory](https://twitter.com/RidleyHistory)



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### The story of Nanyehi: a powerful Indigenous Cherokee woman

#### Podcast



[Stories, A History of Appalachia: Nancy Ward](#)

#### Videos



[Profiles of Martin's Station: Nancy Ward](#)

#### Article



"Nancy Ward: American Patriot or Cherokee Nationalist?",  
Michelene E. Pesantubbee, *American Indian Quarterly*, 38, 2

#### Further reading



Pat Alderman, *Nancy Ward: Cherokee Chieftainess*  
(Overmountain Press, 1978)

Jeffrey Ostler, *Surviving Genocide* (Yale University Press, 2019)

Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women* (Bison Books, 1999)

Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *North American Indians:  
A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010)

Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Cherokee Nation  
and the Trail and of Tears* (Penguin Random House, 2008)

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#)  
webpages for more great content.