

Vignette 2: "Free Press"

A monologue Elias Boudinot
Founding editor, Cherokee Phoenix

Elias Boudinot, a Cherokee Indian and editor of the Cherokee Phoenix newspaper, is dressed in working man's clothes of 1820s.

He sits on a stool or other waist-high prop. There are several newspapers stacked up on a stool/ barrel nearby. There is a Cherokee artifact, like a colored robe, hat, headdress, or some personal but obviously Cherokee item lying on top of the newspapers.

(Ideally, this scene would have something representing a printing press -- even a part of an old press or type boxes.) Boudinot speaks deliberately, reflectively, sometimes wistfully. This is a painful but important story for him to tell.

Elias Boudinot

(Looking down in obvious sadness, then, looking up to address audience)

My story concerns a press. And a people. And freedom. It begins in Philadelphia, 1826. I came there with a plea for patronage -- money to help the people of the Cherokee Nation, my people, establish a printing press.

A press, I told the assembled whites that night, would allow us to publish a newspaper that would paint our true character, something the public knows little about. There are many in this land -- (spreads his arms out toward audience) -- perhaps even here in this enlightened gathering -- who at the bare sight of an Indian would throw back their imagination to the ravages of savage warfare, the yells erupting over the mangled bodies of women and children.

(Pauses. Looks at them squarely) But you behold here (waves hands over himself as if causing his body to appear) -- an Indian. My kindred are -- Indians. My fathers sleeping in the wilderness grave were -- Indians.

To obtain a correct and complete knowledge of the Indian, I told them that night -- (turns as if addressing that other group) -- "There must exist a vehicle of Indian intelligence altogether different from those that have gone before.

"We need a printing press.

(Still addressing this imagined audience)

"We need a press to tell the world what we have done these last years to distinguish our civilization. We need a newspaper, published in Indian country...

"With a press (walks over to pick up the Cherokee artifact lying on the papers, holds it) this people will exhibit specimens of their intellectual efforts. Their eloquence. Their moral, civil and physical advancements."

(Puts the artifact down. Comes back to the reality of the audience now before him, maybe gesturing to them)

You know the next part of my story: The Cherokee Nation obtained its press.

New Echota, Georgia: February 21, 1828. The Cherokee Phoenix published for the first time. I, Elias Boudinot (pronounced BOO-di-not), was appointed editor.

(Index finger in air, as if imitating reciting)

"As the liberty of the press is so essential to the improvement of the mind," I wrote in that first edition, "we shall consider our paper a free paper ..."

(Ends his recitation, goes back to telling audience his story)

We secured our press. Securing liberty proved more difficult.

(Pauses, steps back, as if contemplating up the second part of his story)

The people of the state of Georgia, where our nation and our press are established, have been trying to oust us -- to remove us from our land, to push us out to the territories in the west.

(Agitated, imitating mass mob-speak)

Uproot them! Remove them! Starve them! Shame them!

Pass laws saying that the Cherokees cannot mine the gold on their land!

Laws prohibiting the tribal legislature from meeting!

Laws requiring all non-Cherokees to take an oath of allegiance to the state -- take the oath or leave Georgia and the Cherokee Territory!

(Back to his regular story-telling voice, looking straight at the audience again) The state's militia -- the Georgia Guard -- came out in force to enforce those laws. We argued in the pages of our newspaper that Cherokee law -- not the laws of the state -- applied to our people. I was even jailed for a short time -- a supposed charge of libel -- then let go as quickly, with the promise that if our stories about the militia did not cease, I would be tied to a tree and whipped.

We used courts of law to make our argument as well. The Supreme Court of the United States even ruled that Georgia law did not apply to us.

But that ruling only fanned the hatred of those who wanted us gone. They became more determined to rid their state of the Cherokees.

(Steps back, pausing reflectively)

This might have been a different kind of story had I stayed on as editor. But on Aug. 11, 1832, four years after I began, I resigned as editor of the Cherokee Phoenix newspaper.

Not because of the threats from the Georgia militia.

Not because of our neighbors' hatred of our very existence.

But because, after hard reflection, after bitter and sleepless nights, I came to believe that our removal from Georgia was ... (pauses, searches for the right word) inevitable. That it was better for our people to negotiate a reasonable move than to be slandered, routed, butchered, expunged from this earth.

As I lover of free expression, I expressed those views to tribal authorities -- the same authorities who control our press, who had deemed my view illegal, who then forbid me to write on the matter.

Were I to continue as editor, I could satisfy both my own views and the views of the authorities of the Cherokee Nation.

(Pauses, settling in as if preparing himself for the final movement of his story.)

My fearful dreams about my people's destiny began to come true. Georgia continued to pass laws to constrict us. Soon laws made it illegal for my people to hold elections or to meet.

New Echota, Georgia. October 1835. The press of the Cherokee Nation is destroyed by the state militia. I and my political allies agree to move out to the territories of the west. The others stay.

Read your history books. There you might learn that in the winter of 1838, more than 14,000 Cherokees were startled from their homes with the gleam of the militiamen's bayonets, marched from their land on an 800-mile journey to the west that came to be called the Trail of Tears. Nearly half of the 14,000 died along the way from sickness and exhaustion.

Will your history book tell you what happened to me? Probably not. So I will tell you.

(Steps aside, takes on different posture, as if pretending to be someone else, reading from a notice)

Park Hill, Oklahoma Territory, Cherokee Nation. June 28, 1839: "Elias Boudinot, founding editor of the Cherokee Phoenix, a paper that had a press but never true freedom, is assassinated -- stabbed with a knife in the back and the head outside his home -- by members of his tribe who had labeled him a traitor."

(Still acting as the other person)

The story of a press.
And a people.

And freedom.

And one editor who loved all three.

Goodnight.

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Sources: "An Address to the Whites," a speech by Elias Boudinot, delivered in Philadelphia, May 26, 1826; "Pictures of our Nobler Selves -- a History of Native American Contributions to the News Media," by Mark N. Trahan; "Andrew Jackson and his India Wars," by Robert V. Remini.